INSIDE THE MINDS OF SOMALIA'S ASCENDANT INSURGENTS:

AN IDENTITY, MIND, EMOTIONS AND PERCEPTIONS ANALYSIS OF AL-SHABAAB

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About The Program on Extremism and *Nexus*

The Program on Extremism at George Washington University provides analysis on issues related to violent and non-violent extremism. The Program spearheads innovative and thoughtful academic inquiry, producing empirical work that strengthens extremism research as a distinct field of study. The Program aims to develop pragmatic policy solutions that resonate with policymakers, civic leaders, and the general public. This report is released as part of The Global-Local Jihadist Nexus project (*Nexus*). *Nexus* draws on a global network of subject matter experts and locally-based researchers to monitor Islamic State and al-Qaida affiliates across the Middle East, Africa, and Asia, as well as their support and enabling networks in the West. Our products analyze the interplay of several pairs of forces that have the potential to drive or constrain the global Islamic State and Al-Qaida nexus, including: global and local contexts, ideological and pragmatic drivers, individual and group appeals, leader-inspired and organizationally-enabled change, foreign influence versus local interest, and more.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements

Executive Summary

A central challenge for any mediator, diplomat, or organization engaged in promoting peace is acquiring a deep and accurate understanding of the human terrain of conflict: who the parties really are; how and what they are thinking; how they see themselves, their enemies and the world around them; what they are feeling; what matters to them; what motivates them; and what they really want. That is what an Identity, Mind, Emotions and Perceptions Analysis (IMEP) seeks to accomplish.

An IMEP Analysis is necessarily a working document, which should be adjusted in light of developments. It is not intended to be prescriptive but rather analytical, forming a basis for new ideas and approaches that could make a difference on the ground. This IMEP Analysis is a pilot initiative which focuses only on al-Shabaab. As an increasingly powerful armed group, a deeper understanding of al-Shabaab provides important insights into the wider conflict, and the challenges and opportunities for conflict resolution.

Analysis of the eight facets of an IMEP—identity and character; beliefs, perceptions, and attitude; state of mind and biases; current emotions or sentiments; core interests and concerns; motivations; goals and objectives; and views on dialogues and negotiation—reveal the following main findings:

- Al-Shabaab is a multi-faceted and dynamic organization with *an identity* that reflects that complexity. Al-Shabaab leaders and members hold multiple identities simultaneously that fluctuate in significance. Its Muslim and clan identities are deeply entrenched in the organization, reflecting its Somali-centric nature. While al-Shabaab presents itself as transcending clan affiliations, clan is deeply embedded into its identity, requiring a careful management of clan dynamics within the group, which includes ensuring a balance of clan affiliations in its leadership body.

- The group's leaders possess a shared set of *core beliefs*, particularly religious and political beliefs about the group's superiority to the Somali government, opposition to foreign interventions, and the need for an Islamic state in Somalia based on *Sharia* law. In practice, the group has demonstrated a degree of pragmatism, if not opportunism. None of the potential areas of divergence within al-Shabaab are particularly salient at present, despite a history of significant tensions that were resolved through violence. There are fault lines within any organization as complex as al-Shabaab – part terrorist organization, part

insurgent group, part shadow government, and part mafia. There are also differences between a Somali core and cadre from the region. Nonetheless, the group is currently remarkably cohesive.

- Overall, al-Shabaab discerningly assesses its adversaries and generally has accurate *perceptions* of them. Indeed, the group understands its adversaries better than its adversaries understand al-Shabaab. It accurately identifies and highlights its enemies' weaknesses, then it effectively communicates those deficits in ways that resonate with Somalis' existing understandings and perceptions.

- The group's current *mindset* is that it enjoys the upper hand in the conflict and that time is on its side. This positive view is not a misperception or indication of overconfidence; rather, it is based on an accurate assessment of the group's current position. Consistent with its clear-eyed mindset, the group has proven highly adaptable and resilient, which reflects its ability to assess its situation and correct for mistakes. Though the group generally perceives its enemies accurately, it does have some biases in terms of polarization, denial, and attribution error.

- Members of the group experienc*e a range of emotions* that have varied over the course of the conflict. Contempt towards the Somali government is fairly constant but has increased during certain phases of the conflict, including during the ongoing political crisis. A sense of smugness and self-satisfaction reflects the group's current circumstances and the downfall of its adversaries. A sense of fear within the group has probably subsided with the reduction in drone strikes, but it is unlikely to have dissipated entirely. The group remains concerned about maintaining the support of key clans. Hatred and hostility towards foreign forces persists, as does the group's overall sense of self-righteousness.

- What really matters to leaders and other key individuals in the group has become a source of increasing debate as the group evolves. Some senior figures have become power-hungry or motivated by greed, while others are still ideologically motivated. While *the core interests* of key figures are probably a combination of the pursuit of power, acquisition of resources, and the group's ideological mission, they are also aware that the organization needs public acquiescence, if not its support, especially from clans that are important to al-Shabaab's revenue generation, recruitment, or territorial control.

- As a sprawling and multi-faceted organization, al-Shabaab members have an array of *motivations*. Nonetheless, there are some common motivations, including ideology, religion, economic hardship, political or communal grievances,

friendship, coercion, nationalism, and a desire for adventure, most of which are not mutually exclusive. Moreover, the motivation that initially attracted individuals to al-Shabaab may not be – arguably, is often not – the reason they stay with the group.

- Al-Shabaab's *goal* is to expel foreign forces, defeat the Somali Federal Government and Federal Member States and establish an Islamic state in Somalia in accordance with its interpretation of Islam. In the interim, one of the group's objectives is to provide predictable order where the government has failed, demonstrating its relative legitimacy.

- In the current environment, the *prospects for al-Shabaab to engage in negotiations* to resolve the conflict are poor. The Somali government is weak, divided, and lacks credibility. A desire to negotiate is seen, perhaps unjustifiably, as an indication of weakness, and al-Shabaab sees itself, with justification, as being in a strong position. However, al-Shabaab is not as opposed to negotiations as its rhetoric or current stance would suggest. There have been confidential expressions of interest in dialogue from   senior figures in the organization and past steps towards negotiations. Even in its current position of strength, al-Shabaab may be receptive to confidence building dialogue that can help bring about future negotiations.

Introduction – Identity, Mind, Emotions and Perceptions Analysis

Typically, during a conflict, the focus is on the tangible aspects of conflict: military capabilities and operations, civilian casualties, political developments, and economic or humanitarian dynamics. Diplomatic and conflict resolution actors usually have such information, as well as about the history of the dispute, key turning points and recent developments.

An IMEP has a different focus: it attempts to penetrate the minds of the parties to conflict. It aims to throw light on the identities, beliefs, thoughts, biases, emotions, perceptions, priorities, motivations and objectives that drive, sustain and explain any given conflict. An IMEP analysis is undertaken with as much detachment and objectivity as possible, thereby avoiding the cognitive biases, misperceptions and false assumptions that so often color or distort the views of those involved.

An IMEP strives to provide new, important and actionable insights into any given conflict, especially on specific factors that are driving, aggravating and perpetuating the conflict or blocking steps towards its resolution. Crucially, an IMEP also draws attention to opportunities for convening dialogue, building trust, applying leverage, mobilizing support and de-escalating hostilities. Our conviction is that diplomats, mediators and other practitioners could use these insights to enhance their efforts to mitigate and resolve conflict.

A full IMEP Analysis provides an in-depth exposition of each of the parties to any given conflict, including key leaders and sub-groups, as well as affected population groups. In effect, it is intended to give the user a 360-degree psychological map of the conflict. Methodologically, an IMEP is derived from extensive desk research, drawing on publications by specialists, think-tanks and academic institutions, and field missions involving semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted with the parties to the conflict, as well as with experts, diplomats, practitioners and other informed observers. Subject experts are commissioned to review and edit the final product.

Methodology, Scope and Limitations

This IMEP covers the following overarching areas: (1) Identity and character; (2) Beliefs, perceptions and attitudes; (3) State of mind and biases; (4) Emotions; (5) Core interests and concerns; (6) Motivations; (7) Goals and objectives; and (8) Views on dialogue and negotiations.

1. **Identity and character**

   - Identity and self-conception; enduring and defining beliefs; sacred values.
   - Individual character traits; group-related dispositions.

2. **Beliefs, perceptions and attitudes**

   - Core beliefs of leaders and others relating to the conflict; divergences of opinion or belief within any given actor.
   - Key political, social, economic, cultural or religious beliefs of leaders and others; how these have evolved.
   - Common perceptions of adversaries, allies and key issues.
   - Prevailing narratives about the conflict and attitudes towards other actors.

3. **State of mind and biases**

   - Current mindset and ways of thinking about conflict-related issues.
   - Any prominent biases or misperceptions (such as stereotyping, attribution error, denial, overconfidence).

4. **Emotions**

   - The genesis, nature, intensity and object of emotions (such as fear, anger or hatred).

5. **Core interests and concerns**

   - Core interests: what really matters to leaders, as well as other key individuals or groups, and why.
   - How interests compare to publicly stated positions or rhetoric.
   - Key concerns, in general and in relation to the conflict; sources of those concerns.

6. **Motivations**

    ● Main reasons for the actor's involvement in conflict; motivating grievances.
    ● Motivations of leaders, military elements, other members, sub-groups and supportive constituencies (taking into account that motivations will vary and that each group is likely to be multi-motivated).

7. **Goals and objectives**

    ● In broad terms, what the actor wants: more particularly, what its leaders want, what the actor/organization seeks for itself, and what broader political, social, economic, cultural or religious goals the actor seeks to bring about at local or national level.
    ● What particular objectives the actor has with respect to the dispute, its priorities, and how goals have changed over time.
    ● Influence on objectives from historic experience or from other actors.

8. **Views on dialogue and negotiations**

    ● Views on dialogue, mediation and negotiations.
    ● Any apparent bottom lines, redlines and areas for concessions.
    ● Views on the role of third parties.

Figure 1: IMEP Analysis

Identity and Character	Beliefs, Perceptions, and Attitudes	State of Mind and Biases
Emotions	**IMEP**	Core Interests and Concerns
Motivations	Goals and Objectives	Views on Dialogue and Negotiations
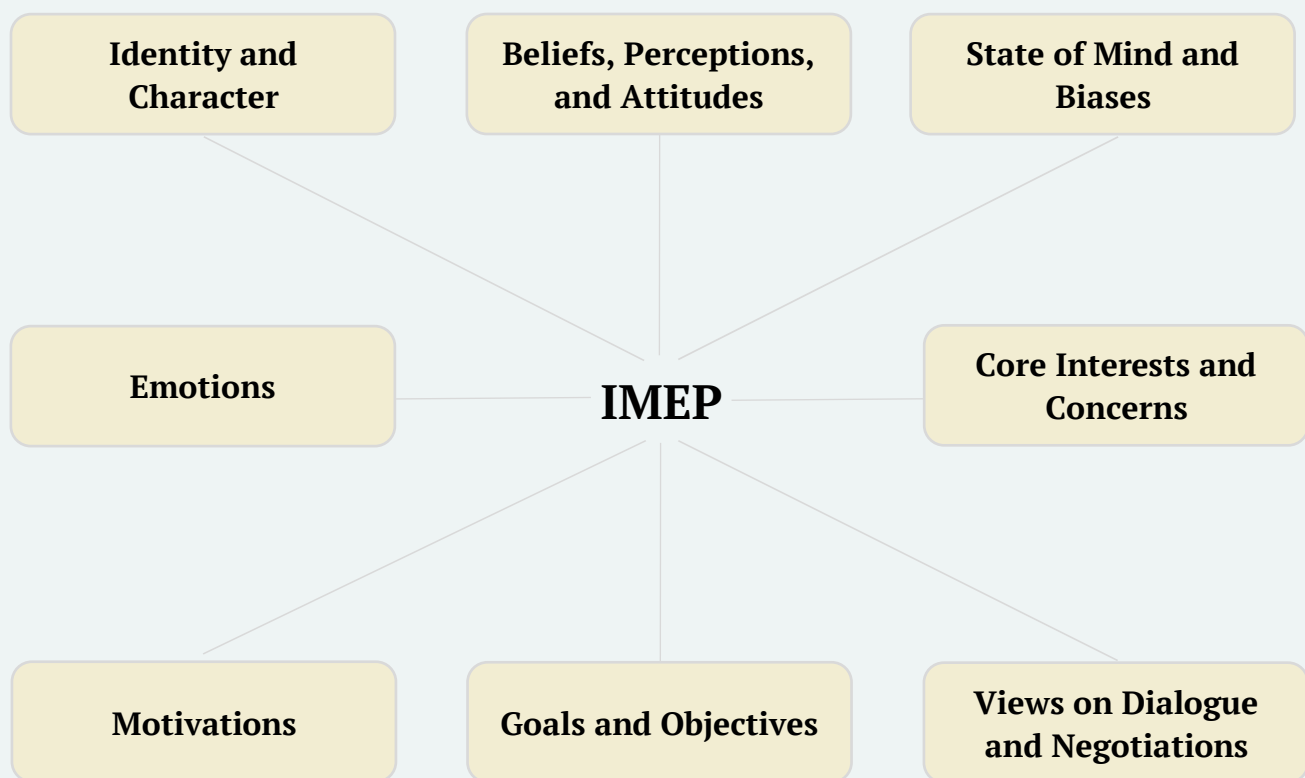
This IMEP study of al-Shabaab was commissioned in 2020. The methodology anticipated extensive desk research, in-depth interviews, followed by field research. A comprehensive review of relevant academic, think tank, government, United Nations Monitoring Group, and other reports was conducted, as well as a review of al-Shabaab's propaganda. Regrettably, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the field research element of the research could not go ahead. (The Institutional Review Board of the American University, where the primary author is based, prohibited any field research, including hiring local researchers in Somalia, through August 2021, the deadline for this report.) Thus, in lieu of field research, additional interviews were conducted virtually with experts and elites. It is acknowledged, however, that whenever possible future IMEPs should benefit from insights derived from field research.

It is important to note that most of the IMEP interviews were conducted in the midst of political upheaval in Somalia and the broader Horn of Africa. In particular, the postponement of the February 2021 elections and corresponding tensions between the President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed, widely known as Farmajo, and the opposition escalated into armed clashes in Mogadishu in April 2021. Somali National Army units were split in their loyalties to Farmajo or the opposition. Consequently, al-Shabaab was a secondary concern for the Somali Federal Government, which was focused on retaining power and authority, and al-Shabaab benefited from the discredited and weakened Somali government. In addition, Ethiopia was preoccupied with the civil war in Tigray, which began in November 2020. These circumstances are reflected in the IMEP analysis, in particular when considering the group's current sentiments and perceptions as well as its disposition towards negotiations.

Section 1: Identity and Character

GROUP LEVEL IDENTITIES

"Al-Shabaab represents different things to different people"[1] and is one of "the most dynamic groups in the world."[2] Unsurprisingly, the identity and character of the group reflect its complexity. Al-Shabaab leaders and members hold multiple identities simultaneously that fluctuate in importance depending on various factors, especially an individual's rank in the group, degree of local connections and affiliations, and the state of conflict dynamics. Yet, there are four overarching facets to the group's identity: as Muslims, as Somalis, as members of a clan, and as an al-Qaida affiliate. Islam, specifically Sunni Islam, and clan affiliation function as "twin pillars" of Somali society, and, as a "Somali-driven"[3] organization, al-Shabaab is no exception.[4] These two identities overlap, as evidenced by the integration of both clan and Islamic customs into Somalis' everyday life, as well as competition between them, a contest in which clannism typically triumphs. Factors related to both clan and Islam can mobilize Somalis politically and militarily. Clan has been dominant in intra-Somali dynamics, while Islam is more salient with respect to responses to perceived foreign threats.[5]

The group's rhetoric does not fully reflect its identity, especially the hierarchy of different identities. Al-Shabaab's al-Qaida affiliation and its place within the broader global jihad[6] are highlighted in the group's propaganda for non-Somali audiences,[7] but they have limited resonance as identities for much of the organization. Conversely, while al-Shabaab presents itself as pan-clan or transcending clan affiliations, in reality clan is "always present" and is more important for its members, including its leaders, than the group acknowledges.[8]

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[1] Interview with international think tank analyst 1, July 2021, Virtual.

[2] Interview with former Somali military official, July 2021, Virtual.

[3] Interview with Somaliland think tank analyst, May 2021, Hargeisa.

[4] Andrew Grant, "Clan Identity and Islamic Identity in Somalia: An Examination of Non-State Armed Groups in Regional and Sub-Regional Context," in *Clan and Islamic Identities in Somali Society*, ed. David Last, and Anthony Seaboyer (Toronto: Defence R&D Canada, 2011), 34-43, 38. http://cradpdf.drdc-rddc.gc.ca/PDFS/unc157/p536953_A1b.pdf.

[5] Ken Menkhaus, "Political Islam in Somalia," *Middle East Policy* 9, no. 1 (2002): 109-123. https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-4967.00045.

[6] The broader global jihad refers to the overarching goal of overthrowing the current world order and re-establishing a caliphate.

[7] Specifically, in its English and Arabic propaganda. The group has multiple audiences for its propaganda, but an expert reviewer helpfully pointed out that propaganda emphasizing al-Qaida or the global jihadist cause rarely appears in the group's Somali-language propaganda.

[8] Interview with former Somali government official, July 2021, Virtual.

Muslim Identity

Above all, al-Shabaab leaders emphasize a shared Sunni Muslim identity as binding the group.[9] They present this as more important than any other identity and as the identity that can unify Somalia, Muslims in the region, and the *ummah* more broadly.[10] In sociological terms, being a "true" Muslim, as defined by al-Shabaab, distinguishes the in-group from the out-group. Specifically, al-Shabaab follows a Salafi jihadi interpretation of Islam (detailed further in section 2) that clashes with Sufi traditions that most Somalis traditionally practice, though Somali society overall has grown more religiously conservative over time.[11]

The group is not the first organization in Somalia to seek to cohere its members through a Muslim identity, though it is the most successful to date.[12] Other groups that have attempted to use Muslim identity to unify Somalia in the past include the Islamic Courts Union and al-Ittihad al-Islami (AIAI), both organizations of which al-Shabaab leaders and members belonged to in the past.[13]

A Sunni Muslim identity is also important for al-Shabaab's ability to accommodate foreign fighters as part of its identity. One of al-Shabaab's sacred values is opposition to foreign occupation and interference in Somalia. Yet the group has welcomed foreign fighters since its inception. In order to reconcile this tension, it presents foreign fighters as not truly being foreign because they are fellow Muslims.[14] In practice, relations between al-Shabaab's Somali leadership and foreign fighters have been complicated, but this argument reflects its propagation of a Sunni Muslim identity.

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[9] For rank and file, this is often a more general Muslim identity, while some more senior members have a narrower Salafi-Wahhabi identity. One expert reviewer pointed out, "Al-Shabaab upholds the Wahhabi theology and seeks to homogenize Islam. The debate about whether Wahhabism is a sect has not been settled. Sunni scholars recognize four schools (Maliki, Shafi'i, Hanbali and Hanafi). The Wahhabis do not and their *fiqh* (jurisprudence) is hybrid and heavily reliant on *hadith* (sayings and deeds of Prophet Muhammad). Some scholars argue Wahhabism is a sect – something which its adherents would reject."

[10] Al-Shabaab sees being a Sunni Muslim as inherently part of a Somali identity, so this distinction is not as discrete as presented.

[11] "Somalia's Divided Islamists," Africa Briefing (Nairobi/Brussels: International Crisis Group, May 18, 2010), 3, https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/somalia/somalia-s-divided-islamists.

[12] There has been a recent resurgence of "non-violent Salafism" in Somalia, most notably an entity known as al-I'tisam. It coalesces around a program to capture power through peaceful means and has built a formidable and well-resourced machinery. The author thanks one of the expert reviewers for this analysis.

[13] As discussed later, both organizations drew significantly on clan and clan alliance dynamics.

[14] Tricia Bacon & Daisy Muibu (2019) The Domestication of Al-Shabaab, *The Journal of the Middle East and Africa*, 10:3, 279-305, DOI: 10.1080/21520844.2019.1658986

Somali Identity

Although al-Shabaab has expanded into a regional organization in its reach and composition, "Somali-ness" is one of its core identity traits.[15] This is another way in which the group's rhetoric does not fully correspond with its identity. It has eschewed nationalism in its rhetoric – indeed there is a tension between pan-Sunni Islamism and pan-Somali nationalism in al-Shabaab's rhetoric and media[16] – but it is "as Somali as they come" at its core.[17] Importantly, its current leadership is entirely Somali and has overwhelmingly been so historically.

The group's Somali identity is reinforced by external interference. As will be discussed in detail in the section 5, one of al-Shabaab's primary objectives is to expel foreign forces from Somalia. More broadly, external interventions have the ability to temporarily unify Somalis and attract diaspora. Most notably, al-Shabaab exploited this to galvanize opposition to the 2006 Ethiopian invasion and to the presence of the African Union Mission to Somalia (AMISOM).[18] As analysts Ahren Schaefer and Andrew Black pointed out, after the Ethiopian invasion, "In a pattern that has recurred throughout Somali history, the presence of an outside invader was able - albeit only temporarily – to rally otherwise disparate Somali factions... [T]he group's [al-Shabaab's] more jihad-oriented leadership equated their radical agenda with nationalist sentiment and gained more cross-clan support than would have been possible absent a common enemy."[19] The group would subsequently continue to "Islamize" nationalist agendas.[20]

Al-Shabaab's Somali identity is not limited to the boundaries of current-day Somalia. Some al-Shabaab's leaders have come from Somaliland, and the group recruits from the Somali-dominated regions of Kenya and Ethiopia. The group professes long-term goals to extend its conceived Islamic state to the predominantly ethnic Somali regions of East Africa. The concept of unifying all Somali-dominated regions of East Africa into "Greater Somalia" has resonated with some Somalis ever since colonial powers divided these

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[15] Interview with retired US official 2, April 2021, Virtual. Al-Shabaab also treats non-Somali Africans in the group with prejudices that are prevalent in Somali society. The author thanks one of the expert reviewers for making this point.

[16] The author thanks one of the expert reviewers for making this point.

[17] Interview with former US military officer, April 2021, Virtual.

[18] Ahren Schaefer and Andrew Black, "Clan and Conflict in Somalia: Al-Shabaab and the Myth of 'Transcending Clan Politics'," *Terrorism Monitor* 9, no. 40 (November 4, 2011), https://jamestown.org/program/clan-and-conflict-in-somalia-al-shabaab-and-the-myth-of-transcending-clan-politics/.

[19] Ahren Schaefer and Andrew Black, "Clan and Conflict in Somalia: Al-Shabaab and the Myth of 'Transcending Clan Politics."

[20] The author would like to thank one of the expert reviewers for making this point.

areas; such aspirations are not unique to al-Shabaab or Islamists.[21] But the group has incorporated this idea into its identity, its rhetoric, and its recruitment to varying degrees over time.[22] For example, in a February 2020 speech al-Shabaab's spokesman Ali Mohamud Rage (aka Ali Dheere) invoked both a Somali identity and a Muslim identity simultaneously to encourage Kenyans to join the group, arguing that the North Eastern Province of Kenya was "under Kenyan occupation."[23] Indeed, the organization has significantly expanded its efforts in eastern Kenya over the past two years. The governor of Mandera county went so far as to claim that al-Shabaab currently controls more than half of Northern Kenya and over 60 per cent of the territory in Mandera county.[24] However, establishing a "Greater Somalia" state could have complicated clan implications,[25] on top of serious military implications, which are likely to mitigate how seriously the group pursues this mission in the future.[26]

Since 2010, al-Shabaab has conducted operations beyond Somalia or even "Greater Somalia," but those actions are still a reflection of Somali identity. That year, al-Shabaab conducted its first external attack in Uganda. Since then, it has carried out attacks in Kenya and Djibouti and attempted attacks in Ethiopia. Of note, these countries all contribute forces to AMISOM. In other words, al-Shabaab's external attacks remain closely tied to an agenda in Somalia: to compel foreign forces to withdraw troops from Somalia. Sometimes the group frames these operations in broader global jihadist narratives in its rhetoric. For example, it claimed several attacks under the slogan "Operation Jerusalem Will Never be Judaized," in response to the U.S. decision to move its embassy to Jerusalem, which situated the group's actions in a broader context. But in practice, its targets are still overwhelmingly driven by its agenda in Somalia and its underlying Somali identity.

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[21] "Greater Somalia" includes Somalia, Somaliland, parts of Djibouti, the northeastern areas of Kenya, and the Somali Region of Ethiopia (also known as the Ogaden Region). Mary Harper, *Getting Somalia Wrong?: Faith, War and Hope in a Shattered State* (London, United Kingdom: Zed Books, 2012), 30–33.
[22] Interview with scholar 1, April 2021, Virtual. There is a tension in the group's advocacy of a Greater Somalia and its arguments that it wants to eliminate borders, as one expert reviewer pointed out.
[23] "Shabaab Spokesman Threatens Non-Muslims in Northeastern Kenya, Cautions Muslims from Supporting Government," SITE Intelligence Group, February 26, 2020, https://ent-siteintelgroup-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/Statements/shabaab-spokesman-threatens-non-muslims-in-northeastern-kenya-cautions-muslims-from-supporting-governemnt.html.
[24] Ali Roba, "Mandera Is at Risk of Being under Shabaab," *The Standard*, January 12, 2021.
[25] Specifically, Hawiye members of al-Shabaab, a particularly powerful clan family within al-Shabaab, may see such a move as empowering the Darod within the group, which could exacerbate internal clan competition. Interview with scholar 2, July 2021, Virtual.
[26] Interview with scholar 2, July 2021, Virtual.

Al-Shabaab does have non-ethnic Somali members, primarily from Kenya, as well as Tanzania. Foreign fighters have been present since al-Shabaab's formation, but, as noted, they have not usually held the most senior positions, thus enabling al-Shabaab to maintain a predominantly Somali identity.[27] Of note, the group's non-ethnic Somali regional recruits have gained greater operational autonomy within Kenya in recent years, most notably in executing the 2019 Dusit attacks in Nairobi.[28] But they remain largely responsible for external attacks in Kenya – operations that relate to the group's goal of expelling foreign forces from Somalia (discussed further in section 7) – rather than within Somalia. Specifically, al-Shabaab has a wing in Kenya, Jaysh Ayman, which is primarily Kenyan (both ethnic Somalis and non-ethnic Somali Kenyans) and involves other foreign fighters, including Europeans. Many of the Kenyans in the group are radicalized and mobilized by grievances in Kenya, rather than al-Shabaab's agenda in Somalia. Their grievances are rooted in the Kenyan government's mistreatment of Muslims as well as the broader socio-economic disadvantages Muslims experience in Kenya. Thus, there is an identity gap between them and the al-Shabaab leadership, one that is bridged to varying degrees through the Muslim and al-Qaida affiliate identities.

Clan Identity

Despite the group's professions that it is above clan or eschews clan affiliations, in reality clan identity is a paramount consideration for al-Shabaab members. Al-Shabaab does not share a collective clan identity, which has been one of its salient – and unusual – characteristics since its inception. The group has been able to manage the clan factionalism that debilitates other Somali organizations and institutions. It even fared better in managing clan dynamics than its predecessor organizations, AIAI and the Islamic Courts Union.

Al-Shabaab recruits across clans, and its senior leadership has rhetorically rejected adherence to clan loyalty, particularly "destructive clannism" or "blind clannism."[29] While the group presents itself as providing an alternative to the clan system and superseding clans,[30] as Harun Maruf and Dan Joseph explained, "clans are social units

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[27] The rare exceptions to this were East African al-Qaida operatives, all of whom had been killed by 2011.
[28] For an excellent analysis of this evolution, see Matt Bryden and Premdeep Bahra, "East Africa's Terrorist Triple Helix: The Dusit Hotel Attack and the Historical Evolution of the Jihadi Threat," *CTC Sentinel*, July 2019, Vol 12, Issue 6.
https://ctc.usma.edu/east-africas-terrorist-triple-helix-dusit-hotel-attack-historical-evolution-jihadi-threat/.
[29] The author thanks one of the expert reviewers for making this point.
[30] Interview with scholar 2, April 2021, Virtual.

whose role in Somali society is so central, so deeply rooted, so part of the air that Somalis breathe, that it simply cannot be escaped."[31] The organization's identity has been shaped by having top leaders in Ahmed Abdi Godane and Ahmed Diriye who have "outside clan" status, rather than hailing from the dominant clans in southern Somalia.[32] This has helped the group to portray itself as superseding clan, even if that is not the reality. Perhaps more importantly, having a leader from the Dir clan helps avoid clan-based fracturing of the organization in southern Somalia since other potential *emirs* are from Hawiye sub-clans that have natural clan rivals, even enemies.[33]

Al-Shabaab has proven savvy at managing clan dynamics, including exploiting them to its benefit.[34] For example, the group manipulated members' clan identity when it used fighters from local clans to take over towns to avoid being seen as a foreign invading force.[35] It appoints governors or commanders from specific clans in order to gain access to and mobility in that clan's territory and enable attacks inside government-held towns. For example, al-Shabaab leadership for Benadir/Mogadishu almost always come from a clan that resides on the outskirts of the city, enabling the organization to readily move attackers through that area.[36] Additionally, al-Shabaab sometimes uses members from non-resident clans to govern the areas it controls to undermine the local clan dynamics.[37] In parallel, al-Shabaab has provided support to particular clans in battles against rival clans or positioned itself as a mediator in clan disputes.[38]

Al-Shabaab also exploits clan grievances to recruit and frames itself as an alternative to the Somali government for disenfranchised clans.[39] It has portrayed itself as a sort of

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[31] Ahren Schaefer and Andrew Black, "Clan and Conflict in Somalia: Al-Shabaab and the Myth of 'Transcending Clan Politics,'" *Jamestown Terrorism Monitor* 9, no. 40 (November 4, 2011), https://jamestown.org/program/clan-and-conflict-in-somalia-al-shabaab-and-the-myth-of-transcending-clan-politics/. Harun Maruf and Dan Joseph, *Inside Al-Shabaab* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018), 17.

[32] Interview with international think tank analyst 1, July 2021, Virtual.

[33] The author would like to thank one of the expert reviewers for this point.

[34] Interview with international expert, April 2021, Virtual.

[35] Stig Jarle Hansen, *Al-Shabaab in Somalia: The History and Ideology of a Militant Islamist Group* (New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 2016), 78.

[36] The author thanks one of the expert reviewers for making this point.

[37] Hansen, 78.

[38] Stig Jarle Hansen, "An In-Depth Look at Al-Shabab's Internal Divisions," *Combating Terrorism Center Sentinel*, Africa Special Issue, 7, no. 2 (February 24, 2014): 9–12, https://ctc.usma.edu/an-in-depth-look-at-al-shababs-internal-divisions/.

[39] Tricia Bacon, "This Is Why Al-Shabab Won't Be Going Away Anytime Soon," *Washington Post*, July 6, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/07/06/this-is-why-al-shabaab-wont-be-going-away-any-time-soon/; Ilya Gridneff, "Al-Shabaab Strategy Shifts Toward Clans as

"Robin Hood" for marginalized or minority clans.[40] As noted in greater detail in section 6, political and communal subjugation have been a salient motivation for joining al-Shabaab for members of disenfranchised clans. Though al-Shabaab portrays itself as championing marginalized clans and the Bantu minority communities, its leaders do not

Presidential Election Looms," *IPI Global Observatory* (blog), January 27, 2017, https://theglobalobservatory.org/2017/01/al-shabaab-strategy-shifts-toward-clans-as-election-looms/.
[40] Interview with international think tank analyst 1, July 2021, Virtual.
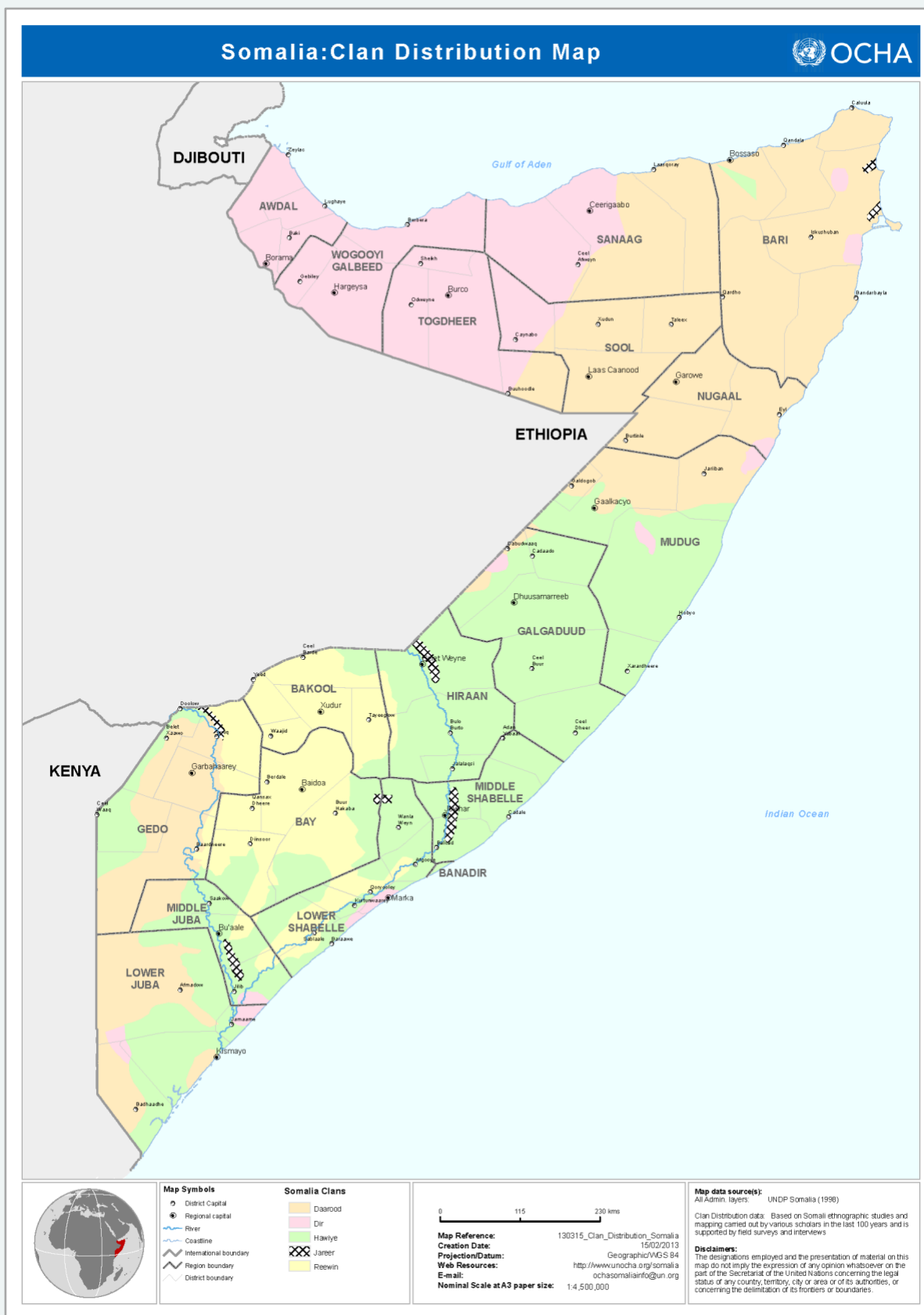
Image 1: Somalia Clan Distribution Map, OCHA, 2013.

hail from those clans and the group perpetuates those inequities in practice within the organization.[41] In addition, as the group has made inroads with dominant clans recently, it is relying less on marginalized clans.[42]

Thus, clan identity offers al-Shabaab opportunities to recruit and sustain its shadow governance, meaning its imposed administration and rule-making as an alternative to the Somali Federal Government. Yet, clan allegiance and obligations have resulted in internal wrangling as well. For example, friction erupted between Godane and Mukhtar Robow when the latter granted safe passage to his clan members in the group's takeover of Baidoa in 2009, and when fighters from Robow's clan were disproportionately killed in al-Shabaab's Mogadishu offensive in 2010.[43] More recently, reports emerged in February 2020 that tensions flared between the group's emir Ahmed Diriye and his deputy Mahad Karate over the distribution of funds contributed by Karate's Hawiye clan and the disproportionately high number of deaths suffered by his clan members in al-Shabaab's October 2017 attack in Mogadishu.[44] Thus, the leaders profess a desire for members' clan affiliation to be subordinate to their Muslim identity, but in practice the group is "pragmatic and opportunistic. It cohabits with clan identity politics and uses it for its purposes."[45]

Al-Qaida Affiliation

The final facet of al-Shabaab's identity is its status as an affiliate of al-Qaida. The group became an al-Qaida affiliate in 2010, but the relationship was not publicly proclaimed at the time due to al-Qaida leader Usama bin Laden's concerns about adverse effects for al-Shabaab.[46] After bin Laden's death and the ascension of Ayman al-Zawahiri, the two groups publicly acknowledged their alliance in February 2012. With his direct connections to al-Qaida's leadership from his time training in Afghanistan, now

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[41] Interview with scholar 2, July 2021, Virtual.

[42] Interview with former Somali government official, July 2021, Virtual.

[43] Schaefer and Black, "Clan and Conflict in Somalia," November 4, 2011, 9.

[44] Abuga Makori, "Al-Shabaab Leaders Rocked in Wrangles over Control of Finances," *Garowe Online*, March 28, 2020, sec. News, https://www.garoweonline.com/en/news/somalia/somalia-al-shabaab-leaders-rocked-in-wrangles-over-control-of-finances. On October 14, 2017, al-Shabaab conducted two truck bombings in Mogadishu, killing at least 587 people and injuring 316 others

[45] The author thanks one of the expert reviewers for this point.

[46] "Letter from Usama Bin Laden to Mukhtar Abu Al-Zubayr," August 7, 2010, https://ctc.usma.edu/harmony-program/letter-from-usama-bin-laden-to-mukhtar-abu-al-zubayr-original-language-2/.

deceased al-Shabaab emir, Ahmed Abdi Godane drove the formation of this alliance.[47] His successor, Ahmed Diriye, reaffirmed the *baya* (pledge of loyalty) to Zawahiri quickly after assuming the helm in September 2014. It took Zawahiri nearly a year to publicly acknowledge Diriye's pledge, but he finally did so in September 2015.[48]

Despite the delay in Zawahiri's recognition, Diriye fiercely defended al-Shabaab's identity as an al-Qaida affiliate in the face of overtures from the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) throughout 2015. ISIS publicly called for al-Shabaab to join its alliance network and reportedly sent emissaries to Somalia. Rumors abounded that al-Shabaab would defect to the Islamic State.[49] There were reports that even some senior al-Shabaab leaders wanted to shift allegiances, most notably Mahad Karate, who was Diriye's deputy, rival, and the head of the intelligence wing, known as the Amniyat.[50] Nonetheless, in late 2015, after proclaiming his intent to maintain ties to al-Qaida, Diriye initiated a purge of ISIS sympathizers within Somalia.[51] Despite some defections, the formation of a splinter ISIS affiliate in Puntland, and limited direct connections between al-Shabaab leaders and al-Qaida leaders, there are no indications that al-Shabaab leaders have waivered from their commitment to al-Qaida since then. But al-Qaida likely values al-Shabaab more highly now, given al-Shabaab's status as one of al-Qaida's most successful affiliates. The relationship is further bolstered by al-Shabaab's long-standing, close ties to al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula, al-Qaida's Yemen-based affiliate.[52]

Al-Shabaab's status as an al-Qaida affiliate ties al-Shabaab's local and regional agenda to al-Qaida's global jihad narrative and its larger struggle for a caliphate. The al-Qaida affiliation helps the group give the appearance of lifting its struggle out of the nationalist and clannist identity trappings that define many groups in Somalia. However, al-Shabaab's identity as an al-Qaida affiliate currently has limited impact on the group's day-to-day operations, with the important exception of al-Qaida in the Arabian

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[47] Harun Maruf and Dan Joseph, *Inside Al-Shabaab: The Secret History of al Qaeda's Most Powerful Ally*, 1st ed. (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2018), 64; Tricia Bacon, *Why Terrorist Groups Form International Alliances* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), 205.

[48] Maruf and Joseph, *Inside Al-Shabaab,* pg. 259.

[49] Maruf and Joseph, *Inside Al-Shabaab,* pg. 259.

[50] Caleb Weiss, "Reigniting the Rivalry: The Islamic State in Somalia vs. al-Shabaab," *Combating Terrorism Center Sentinel* 12, no. 4 (April 2019): 29–36, https://ctc.usma.edu/reigniting-rivalry-islamic-state-somalia-vs-al-shabaab/; Hamil al-Bushra, "Somalia the Land of Khilafah: Message to Our Brothers in Somalia," February 24, 2015, available from:
https://somalianews.files.wordpress.com/2015/03/bushra.pdf.

[51] Weiss, "Reigniting the Rivalry," 30; Maruf and Joseph, *Inside Al-Shabaab*, 2018, 259–60.

[52] Interview with a U.S. defense official, April 2017, Washington, D.C.; Interview with U.S. intelligence officer, May 2017, Washington, D.C.

Peninsula's assistance in obtaining weapons from the black market,[53] and is of little consequence to most rank-and-file members of the organization. Foot soldiers in particular defer to the leadership on this facet of the group's identity. Indeed, one al-Shabaab media official noted when al-Shabaab internally debated the group's allegiance to al-Qaida (discussed further in section 2), "members began blindly following the top leadership's decision not to switch [allegiance to the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria]."[54]

Inter-Play Between Identities

While al-Shabaab's leadership has sought to instill the supremacy of a Muslim and pan-clan identity, the reality is that the salience of these identities varies according to the rank, disposition or affiliations of individual leaders and the exigencies or opportunities of particular conflict dynamics. For instance, early in the organization's history, in the face of a common foreign enemy during the Ethiopian invasion, a Somali identity was activated, and nationalist and religious identities worked hand in hand, mutually reinforcing one another.[55] Al-Shabaab's leadership rejected nationalism in speeches, but the group exploited nationalism to acquire recruits.[56] With the Ethiopian withdrawal in 2009, the salience of the national identity waned though it was reinvigorated with the 2011 Kenyan entry into the conflict and Ethiopia's return.[57] However, al-Shabaab has successfully indoctrinated some nationalist-motivated recruits into its jihadist ideology.[58]

Clan grew increasingly important within the group as its gained territory, governed, and developed its shadow government. In the early years, ideology and a Salafi jihadist identity were central to the leadership. Increasingly over time clan trumps other identities.[59] The shift began in 2009, when al-Shabaab gained a massive influx of recruits as it swept through much of southern Somalia, leading to "a hollowing out of the organization with regard to ideology" as these recruits trained in local camps and maintained clan loyalties.[60] This issue has persisted. Analyst Richard Barrett found that

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[53] The author would like to thank one of the expert reviewers for this point.

[54] Maruf and Joseph, *Inside Al-Shabaab*, 2018, 264.

[55] There was a more ideologically motivated subset of members and recruits who were equally if not more motivated by the need to defend Muslims against "Christian Ethiopia."

[56] Reuven Paz, "The Youth Are Older: The Iraqization of the Somali Mujahidin Youth Movement" (Herzliya: Global Research in International Affairs (GLORIA) Center, December 2008), http://www.readbag.com/e-prism-images-prism-no-2-vol-6-millat-ibrahim-dec08; Maruf and Joseph, *Inside Al-Shabaab*, 2018, 48–49; Hansen, *Al-Shabaab in Somalia*, 63.

[57] Roland Marchal, "A Tentative Assessment of the Somali Harakat Al-Shabaab," *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 3, no. 3 (November 1, 2009): 399, https://doi.org/10.1080/17531050903273701.

[58] Maruf and Joseph, *Inside Al-Shabaab*, 2018, 89; Hansen, *Al-Shabaab in Somalia*, 63, 67.

[59] Interview with international expert, April 2021, Virtual.

[60] Hansen, *Al-Shabaab in Somalia*, 95.

al-Shabaab defectors were more likely to identify themselves by clan or as Somali rather than primarily as Muslim.[61] The primacy of clan identification is not surprising given that al-Shabaab also coerces clans into providing recruits. Consequently, the analytical organization Sahan argued that "Much of its [al-Shabaab] support comes from clans with local grievances and communities with no viable alternative rather than ideological affinity with the jihadists," which points to clan as the most salient identity marker for such individuals.[62]

Yet, as noted, al-Shabaab is adept at manipulating perceived identities for its own ends. As one expert observes, the group "exploits multiple identity politics to advance its strategic goals. Its notion of Islamic brotherhood undermines clan identity politics… This [perceived] supra-clan identity is potent and appeals to younger generation frustrated by the corrosive power clan identity exerts on the body politic."[63]

KEY LEADERS

Al-Shabaab has an established leadership structure led by its emir Ahmed Diriye, who rose to the helm in September 2014 when the group's founder Ahmed Godane was killed in a U.S. airstrike. The group's executive council is its primary leadership body, which is believed to consist of 7–14 members and a broader consultative shura that has input but no formal decision-making authority. Though the group recruits from the region, with an increasingly influential Kenyan cadre in Kenya, the executive council is currently and has historically been Somali. Clan identities permeate even at this level. Despite the group's abdication of clannism, the executive council composition roughly follows the 4.5 clan balance formula, an approach that distributes power equally between the four major Somali clans and gives some limited representation for other clans. Though its current emir and his predecessor are from a clan that is not dominant in southern Somalia, Hawiye clan members are believed to dominate the executive council, hold more than half of the positions, followed by members of the Darood and Dir clans, while the Rahanweyn clan holds the fewest positions.[64]

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[61] Richard Barrett, "Why They Fight and Why They Quit: An Analysis of Interviews with Current and Former Al-Shabaab Fighters," in *War and Peace in Somalia*, ed. Michael Keating and Matt Waldman (Oxford University Press, 2018), 326.

[62] Sahan, *Somalia Wire*, June 22, 2021.

[63] The author would like to thank one of the expert reviewers for this point.

[64] "Taming the Clans: Al-Shabab's Clan Politics" (Mogadishu, Somalia: Hiraal Institute, May 31, 2018), 2–3, https://hiraalinstitute.org/taming-the-clans-al-shababs-clan-politics/./; Interview with former Somali government official, July 2021, Virtual.

The current generation of leadership has a more "homegrown" identity than its predecessors.[65] Their formative experiences have been in Somalia, both in al-Shabaab and, for some, dating back to AIAI in the 1990s. Generally, the current leaders have not spent significant time overseas like their predecessors. This has two consequences. First, they are less personally connected to global jihadist figures, specifically in the al-Qaida leadership.[66] Their predecessors trained or fought in Afghanistan and Pakistan, thereby forging direct ties with key figures in the broader jihadist movement and a corresponding jihadist identity. Second, fewer current leaders have lived for any significant period of time in a "functional society."[67] The failed state of Somalia is their primary frame of reference, and many are young enough that they have little, if any memory, of the Siad Barre regime era.[68] Their identity has been shaped by Somalia's history of state collapse, the Ethiopian and Kenyan interventions, AMISOM's enduring presence, and al-Shabaab's rise, fall, and recovery. They have the benefit of "knowing what is possible"[69] from al-Shabaab's quasi-state period from 2009 to 2013 and learning from their experiences in Somalia over the past 15 years, especially controlling territory and operating as a shadow government.[70] What binds this generation of leaders may be more "diffuse" than the founding generation in the absence of the key formative experiences in South Asia.[71]

When Diriye became leader, he adopted a more consensus-driven approach to decision-making than his predecessor Godane, who insisted on uncontested dominance. There were questions about whether Diriye would be able to consolidate power and keep the organization together, both of which he has achieved. Initially, he largely kept senior officials in their positions, rather than making major changes, even when that meant keeping a potential rival, Karate, in an influential position. Nonetheless, Diriye also demonstrated a willingness to purge dissenters in a manner similar to Godane when some challenged his decision to stay with al-Qaida over the Islamic State. Like Godane, Diriye can and has used the Amniyat as an instrument of internal repression and to terrorize the population into paying 'taxes.'

Despite the established leadership structures, it is not clear how the organization's decision-making process is currently operating. Analysts debate whether the group is still managed from the executive council or if decision-making has devolved to lower

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[65] Interview with international think tank analyst 1, July 2021, Virtual.
[66] Interview with international expert, April 2021, Virtual.
[67] Interview with scholar 2, July 2021, Virtual.
[68] Interview with former Somali government official, July 2021, Virtual.
[69] Interview with former US military officer, April 2021, Virtual.
[70] Interview with international expert, April 2021, Virtual.
[71] Interview with retired US official 1, April 2021, Virtual.

levels.[72] In addition, there have been regular reports since 2018 that Diriye is in poor health as well as indications of internal jockeying for power, perhaps amplified by his illness.[73] However, the current executive council is reportedly unified, operating well, and experiencing limited internal tensions since Mahad Karate was reportedly sidelined in recent months, though he maintains significant power in the organization by virtue of his reported role as head of Amniyat and of al-Shabaab activities in Mogadishu.[74]

Included below are profiles of the leader and four individuals who may feature prominently in decision making or may be primed to be Diriye's successor in the event of his death: Mahad Karate, Abukar Ali Aden, Hussein Ali Fiidow and Ali Dheere.

Ahmed Diriye (aka Abu Ubaydah)

Background: Diriye is from the Dir clan, specifically the Dir/Bajimal, which generally hail from Ethiopia near the Hiran border, but there is some debate about where Diriye is from.[75] His predecessor Godane's outsider clan status – an Isaaq from Somaliland – was important to al-Shabaab's pan-clan image in its early years, but later produced tensions as Godane was less concerned with the civilian population than his counterparts with clan ties in the south. Diriye has stronger clan connections in southern Somalia than his predecessor. He was a close confidant of Godane. The two men were cousins through Diriye's maternal Isaaq line.[76] Though there

Image 2: Photo of Ahmed Diriye (aka Abu Ubaydah and Ahmed Umar), released by U.S. Department of State.

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[72] Interview with former Somali government official, July 2021, Virtual.

[73] Sunguta West, "Hussein Ali Fiidow's Challenge to al-Shabaab Leadership," *Militant Leadership Monitor* 9, no. 5 (June 6, 2018), https://jamestown.org/brief/hussein-ali-fiidows-challenge-to-al-shabaab-leadership/; Sunguta West, "Al-Shabaab Faces Leadership Battle as Speculation over Emir's Health Mounts," *Terrorism Monitor* 16, no. 10 (March 18, 2018), https://jamestown.org/program/al-shabaab-faces-leadership-battle-as-speculation-over-emirs-health-mounts/; Jacob Onyango, "Al-Shabaab Leaders Split amid Acrimonious Succession Wrangles," *Tuko.co.ke*, April 22, 2018, https://www.tuko.co.ke/271776-al-shabaab-leaders-split-acrimonious-succession-wrangles.html; "Al Shabaab Leader's Physical Health a Concern to His Deputies," *Nation*, April 20, 2018, https://nation.africa/kenya/videos/news/al-shabaab-leader-s-physical-health-a-concern-to-his-deputies-1260674.

[74] Interview with former Somali government official, July 2021, Virtual.

[75] Hansen, *Al-Shabaab in Somalia*, 153; Maruf and Joseph, *Inside Al-Shabaab*, 2018, 243.

[76] Hansen, *Al-Shabaab in Somalia*, 153; Maruf and Joseph, *Inside Al-Shabaab*, 2018, 243.

are some Dir in the executive council,[77] the Dir clan does not feature as prominently in al-Shabaab's leadership as other major clans. Thus, Diriye also holds some degree of outsider clan status compared to other members of the executive council. In particular, he helps the group to present itself as more than an instrument of Hawiye domination.[78]

Diriye has a long history of jihadism in Somalia. He fought with al-Shabaab's predecessor group AIAI as early as April 1991. He trained with AIAI in Dhobley, was then stationed in Kismayo and his hometown of Luuq, and later participated in AIAI's operations in Ethiopia.[79] After AIAI fragmented in 1996, he taught at a Koranic school in Kismayo.[80] One journalist reported Diriye holds a special ire for Kenya after spending some years there and is thus particularly committed to unifying the Somali-dominated regions of Kenya with Somalia and expelling non-Muslims from the region.[81] Unlike al-Shabaab's founding leaders, Diriye never trained with al-Qaida in Afghanistan and is "a local man."[82] He joined al-Shabaab around 2006 or 2007 while the group was still under the ICU through fellow former AIAI members.[83] Diriye gained prominence in the group after he was named the governor of the Bay and Bakool regions in 2009.[84] He adhered to Godane's approach and imposed the group's strict and harsh interpretation of *Sharia* (Islamic law), banned Western culture, and severely restricted the movement of aid agencies during the 2011 famine.[85] He became Godane's advisor and was responsible for the group's domestic affairs as the head of the internal *maktab* (department) by 2013.[86] Diriye supported the Amniyat and Godane's purge of dissenters in 2013,[87] placing him in opposition to the more 'pragmatic' segments of al-Shabaab's leadership and cementing his loyalty to Godane. He ascended to become emir in 2014, with Godane reportedly

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[77] Mohamed Mohamed Nur and Abdullahi Yare are two examples.

[78] "Taming the Clans," 2–3.

[79] Maruf and Joseph, *Inside Al-Shabaab*, 2018, 243.

[80] Maruf and Joseph, 243–44.

[81] Hamza Mohamed, "Meeting Al-Shabab's Elusive Leader," *Al Jazeera*, January 22, 2016, https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2016/1/22/meeting-al-shababs-elusive-leader.

[82] Maruf and Joseph, *Inside Al-Shabaab*, 2018, 243–44.

[83] "New Al-Shabab Chief Said to Be Experienced But 'Difficult,'" *Voice of America*, September 8, 2014, sec. Africa, https://www.voanews.com/africa/new-al-shabab-chief-said-be-experienced-difficult.

[84] Maruf and Joseph, *Inside Al-Shabaab*, 2018, 244.

[85] Maruf and Joseph, 244; U.N. Security Council, "Resolution 1916, Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 1916," S/2011/433, July 18, 2011, para. 217, https://undocs.org/en/S/2011/433.

[86] U.S. Department of State, "Terrorist Designations of Ahmed Diriye and Mahad Karate," April 21, 2015, http://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2015/04/240932.htm; "New Al-Shabab Chief Said to Be Experienced But 'Difficult.'"

[87] Stefan Smith, "Shebab's New Leader a Devout, Ruthless Hardliner," *Agence France-Presse*, September 7, 2014, http://news.yahoo.com/shebabs-leader-devout-ruthless-hardliner-sources-105730104.html.

endorsing Diriye as his successor, despite the seniority of Mahad Karate as Godane's deputy.[88]

Since becoming emir, Diriye has adhered to the ideological foundations established by his predecessor, though the group is overall less ideologically dogmatic now than it was under Godane. As noted in greater detail in sections 2 and 7, he has defended the group's allegiance to al-Qaida and has continued prioritizing the expulsion of foreign forces from Somalia. The group's revenue generation has expanded significantly under his tenure through its extortion system, which reaches into all sectors of the economy in Somalia and generates a surplus for the group. He faces some powerful internal rivals, especially Mahad Karate. But overall, under his leadership al-Shabaab remains the most unified actor in Somalia, though the group is far from homogenous.

Character/Personality: One al-Shabaab member who knew Diriye when he was al-Shabaab's governor of the Bay and Bakool regions characterized him by saying, "He likes discussions, and he likes to change people's perceptions... He was a politician" who was "very good at lobbying."[89] He reportedly was an expert in "*itisal fardi*" (man management) and was an effective administrator.[90] When he was appointed emir the UN Monitoring Group identified him as a "compromise candidate" who was acceptable to the moderate elements of al-Shabaab's leadership.[91] Like Godane before him, he is an ideologue who adheres to al-Shabaab's *takfir* ideology, which emphasizes the excommunication of Muslims deemed insufficiently devout.[92] Diriye has assumed a more consultative leadership style than Godane. He actually rebuilt the shura council structure that Godane had destroyed. In so doing, Diriye helped to align internal leadership decision making with the Somali cultural predilection for clan elder dialogue, consensus building, or at least giving every leader a chance to be heard and respected.[93] He even released and pardoned some of Godane's dissidents.[94] For example, one of al-Shabaab's ideological leaders, Fuad Shongole, affirmed the group was moving to bring back former

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[88] Hansen, *Al-Shabaab in Somalia*, 153.
[89] As quoted in Maruf and Joseph, *Inside Al-Shabaab*, 2018, 244.
[90] Maruf and Joseph, 244.
[91] U.N. Security Council, "Resolution 2182, Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 2182," S/2015/801, October 19, 2015, para. 79 footnote 47, https://undocs.org/en/S/2015/801.
[92] Maruf and Joseph, *Inside Al-Shabaab*, 2018, 244; "New Al-Shabab Chief Said to Be Experienced But 'Difficult.'"
[93] The author would like to thank one of the expert reviewers for this point.
[94] Matt Bryden, "The Decline and Fall of Al-Shabaab? Think Again" (Sahan, April 2015), 5, http://sahan.global/stories/decline-fall-al-shabaab-think/.

commanders just days after Diriye became emir.[95] Still, under his leadership, al-Shabaab has persisted in its harsh punishments, assassinations of spies, and Diriye has also attempted to marginalize internal challengers.[96]

Mahad Karate Warsame

Background: Karate is a member of the Ayr, a sub-sub-clan of the powerful Hawiye clan; thus, he is an al-Shabaab leader with a significant clan constituency in southern Somalia.[97] Karate was a member of AIAI and gained combat experience through the group. Like Diriye, he was stationed in Luuq during AIAI's rein there. Following AIAI's fragmentation, he reportedly worked as a businessman in Nairobi before being arrested and bouncing between prisons in Kenya, Ethiopia, and Somaliland. He escaped and fled back to Nairobi and then to Mogadishu.[98] Karate was involved in al-Shabaab from its origins as an independent group, and perhaps earlier. He directed the group's commanders in Mogadishu to conduct attacks against the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) and the Ethiopians after the latter took over the city in 2007.[99] He was also responsible for "formulating a 'death list'" for the group during its earliest periods.[100] Importantly, Karate was one of the members of al-Shabaab's leadership who rejected the potential for negotiations with the newly formed government in 2009, detailed in section 8.[101]

Karate was the head of the Amniyat and replaced Mukhtar Robow and Ibrahim al-Afghani as Godane's deputy emir in 2011, indicating Godane's high level of trust in him. Still, he was passed over for the top spot after Godane's death. Karate reportedly opposed Diriye's appointment because the latter did not have tactical experience and came from a weak clan.[102] Karate retained his position as deputy emir and head of the Amniyat for years

[95] Mohamed Mubarak and Will Hartley, "Marching On - Al-Shabaab Looks to the Future Following Leader's Death" (Jane's Terrorism and Security Monitor, September 23, 2014), 3, https://customer-janes-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/Janes/Display/jtsm6224-jtsm-2014.
[96] Makori, "Al-Shabaab Leaders Rocked in Wrangles over Control of Finances"; Hunja Macharia, "Terror Fugitive Ahmed Iman Falls out with Al Shabaab," *Kenya's Watching*, November 23, 2017, https://www.kbc.co.ke/terror-fugitive-ahmed-iman-falls-al-shabaab/; Fred Mukinda, "Ahmed Iman Alias Kimanthi Flees after Al-Shabaab Fallout," *Nation*, November 22, 2017, https://nation.africa/kenya/news/ahmed-iman-alias-kimanthi-flees-after-al-shabaab-fallout-479760.
[97] Named as Mahad Warsame Qaley, "Somalia Places Bounty On Al-Shabaab Leaders," *SomTribune*, April 11, 2015, https://www.somtribune.com/2015/04/11/somalia-places-bounty-on-al-shabaab-leaders/.
[98] Stig Jarle Hansen, *Horn Sahel and Rift: Fault Lines of the African Jihad* (London: Hurst, 2019), 164.
[99] Hansen, *Al-Shabaab in Somalia*, 53.
[100] "Abdullahi Sudi Arale JTF-GTMO Detainee Assessment" (*The New York Times*, August 6, 2007), 7, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/projects/guantanamo/detainees/10027-abdullahi-sudi-arale.
[101] Maruf and Joseph, *Inside Al-Shabaab*, 2018, 107–8.
[102] Hansen, *Horn Sahel and Rift*, 177.

after Diriye's ascension but not being chosen as emir reportedly left him "sulking for months."[103]

Karate's relationship with Diriye is still fraught with tension. Karate was reportedly one of the leading voices advocating for a shift to the Islamic State in 2015; however, his position may have been exaggerated by security services seeking to sow dissent within the group.[104] Either way, policy disagreements between Karate and Diriye led to a rift between them in 2017. In March 2020, the Somali intelligence service claimed that Diriye expelled Karate from the executive council after the group's attacks on civilians, which particularly impacted Hawiye clan members.[105] There are conflicting reports about whether Karate was actually expelled from the executive council, but tensions relating to the deaths of his clansmen are plausible.[106] Other reports attributed the friction between the two men to the distribution of funds within the group.[107] It is unclear what precipitated another round of tensions, but it appears that there is still friction between the two men.

Image 3: Mahad Karate Warsame issues an audio statement for al-Shabaab's al-Kata'ib Media Foundation in May 2019.

Karate has increased his public media presence in recent years. He released his first audio message and appeared for the first time in a biography video on Godane in 2017.[108] More recently he released an audio statement in a May 2019 video in which he provided al-Shabaab's justification for killing a prominent Sufi leader.[109] He also warned civilians against going near

[103] Maruf and Joseph, *Inside Al-Shabaab*, 2018, 272.

[104] The author would like to thank one of the expert reviewers for this point, which was corroborated by confidential sources.

[105] "Al-Shabaab Leader Expels Top Commanders;" Interview with former Somali government official, July 2021, Virtual.

[106] The author thanks two of the expert reviewers for making this point.

[107] Allan Olingo, "Shabaab Leaders Split over Funds Control," *Nation*, March 27, 2020, https://nation.africa/kenya/news/shabaab-leaders-split-over-funds-control-282272.

[108] Maruf and Joseph, *Inside Al-Shabaab*, 2018, 276; Harun Maruf, "29 Dead After Al-Shabab Attacks Mogadishu Restaurants," *Voice of America*, June 15, 2017, sec. Africa, https://www.voanews.com/africa/29-dead-after-al-shabab-attacks-mogadishu-restaurants.

[109] Mahad Karate, "The Sanctity of Muslim Blood," Jihadology, May 12, 2019, Available from: https://jihadology.net/2019/05/12/new-video-message-from-%e1%b8%a5arakat-al-shabab-al-mujahidins-shaykh-abu-abd-al-ra%e1%b8%a5man-mahad-warsami-the-sanctity-of-muslim-blood/; "Sufi Scholar, Followers Killed in al-Shabab Attack," *Al Jazeera*, November 26, 2018, sec. News, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/11/26/somalia-sufi-scholar-followers-killed-in-al-shabab-attack.

government buildings and cautioned al-Shabaab fighters to "beware of unjustly shedding the blood of Muslims."[110] In March 2021, he was heard again claiming responsibility for an al-Shabaab attack on a prison in Puntland.[111]

Character/Personality: Karate presents contradictions that are difficult to reconcile. At a minimum, reporting on and perceptions of him are rife with contradiction and speculation. Karate's connection to Godane, his history of enforcing Godane's policies, and his preference for the Islamic State means he is sometimes identified as a "die hard jihadist."[112] He has been ruthless in maintaining the group's internal cohesion and was directly connected to prominent al-Shabaab founding senior leader Ibrahim al-Afghani's assassination during Godane's purge.[113] However, he has been pragmatic in his dealings in Mogadishu – a place where his clan is powerful and where he is believed to be responsible for al-Shabaab's activities. For example, he sometimes refrains from enforcing death penalties of government officials, and there are pervasive rumors about him dealing with Somali intelligence, particularly its chief.[114]

Personality issues plagued his bid for emir as he reportedly had conflicts with other members of the executive council.[115] Operationally, Karate reportedly "had a particular talent for organization and tactics,"[116] but he was also accused of avoiding fighting on the front lines and inflaming tensions between al-Shabaab's leaders.[117] Moreover, his ascension risked other sub-clans, like the Saad, Suleiman, or Abgal, balking at the group having a Hawiye/Habr Gedir/Ayr leader. In other words, it would disrupt the balance of power among the clans within the group's leadership.[118]

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[110] Karate, "The Sanctity of Muslim Blood."

[111] "Shabaab Official Warsame Speaks on Bosaso Central Prison Operation, Vows More Raids to Come," SITE Intelligence Group, March 9, 2021, https://ent-siteintelgroup-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/Statements/shabaab-official-warsame-speaks-on-bosaso-central-prison-operation-vows-more-raids-to-come.html.

[112] Maruf and Joseph, *Inside Al-Shabaab*, 2018, 242.

[113] "Somalia: Al-Shabaab – It Will Be a Long War," Africa Briefing (Nairobi/Brussels: International Crisis Group, June 26, 2014), 11, https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/somalia/somalia-al-shabaab-it-will-be-long-war.

[114] The author thanks one of the expert reviewers for this insight.

[115] Maruf and Joseph, *Inside Al-Shabaab*, 2018, 242.

[116] Hansen, *Al-Shabaab in Somalia*, 143.

[117] Maruf and Joseph, *Inside Al-Shabaab*, 2018, 242.

[118] The author would like to thank one of the expert reviewers for this point.

Abukar Ali Aden

Background: Abukar Ali Aden comes from the Hiraan region[119] and is a member of the Gaalje'el sub-clan of the Hawiye clan.[120] He was a businessman who financed the ICU during its takeover of Mogadishu in 2006.[121] Beginning in 2009, he served as one of al-Shabaab's shadow governors, although reports conflict on which region he led.[122] He became involved in the group's military wing in 2010,[123] and the International Crisis Group identified him as the overall head of al-Shabaab's military by mid-2013.[124] He maintained a senior position within the group's military apparatus during Godane's purge.[125] Still, Aden was a relatively unknown figure in the group until 2018 when Diriye reportedly named him one of his deputies and the U.S. State Department designated him as a Specially Designated Terrorist.[126] He probably ascended to this position because of the need for clan balance among al-Shabaab's senior ranks and in recognition of the large number of fighters and sizeable territory that the Gaalje'el sub-clan provide to al-Shabaab.[127] Since then, rumors of Diriye's ill health have coincided with assertions that Aden has de facto assumed the role of emir and replaced Karate in terms of influence.[128]

Character/Personality: There is little public information on Aden's character but his survival through Godane's purge and ascension to one of the most senior leadership positions indicates his commitment to Godane and later Diriye's agenda.

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[119] Harun Maruf and Dan Joseph, "No End in Sight for the Al-Shabaab Threat to Somalia," *Combating Terrorism Center Sentinel* 11, no. 11 (December 14, 2018): 16–17, https://ctc.usma.edu/no-end-sight-al-shabaab-threat-somalia/.

[120] "It Will Be a Long War," 11-12 footnote 61.

[121] Maruf and Joseph, "No End in Sight," 16.

[122] The UN Monitoring Group found in 2010 that he led the Hiraan region while West and Maruf and Joseph state he was the governor of the Juba regions. U.N. Security Council, "Resolution 1853, Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 1853," S/2010/91, March 10, 2010, para. 92, https://undocs.org/en/S/2010/91; Sunguta West, "Shaykh Abukar Ali Adan: The Making of a New al-Shabaab Leader," *Jamestown Militant Leadership Monitor* 11, no. 11 (November 2020): 3–5, https://jamestown.org/program/shaykh-abukar-ali-adan-the-making-of-a-new-al-shabaab-leader/; Maruf and Joseph, "No End in Sight," 17.

[123] Maruf and Joseph, "No End in Sight," 17.

[124] "It Will Be a Long War," 11-12 footnote 61.

[125] West, "Shaykh Abukar Ali Adan," 5.

[126] Maruf and Joseph, "No End in Sight," 16; "Designation of Abukar Ali Adan, Aka Abukar Ali Aden, Aka Sheikh Abukar, Aka Ibrahim Afghan, as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist," Federal Register, January 9, 2018, https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2018/01/09/2018-00196/designation-of-abukar-ali-adan-aka-abukar-ali-aden-aka-sheikh-abukar-aka-ibrahim-afghan-as-a.

[127] The author would like to thank one of the expert reviewers for this point.

[128] West, "Shaykh Abukar Ali Adan," 3; Japheth Ogila, "Change of Guard for Al-Shabaab as Leader Falls Sick," *The Standard*, August 31, 2020, sec. Africa, https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/africa/article/2001384609/change-of-guard-for-al-shabaab-as-leader-falls-sick.

Hussein Ali Fiidow

Background: Like Karate and Aden, Fiidow is a member of the Hawiye clan although he is from the Murusade sub-clan.[129] How and when he joined al-Shabaab and his jihadist history prior to joining the group are unclear. By the time he was openly connected to al-Shabaab, he was already a prominent figure, suggesting he has a robust jihadist history. He was reportedly one of the 18 leaders who unanimously chose Godane as al-Shabaab's emir in August 2007.[130] Since that time, Fiidow has held various positions within the group, mostly roles involving politics and administration. In 2009, he was identified as one of three commanders of al-Shabaab's operations in Mogadishu.[131] The UN Monitoring Group identified his position as the "chief of political and regional affairs" in Mogadishu in 2010.[132] Since that time Fiidow has maintained leadership roles in the realm of governance.[133] Throughout the 2011 drought and subsequent famine, he led the group's "emergency drought relief committee."[134] The group established a "Council of Clan Leaders" in 2016,[135] which falls under Fiidow's leadership under the shadow interior ministry.[136] As of 2017, Fiidow was the group's political chief, known as the "Head of the Office of Policy Affairs and Reconciliation," strongly suggesting that if al-Shabaab were to engage with external actors he would have a central role in such talks.

Character/Personality: Despite being a senior member of al-Shabaab since its formation, Fiidow remains an enigmatic individual with little known about his life before the group or his character. However, his public statements provide justifications for some of the

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[129] "Somalia List of Al-Shabaab Top Leaders from Hawiye Clan," *Voice of Djibouti*, April 13, 2015, sec. regional news, http://voiceofdjibouti.com/somalia-list-of-al-shabaab-top-leaders-from-hawiye-clan/; Sunguta West, "Hussein Ali Fiidow's Challenge to al-Shabaab Leadership," *Jamestown Militant Leadership Monitor* 9, no. 5 (June 6, 2018), https://jamestown.org/brief/hussein-ali-fiidows-challenge-to-al-shabaab-leadership/.

[130] One of Fiidow's aliases is Hussein Dayniile who is the individual Maruf and Joseph name as present in this meeting. Maruf and Joseph, *Inside Al-Shabaab*, 2018, 61.

[131] Paula Cristina Roque, "Somalia: Understanding Al-Shabaab," Situation Report (Institute for Security Studies, June 3, 2009), 1, https://issafrica.org/research/situation-reports/situation-report-somalia-understanding-al-shabaab-paula-cristina-roque.

[132] "S/2010/91," para. 29.

[133] Maruf and Joseph, *Inside Al-Shabaab*, 2018, 274; "Shabaab Reports 40 Somali Tribal Leaders Pledging Allegiance to Its Leader and Vowing to Fight 'Occupiers' Together," SITE Intelligence Group, March 11, 2019, https://ent-siteintelgroup-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/Statements/shabaab-reports-40-somali-tribal-leaders-pledging-allegiance-to-its-leader-and-vowing-to-fight-occupiers-together.html.

[134] Christopher Anzalone, "Al-Shabab's Setbacks in Somalia," *Combating Terrorism Center Sentinel* 4, no. 10 (October 31, 2011): 24, https://ctc.usma.edu/al-shababs-setbacks-in-somalia/.

[135] Sahan, "Al-Shabaab as a Transnational Security Threat," in *War and Peace in Somalia*, ed. Michael Keating and Matt Waldman (Oxford University Press, 2018), 405.

[136] "Taming the Clans," 1.

groups' most ruthless tactics including amputations[137] and suicide attacks.[138] Early in the group's history, Fiidow was one of several leaders calling on foreign fighters to come to Somalia.[139] He also adheres to al-Shabaab's standard narrative that Somalia is "managed by" external powers.[140] Fiidow has maintained a prolonged tenure in the senior leadership and retained his position throughout Godane's internal purge. Thus, Fiidow likely shares Godane and Diriye's vision for al-Shabaab and adheres to its ideology. While speculative, one potential area where Fiidow may diverge from Godane and Diriye actions, is his interactions with clans as Fiidow more directly interacts with clan leaders than most senior leaders of the group.

Ali Dheere

Background: Like Fiidow, Dheere is from the Murusade sub-clan of the Hawiye clan.[141] Dheere replaced Mukhtar Robow as al-Shabaab's spokesman in May 2009 after Robow allowed members of his clan loyal to the Transitional Federal Government to flee Baidoa after al-Shabaab took the city. His initial appointment may have been shaped by Godane's desire to appease members of the Murusade sub-clan.[142] However, Dheere has maintained this position since 2009. Along with leading the group's media department, he is also involved in the group's education department. Dheere regularly provides statements and justifications for al-Shabaab's attacks and commentary on news relevant to al-Shabaab or al-Qaida's agenda. He is the main voice and face of al-Shabaab.

In June 2021, there were rumors that Dheere had been diagnosed with cancer and was going to be flown to Qatar for medical treatment. Sahan argued that "Ali Dheere's medical evacuation to Qatar would send a strong signal from both Mogadishu and Doha that they are offering to engage constructively with Al-Shabaab."[143] However, as of this writing, it is unclear whether Dheere does in fact have cancer, his medical prognosis, or whether Doha will host him for treatment.

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[137] Maruf and Joseph, *Inside Al-Shabaab*, 2018, 127; Xan Rice, "Mogadishu Militia Cuts Off Right Hands and Left Feet of Teenagers Accused of Stealing," *The Guardian*, June 25, 2009, sec. World, http://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/jun/25/somali-militia-amputate-teenagers.
[138] "Radical Islamist Group Claims Mogadishu Suicide Attack," *Xinhua*, May 25, 2009, https://reliefweb.int/report/somalia/somalia-radical-islamist-group-claims-mogadishu-suicide-attack.
[139] Ted Dagne, "Somalia: Current Conditions and Prospects for a Lasting Peace" (Congressional Research Service, June 29, 2011), 6, https://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=489535; Maruf and Joseph, *Inside Al-Shabaab*, 2018, 11.
[140] "Al Shabab Says Kampala Meeting Ended Failure," Mareeg, accessed May 18, 2021, https://web.archive.org/web/20180915152800/https://www.mareeg.com/fidsan.php?sid=20105&tirsan=3.
[141] "Somalia List of Al-Shabaab Top Leaders from Hawiye Clan."
[142] "Somalia's Divided Islamists," 7.
[143] Sahan Commentary, *Somalia Wire*, June 22, 2022

<u>Character/Personality</u>: Shortly after he became spokesman, the International Crisis Group profiled Dheere, characterizing him as less of a hardliner than other leaders[144] and later labeling him a "pragmatist" who remained quiet throughout Godane's purge.[145] His statements were "cautious and well-crafted, clearly designed not to alienate the public."[146] He also presents targeted messages that use language and imagery that appeal to Somalis, to recruits in the region, and to foreign fighters. As spokesman, it is difficult to delineate between the views Dheere holds personally from those that represent al-Shabaab's established rhetoric. In interviews, he has presented less hardline views than his rhetoric as spokesman suggests.[147] However, had he disagreed with other al-Shabaab leaders, Dheere was the best-positioned leader to voice his dissent, given his prominent public profile. Instead, he has held the spokesman position for over a decade, through Godane's purge, leadership succession, and the ISIS crackdown without contradicting the decisions of the emir or executive council. This indicates at a minimum he respects the group's internal decision-making processes.

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[144] "Somalia's Divided Islamists," 7 footnote 36.
[145] "It Will Be a Long War," 11 footnote 58.
[146] "Somalia's Divided Islamists," 7 footnote 36.
[147] Interview with scholar 4, July 2021, Virtual.

Section 2: Beliefs, Perceptions, and Attitudes

The group's leaders possess a shared set of core beliefs, particularly religious and political beliefs about the group's superiority to the Somali government, opposition to foreign interventions, and the need for an Islamic state in Somalia based on *Sharia* law. In practice, the group has demonstrated a degree of pragmatism, if not opportunism, and more broadly, there has been a decline in the degree of dogmatism within the group, though the core elements of these beliefs have persisted over time. There are potential areas of divergence within the group, though none are particularly salient at present, as well as a history of sharp divergences that were resolved through violence.

Al-Shabaab has a long list of adversaries, including most importantly the Somali Federal Government, AMISOM, and the United States. It perceives governments supporting the Somali government as adversaries, but it prioritizes the Somali government's allies differently based on the degree and visibility of their support. It also has a hierarchy of adversaries within AMISOM, with Ethiopia and Kenyan drawing more ire than Uganda, Burundi, or Djibouti. In its rhetoric, it adheres to al-Qaida's narratives about other enemies, like Saudi Arabia or France, but these are not salient actors for al-Shabaab in the Somalia conflict.

CORE BELIEFS RELATED TO THE CONFLICT

Fundamentally, the group sees itself as a more just and effective alternative than the government. It believes it is fighting against injustice in the form of external forces, crusaders, and apostate regimes. Moreover, "in the security bazaar of Somalia, al-Shabaab perceives itself as the most legitimate and best provider of security with a superior code based on religion."[148] The leaders view themselves at the "vanguard" of Islam, *Sharia* governance, Somali nationalism, and Muslims.[149]

The group currently believes it is in a strong position in the conflict in Somalia and enjoys the strategic advantage – an accurate assessment. In the current circumstances, al-Shabaab can bide its time.[150] More broadly, it sees itself as on the right side of history, the side pre-ordained by God to succeed. This perception has been bolstered by the implosion of the Somali Federal Government, the civil war in Ethiopia, the U.S. withdrawal of forces from Somalia, and the Taliban's rapid gains and succeeding victory

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[148] Interview with former US military officer, April 2021, Virtual.
[149] Interview with scholar 2, July 2021, Virtual. One expert reviewer pointed out that there are individual leaders who may be more pragmatic, such as Yusuf Kabakutukade.
[150] Interview with scholar 4, July 2021, Virtual.

in Afghanistan following the U.S. withdrawal. Those perceptions are not inaccurate. In its competition with the Somali government, the group often outperforms its primary enemy. Its adversaries are weakened or losing interest in costly investments in Somalia, most notably Ethiopia and the United States respectively.

The group simplifies the situation in its narratives, presents it in stark or black and white terms, and ignores its own shortcomings, but its perceptions are grounded in reality as many Somalis understand it.[151] The group accurately sees itself as deeply embedded in Somali society, though it most likely underestimates how much of its embeddedness is based on fear, coercion, and duplicity. Nevertheless, the result of its deep roots in and connections to Somali society is that the conflict cannot be neatly divided into two sides; al-Shabaab has penetrated society and the government too deeply.[152] Another area where the group's self-perception is at odds with reality is its quest for power: leaders and members of the group may be more interested in acquiring and exercising power that they are willing to acknowledge.[153]

Key Religious Beliefs

The group's leaders see themselves as authentic jihadists, undertaking a religiously mandated duty.[154] Al-Shabaab's ideology is based on Salafi jihadism. In modern times, Wahhabism – a type of Salafism – penetrated Somalia through a combination of Somalis who returned home from working and studying in the Gulf and Saudi Arabia's proselytization and largess. Salafism served as the ideological basis for AIAI during the 1990s as well, though the perception that Salafism was a foreign import was one factor that hindered AIAI's ability to gain a mass following.[155] As noted in section 7, AIAI initially focused on proselytizing; this agenda morphed into promoting jihad in the wake of the state collapse.[156] The group then fragmented over clan dynamics as well as differing views on whether to prioritize *dawa* (proselytization) or jihad. As discussed in section 1, some future leaders of al-Shabaab were AIAI members.[157] Also as noted in section 1, along with training or fighting in Afghanistan, AIAI membership was one of the formative experiences for founding al-Shabaab leaders. However, few current leaders

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[151] Interview with international think tank analyst 1, July 2021, Virtual; Interview with retired US official 2, April 2021, Virtual.

[152] Interview with scholar 2, July 2021, Virtual.

[153] Interview with retired US official 1, April 2021, Virtual.

[154] Interview with scholar 1, April 2021, Virtual.

[155] "Somalia's Divided Islamists," 3–4.

[156] "Somalia's Islamists," Africa Report (Nairobi/Brussels: International Crisis Group, December 12, 2005), 4–5, https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/somalia/somalias-islamists.

[157] As are some current, influential members of the Somali Federal Government

trained in Afghanistan while several were AIAI members, thus increasing AIAI's salience as a shared formative experience.

AIAI's goals and connections to al-Shabaab are detailed further in section 7; briefly, AIAI was the first group to propagate Salafism and the idea of a unified "Greater Somalia" under a Salafist interpretation of *Sharia* law. Al-Shabaab's ideology embraces many similar elements, including the imposition of harsh punishments for infractions of *Sharia* and rejection of Sufi traditions.[158] As noted, many Somalis follow Sufism, which includes the veneration of saints and ancestor worship.[159] However, al-Shabaab rejects Sufism and imposes conduct consistent with its interpretation of Salafism in areas it controls. It has destroyed Sufi shrines,[160] killed Sufi clerics,[161] and one of the group's most significant opposition forces was, for a time, the Sufi group Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama.[162]

Al-Shabaab goes further in embracing *takfirism* and declaring its Muslim adversaries to be apostates, most importantly the Somali government. *Takfirism* establishes a binary: one is either a true believer or an apostate who is excommunicated from the religion. Importantly, for al-Shabaab, this stance provides the justification necessary to permit killing other Muslims, particularly al-Shabaab's killing of Sufis, civilians, and Somali government officials.[163] It has warned civilians to stay away from government and AMISOM installations to avoid being harmed by the group's attacks, thereby attempting to shift the blame for any civilian deaths.[164]

It should be noted that al-Shabaab's rhetoric has increasingly referred to the sanctity of Muslim blood, often specifically referring to civilians, indicating the group may be under pressure to refrain from its most extreme conduct, particularly following the backlash to

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[158] "Somalia's Islamists," 3, 7.

[159] "Somalia's Islamists," 3.

[160] "Kismayo: Somali Fighters Destroying Shrines," *Media With Conscience*, December 20, 2008, https://www.hiiraan.com/news2_rss/2008/Dec/kismayo_somali_fighters_destroying_shrines.aspx.

[161] Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, "2011 Report on International Religious Freedom" (U.S. Department of State, July 30, 2012), https://2009-2017.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2011/index.htm; "Al-Shabaab Terrorists Kill Sufi Cleric, 19 Others in Central Somalia," *Daily Sabah*, November 26, 2018, sec. Africa, https://www.dailysabah.com/africa/2018/11/26/al-shabaab-terrorists-kill-sufi-cleric-19-others-in-central-somalia.

[162] Maruf and Joseph, *Inside Al-Shabaab*, 2018, 136.

[163] "Somalia's Divided Islamists," 4.

[164] Al-Shabaab's tolerance for high civilian casualties stems from a doctrine developed by Salafi Jihadists. The doctrine, based on an unscrupulous exegesis of Koranic text, holds that civilians killed in a just jihad are "martyrs" who will go to heaven. This absolves al-Shabaab from culpability, explains why the group never publicly apologizes for civilian deaths and justifies its campaign of gratuitous violence. The author thanks one of the expert reviewers for this point.

the 2017 Zoobe junction attack in Mogadishu.[165] Operationally, al-Shabaab attacks continue to kill civilians. However, there has been an overall shift from vehicle-born improvised explosive devices to suicide vests, which might be partly explained by an attempt to reduce civilian causalities as these smaller devices can be more precise than a large vehicle-born one.[166]

Overall, the group sees itself as "real Muslims" and as a force that protects Muslims from external interference and an apostate government, despite its frequent harm to civilians.[167] It believes in the need for governance according to *Sharia* law, with itself as the only legitimate deliverer of that system. Even though in reality there is an influential cadre within the current government that shares many of al-Shabaab's fundamental beliefs, al-Shabaab rejects the Somali government as un-Islamic, denouncing what al-Shabaab views as its failure to fulfill its promise to implement *Sharia* law.[168]

Key Political and Social Beliefs

Closely related to the group's religious beliefs is its core political belief: the need for an Islamic state under its interpretation of *Sharia* law in Somalia. This bears repeating, above all, it seeks an Islamic state under *its version of Sharia law in Somalia.* The group's beliefs have a regional dimension, but the group prioritizes political and social aims in Somalia. Its objectives will be discussed further in section 7, but it is worth noting here that al-Shabaab's perception of the conflict is through a Somali and Somalia-centric lens.[169]

This core political belief means that in principle al-Shabaab rejects democracy. The group has explicitly laid out its justification for this belief, stating that "the right of legislation solely belongs to Allaah" and that, "The only form of legislation that Allaah has chosen for mankind and that can unite the Muslims all over the world is Islamic

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[165] On October 14, 2017, al-Shabaab detonated two truck bombings in Mogadishu, killing at least 587 people and injuring 316 others.

[166] The author thanks one of the expert reviewers for this point. Also see Sahan, "Al-Shabaab's IED attacks: a change of tactics and targets," *The Somalia Wire*, September 23, 2021.

[167] Interview with international expert, April 2021, Virtual. However, al-Shabaab's suicide attacks usually target government and AMISOM targets. Jason Warner and Ellen Chapin, "Targeted Terror: The Suicide Bombers of al-Shabaab," Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, February 13, 2018, https://ctc.usma.edu/targeted-terror-suicide-bombers-al-shabaab/. One expert review pointed out that the rank and file's understanding of Islam may be fairly simplistic and unquestioning.

[168] Interview with scholar 1, April 2021, Virtual; Interview with international journalists, July 2021, Virtual.

[169] Interview with international think tank analyst 1, July 2021, Virtual; Interview with former Somali government official, July 2021, Virtual.

Sharia."[170] Diriye has explicitly rejected democracy for these reasons and because it "permits apostasy," "equates the disbeliever with the Muslim," and "is held hostage to the whims and desires of the majority."[171] This has been a consistent position for Diriye, as it was for Godane; Diriye rejected any form of democracy in his first audio message as emir.[172] The group has consequently targeted officials who ran for office or participated in elections. It undoubtedly feels vindicated about the failings of democracy during the ongoing election imbroglio.[173]

The senior leadership has also made of point of rejecting federalism and Somalia's 4.5 system of allocating power to clans. Diriye has made statements denouncing Somalia's 4.5 system, accusing it of discriminating between the clans and seeking to divide Somalis.[174] This was reiterated in al-Shabaab's propaganda video series ahead of Somalia's planned 2021 elections. The narrator of the video connected Somalia's colonial history to modern federalism, pointing to both as seeking to divide Somalis. Additionally, the video claimed the Federal Member States are controlled by particular clans; thus, these states represent another unnecessary division within Somalia, according to al-Shabaab.[175] However, as discussed in section 1, although al-Shabaab reject clannism, clan is actually central to al-Shabaab's identity as well, and it manages clan power dynamics carefully, though it seeks to present itself as an alternative to the clan-dominated system and champion of minority clans marginalized in the current system.

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[170] "Shabaab Threatens Somali Tribal Elders for Facilitating Democracy, Gives 45 Days to Repent," SITE Intelligence Group, July 15, 2019, https://ent-siteintelgroup-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/Statements/shabaab-threatens-somali-tribal-elders-for-facilitating-democracy-gives-45-days-to-repent.html.

[171] Abu Ubaydah, "But Allah Will Complete His Light, Even Though the Disbelievers Hate It," Jihadology, September 19, 2019, https://jihadology.net/2019/09/19/new-video-message-from-%e1%b8%a5arakat-al-shabab-al-mujahidins-shaykh-abu-ubaydah-a%e1%b8%a5mad-umar-but-god-will-perfect-his-light-although-the-disbelievers-dislike-i/.

[172] "Shabaab Leader Calls for Lone-Wolf Attacks in East Africa, Incites Somali Muslims to Fight in Inaugural Audio Speech," SITE Intelligence Group, July 12, 2016, https://ent-siteintelgroup-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/Statements/shabaab-leader-calls-for-lone-wolf-attacks-in-east-africa-incites-somali-muslims-to-fight-in-inaugural-audio-speech.html.

[173] This sentiment is not unique to al-Shabaab and can be found in other modernist Sunni Islamist movements. The author thanks one of the expert reviewers for this point.

[174] Abu Ubaydah, "We Bow To None Other Than Allah," Jihadology, November 5, 2019, https://jihadology.net/2019/11/05/new-video-message-from-%e1%b8%a5arakat-al-shabab-al-mujahidins-shaykh-abu-ubaydah-a%e1%b8%a5mad-umar-we-bow-to-none-other-than-god/.

[175] "Farmajo: False Promises and Fading Hopes #4: Federalism: The Balkanization of Somalia," Jihadology, February 11, 2021, https://jihadology.net/2021/02/11/new-video-message-from-%e1%b8%a5arakat-al-shabab-al-mujahidin-farmajo-false-promises-and-fading-hopes-4-federalism-the-balkanization-of-somalia/.

Despite this, there are some indications that the group has sought to shape the outcomes of the elections, which are based on the 4.5 system. The group has accrued significant influence with some clans by coopting and coercing clan elders. The leadership initially sought to sideline clan elders but was forced to be more pragmatic and instead leverage the clan system, including empowering clan leaders who are responsive to the group.[176] Clan elders will play a key role in selecting the next government through the indirect democratic voting process, and there are reports that al-Shabaab is using pressure and intimidation against clan elders to ensure the selection of candidates it favors in order to subvert the electoral process and establish a powerbase in parliament. This contradiction between its rejection of democracy and these actions are a reflection of al-Shabaab's strong pragmatic and opportunistic streak. Even in the realm of deeply held beliefs, the group has made compromises in the service of expanding power.

Evolution of Beliefs

The current generation of the leadership appears to be more pragmatic and less dogmatic than its predecessors.[177] There are probably fewer true believers in the organization now, though some senior leaders are likely still hardline ideologues.[178] Its lucrative extortion racket has diluted some of its ideological rigor, though not to the point that it is primarily a mafia without an ideological and political basis. In addition, as discussed in section 1, clan has become more important in the organization over time. Thus, overall, the group's greater involvement in clan dynamics, business, governing, and extortion has probably tempered some of its beliefs, though this is not reflected in the group's rhetoric.

DIVERGENT OPINIONS

There are fault lines within any organization as complex as al-Shabaab – part terrorist organization, part insurgent group, part shadow government, and part mafia – as well as one consisting of both a Somali core and cadre from the region. Nonetheless, the group is remarkably cohesive. Though there was a surge of dissenters, no splinter group that has significantly weakened the group has emerged to date: a remarkable accomplishment for any militant group more than fifteen years old, especially one in Somalia, albeit an outcome resulting in part from the violent suppression of internal dissent. In its current position of strength, differences within al-Shabaab are not particularly salient. At a minimum, they are not visible to outsiders. In particular, the executive council is

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[176] Michael Weddegjerde Skjelderup, "Jihadi Governance and Traditional Authority Structures: Al-Shabaab and Clan Elders in Southern Somalia, 2008-2012," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 31, no. 6 (August 17, 2020): 1182, https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2020.1780686.

[177] Interview with former Somali government official, July 2021, Virtual; Interview with scholar 4, July 2021, Virtual.

[178] Interview with international think tank analyst 1, July 2021, Virtual.

currently fairly unified, though it struggles to meet out of fear of drone strikes.[179] However, there are five areas of potential future divergence: clan, resources, civilian causalities, succession, and negotiations.

Clan

Al-Shabaab has been unique as a Somali organization with cross-clan membership, including minority clans. This has been one of al-Shabaab's notable successes.[180] As noted, the group has been skillful at managing internal clan dynamics.[181] Generally, it has been able to play clan politics and exploit clan dynamics without succumbing to clan divisions. However, there is the potential for tensions or opinions to diverge about clans, especially when resources or damages are seen as disproportionately benefiting or harming certain clans. Because clan identity is still salient for al-Shabaab members, they are sensitive to action that disproportionately benefits certain clans, such as through the distribution of resources, or harms particular clans, such as through terrorist attacks.

Civilian Causalities

Related to clan, there is the potential for divergence surrounding civilian causalities, which has been previously discussed. The group's killing of civilians was one of the rifts between Godane and his critics, discussed in the next sub-section. It has arisen again in the aftermath of attacks that have killed numerous civilians, most notably the October 2017 truck bombing at the Zoobe junction in Mogadishu that killed more than 500.[182] That attack was sufficiently damaging to public opinion that al-Shabaab did not claim responsibility. There was also

Image 4: The aftermath of the twin VBIED bombings in Mogadishu on October 14, 2017. Photo: AMISOM Public Information.

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[179] Interview with former Somali government official, July 2021, Virtual; Interview with scholar 4, July 2021, Virtual.

[180] Interview with retired US official 1, April 2021, Virtual.

[181] Interview with scholar 4, July 2021, Virtual.

[182] "Managing the Disruptive Aftermath of Somalia's Worst Terror Attack," Africa Briefing (Nairobi/Brussels: International Crisis Group), October 20, 2017, https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/somalia/b131-managing-disruptive-aftermath-somalias-worst-terror-attack.

significant internal blowback to the attack, including a temporary spike in defections, in addition to the public condemnation.[183] In reports of dissent between Diriye and Karate in 2018, one of the reported issues was civilian casualties, specifically the number of deaths of members of Karate's clan in that attack. However, defections have subsided significantly since the aftermath of the Zoobe attack, and dissension about civilian causalities does not appear to be salient in the current environment, though it could reemerge in the wake of another indiscriminate attack.

Resources

Perhaps the most frequent source of dissension within the group relates to resources. Individuals within the group quarrel over money, especially as the group has grown wealthier. But perhaps even more important, tensions arise when there is a perception that resources in the group is advantaging or disadvantaging certain clans over others.

Succession

Perhaps most speculatively, there may be the potential for divergence in the organization over succession. Godane allegedly communicated his preference for Diriye to succeed him, elevating a dark horse candidate and reducing, though not eliminating, the internal fallout in the succession process. While Diriye is most likely alive, the reports of his illness have, as noted, sometimes been accompanied by reports of internal jockeying for power. On his death, there could be competition for power within the group. In the succession process, as was the case when Diriye became emir, there will be balance of power clan dynamics for the group to carefully negotiate. In particular, there is a high chance it will opt for continuity with another Dir leader, and that specific clan segments within al-Shabaab will push for that, especially to avoid Hawiye domination.[184]

In addition to competition over the role of leader, there is constant jockeying within the group among al-Shabaab senior leaders who are trying to get ahead of rivals and peers. This dynamic, not unique to al-Shabaab, is a constant source of latent tensions within the group.

Negotiations

Finally, should a genuine and viable opportunity for negotiations materialize, there would probably be differences in the group about whether to negotiate, the conditions

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[183] Interview with scholar 4, July 2021, Virtual.
[184] The author would like to thank one of the expert reviewers for this point.

for negotiations, and the terms of any negotiated settlement.[185] Indeed, there are reports that such differences emerged in 2017. However, as discussed in section 8, the prospects for negotiations in the current environment are poor; thus, this is not an active area of divergence. Instead, the group is in a position of strength with no credible government with which to negotiate. The vastly increased number of air strikes under Trump Administration, which put the leadership under intense pressure, is believed to have led some al-Shabaab leaders to consider negotiations. But having faced few strikes since the Biden Administration took office, this factor presently has less relevance. Finally, al-Shabaab members will be reluctant to openly express support for negotiations until the leadership has clearly signaled receptivity, given the group's track record of detaining or eliminating individuals who challenge the leadership.[186]

PAST DIVERGENCE

There have been at least two major episodes of internal divergences during the group's lifespan: 1) the debate over al-Qaida versus ISIS affiliation; and 2) the disagreements that led to Godane's purge of dissenters, often framed as a national versus international debate. These episodes involved violence and arrests of those who dissented from the leadership. Ultimately, the Amniyat is a key instrument to enforce the leadership's mandate and silence dissent, when it does occur.

AQ vs ISIS affiliation

As previously mentioned, since Diriye became emir in 2014, al-Shabaab's most significant internal debate surrounded its affiliation to al-Qaida over ISIS. In 2015, just months after Diriye was named emir, ISIS was at its peak in Iraq and Syria, and it was courting al-Shabaab as an ally.[187] ISIS sought to convince al-Shabaab to switch its allegiance from al-Qaida, and at the time ISIS offered access to greater resources, cachet, and exposure than al-Qaida. There was support for a switch to ISIS within al-Shabaab, perhaps most importantly rumors that among its supporters was Mahad Karate.[188] The

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[185] Interview with international expert, April 2021, Virtual; Interview with retired US official 2, April 2021, Virtual.

[186] Interview with international expert, April 2021, Virtual.

[187] Maruf and Joseph, *Inside Al-Shabaab*, 2018, 257–59; al-Bushra, "Somalia the Land of Khilafah"; "S/2015/801," para. 85; Jason Warner and Caleb Weiss, "A Legitimate Challenger? Assessing the Rivalry between al-Shabaab and the Islamic State in Somalia," *Combating Terrorism Center Sentinel* 10, no. 10 (November 2017): 28, https://ctc.usma.edu/a-legitimate-challenger-assessing-the-rivalry-between-al-shabaab-and-the-islamic-state-in-somalia/.

[188] Maruf and Joseph, *Inside Al-Shabaab*, 2018, 259; Stig Jarle Hansen, "Al-Shabaab's Three Crises," *Institute for Global Change* (blog), October 29, 2014, https://institute.global/policy/al-shabaabs-three-crises; Caroline Hellyer, "ISIL Courts Al-Shabab as al-Qaeda Ties Fade Away," *Al Jazeera*, March 23, 2015,

group's senior leadership reportedly met in July 2015 to discuss the issue. Rumors swirled that a change was imminent, but no new *baya* emerged.[189] Instead, in September 2015, Diriye reaffirmed the group's allegiance to al-Qaida, banned any pro-ISIS materials, and initiated a purge of ISIS proponents.[190] Some al-Shabaab commanders defected to align with ISIS, but the Amniyat quickly imprisoned and killed many defectors. The notable exception was Abdulqadir Mumin, a former al-Shabaab ideologue who has successfully established an ISIS affiliate group in the northern area of Puntland.[191] The ISIS faction in Puntland consists of a few hundred members and remains constrained to the north and a particular clan, but it has survived multiple al-Shabaab attacks.[192]

Within al-Shabaab, the ISIS challenge was ultimately beneficial to its leadership. It forced Diriye and Karate to put aside their differences and cooperate against a common enemy. Despite rumors that Karate was sympathetic to ISIS, he played an active role in eliminating pro-ISIS cells.[193]

While al-Shabaab appears to have thoroughly answered the allegiance question for the time being, some still see this debate as relevant.[194] As noted in section 1, al-Qaida affiliation may not be an identity marker for many rank and file members, and even for some senior leaders. Should the issue of ISIS versus al-Qaida affiliation re-emerge, there is the potential for schisms, though it is unclear under what conditions the affiliation question would become relevant again.

Reassessing the 2011-2013 Internal Dispute: Internationalist vs Nationalist Narrative?

When disputes spiraled within al-Shabaab between 2010 and 2013, culminating in Godane's purge, some saw the group as divided into internationalists versus nationalists, and thus in fundamental disagreement about the scope of the conflict. This analysis focused on perceptions of two of the central leaders at loggerheads: Godane versus

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sec. Somalia, https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2015/03/isil-eyes-east-africa-foments-division-150322130940108.html.

[189] Maruf and Joseph, *Inside Al-Shabaab*, 2018, 259; "Senior Al Shabaab Officials Discussing Allegiance to ISIL," *Garowe Online*, July 9, 2015, sec. Somalia,
https://www.garoweonline.com/en/news/somalia/somalia-senior-al-shabaab-officials-discussing-allegiance-to-isil.

[190] Maruf and Joseph, *Inside Al-Shabaab*, 2018, 259–60.

[191] Notably, Mumin was initially a proponent of the affiliation with al-Qaida and praised the formalization of that relationship.

[192] Warner and Weiss, "A Legitimate Challenger?," 28–29; Weiss, "Reigniting the Rivalry," 29.

[193] The author thanks one of the expert reviewers for this analysis.

[194] Expert analysis in a non for attribution event

Robow. Robow was perceived as the nationalist because he was more connected to his clan, adhered to clan obligations, objected to the loss of his clansmen in the Mogadishu offensive in 2010, and advocated against the death of civilians in the group's operations and for more moderate policies on aid distribution. Godane, on the other hand, had no such clan obligations in the south, was an ideological hardliner, and many pointed to his training in Afghanistan and advocacy of al-Shabaab's al-Qaida affiliation as proof that he was a global jihadist through and through.[195]

However, viewing the internal disputes between 2011 and 2013 as primarily defined by this distinction is at best incomplete.[196] While Godane certainly held international ambitions, Robow also had global jihadist beliefs. Like Godane, he had trained with al-Qaida, and, as spokesman, he promoted global jihadist narratives. Moreover, Godane's purge killed Omar Hammami, a prominent foreign fighter, and Ibrahim Haji Jama Meead (ak Ibrahim al-Afghani), perhaps al-Shabaab's most experienced foreign-trained Somali, both of whom were both ardent international jihadists.[197]

Rather than being primarily about the scope of al-Shabaab's ambitions, the dispute was much more about power.[198] Godane had grown more authoritarian over his tenure as emir, overriding the traditional consensus decision-making approach of the executive council. Godane sought uncontested authority and eventually moved to kill or otherwise eliminate those who sought to challenge his power.

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[195] Sudarsan Raghavan, "Al-Shabab Leader's Ambitions Appear to Be as Complex as His Personality," *Washington Post*, September 26, 2013, sec. Africa, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/africa/investigators-search-rubble-of-kenyan-mall-for-bodies-clues-to-bloody-massacre/2013/09/25/b9b383e2-25e5-11e3-b75d-5b7f66349852_story.html; Magnus Taylor, "Westgate Attack Puts Al Shabaab Top of the Global Jihadist Premier League," African Arguments, September 24, 2013, https://africanarguments.org/2013/09/westgate-attack-puts-al-shabaab-to-top-of-the-global-jihadist-premier-league/.

[196] One potential outlier is Aweys, who had led Hizbul Islam until al-Shabaab absorbed the group in 2010. Hizbul Islam was a broadly nationalist and was not aligned with al-Qaida. But al-Shabaab had nearly eliminated the group by the time it absorbed Hizbul Islam, and Hizbul Islam had to accept al-Shabaab's global mission. Aweys did receive a spot on the group's executive council, and he was one of the few leaders to speak out publicly against al-Shabaab's public affiliation with al-Qaida in 2012. But most of the leaders who disagreed with the public announcement did not oppose the affiliation (which had stood since 2010) but instead lamented Godane's unilateral decision to announce it. Maruf and Joseph, *Inside Al-Shabaab*, 2018, 165–66; "S/2010/91," para. 38; Matthew J. Thomas, "Exposing and Exploiting Weaknesses in the Merger of Al-Qaeda and Al-Shabaab," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 24, no. 3 (July 1, 2013): 417–18, https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2013.802611.

[197] Hansen, "An In-Depth Look," 11.

[198] Hansen, "An In-Depth Look."

While Diriye has been inclined towards more consensus decision-making than Godane, he too has been willing to use violence against those within the group that challenge his decisions, as evidenced during the purge of ISIS supporters after he decided to maintain the al-Qaida affiliation.[199] Like Godane, he also has less clan stature than other senior al-Shabaab leaders and thus may be vulnerable to similar accusations of being insufficiently concerned about civilians, a charge made by Karate.

PERCEPTIONS OF ADVERSARIES AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS OTHER ACTORS

Overall, al-Shabaab generally has accurate perceptions of its adversaries and makes distinctions among them.[200] Indeed, al-Shabaab has "the upper hand in this realm," meaning the group understands its adversaries better than its adversaries understand al-Shabaab.[201] It accurately identifies and highlights its adversaries' weaknesses.[202] It effectively communicates those weaknesses in ways that resonate with Somalis' existing understandings and perceptions.[203]

One misperception the group makes is to attribute too much coherence and focus to its adversaries. For example, the U.S. policy process is not as coherent as al-Shabaab perceives it to be, and the U.S. is far less concerned with Somalia than al-Shabaab thinks.[204] Nonetheless, the group accurately perceives its foreign enemies as growing fatigued with Somalia, most notably the U.S. and AMISOM. And it correctly sees the Somali government as not only corrupt and failing to gain legitimacy but as increasingly discredited through its actions.

Somali Government

Al-Shabaab has made its views on the Somali government abundantly clear: the government is an illegitimate apostate authority that is beholden to its foreign backers. This view has not waivered with the changes in Somali Federal Government leadership. As previously discussed, the group rejects democratic systems in favor of *Sharia* law. While the Somali constitution enshrined *Sharia* as the supreme law of Somalia, the combination of democracy and *Sharia* is unacceptable to al-Shabaab. Al-Shabaab views the government as failing to implement its promise to enshrine *Sharia* law. Thus, it perceives the Somali government as apostate, which provides ideological justification

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[199] Godane admittedly had a lower threshold for transgressions he viewed as challenging his leadership.
[200]Interview with scholar 2, April 2021, Virtual; Interview with scholar 2, July 2021, Virtual.
[201] Interview with former Somali government official, July 2021, Virtual.
[202] Interview with international think tank analyst 1, July 2021, Virtual.
[203] Interview with international think tank analyst 1, July 2021, Virtual; Interview with scholar 1, April 2021, Virtual.
[204] Interview with scholar 2, July 2021, Virtual; Interview with scholar 1, April 2021, Virtual.

for the use of violence. It further accuses "apostate Arab regimes, African mercenaries and Western forces" of holding sway over the Somali government.[205]

Additionally, al-Shabaab views the government as incompetent and corrupt, referring to it as a "parliament of mercenaries"[206] who lack "pride, dignity, or religion, and even lacking the very sentiment of nationalism they so often proclaim."[207] It has called Farmajo foolish, stupid,[208] politically inept, spontaneous, bumbling, and prone to amateurish outbursts, insults that probably accurately convey its perceptions.[209] The group branded Farmajo a "powerless national symbol without any authority or significance," although this statement likely extends beyond Farmajo as an individual to the Presidency overall, since al-Shabaab views the government as serving external interests.[210] It perceives the government and the army to be corrupt and working to further parochial interests.[211] Al-Shabaab views the Federal Member States as dominated by particular clans, thereby contributing to the country's divisions.

Al-Shabaab's view of the government is not uninformed or developed from afar. The group has thoroughly penetrated the Somali government from the intelligence service to the chamber of commerce.[212] There were even allegations that the former Somali intelligence chief was connected to al-Shabaab.[213] Consequently, it has an intimate

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[205] "Farmajo: False Promises and Fading Hopes #2: Scramble for Somalia," Jihadology, February 7, 2021, https://jihadology.net/2021/02/07/new-video-message-from-%e1%b8%a5arakat-al-shabab-al-mujahidin-farmajo-false-promises-and-fading-hopes-2-scramble-for-somalia/.

[206] Al-Shabaab characterizes parliament in this way, yet it intimidates clans before the elections into selecting the candidates it prefers for parliament. The author thanks one of the expert reviewers for this point.

[207] "Shabaab Leader Slams 'Parliament of Mercenaries' in Audio Speech, Says Nearly 200 AMISOM Forces Killed in 3 Months," SITE Intelligence Group, May 21, 2018, https://ent-siteintelgroup-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/Statements/shabaab-leader-slams-parliament-of-mercenaries-in-audio-speech-says-nearly-200-amisom-forces-killed-in-3-months.html; "Farmajo: False Promises and Fading Hopes #2: Scramble for Somalia."

[208] "Shabaab Leader Slams 'Parliament of Mercenaries.'"

[209] "Farmajo: False Promises and Fading Hopes #6: The Fruits of Failure," Jihadology, February 15, 2021, https://jihadology.net/2021/02/15/new-video-message-from-%e1%b8%a5arakat-al-shabab-al-mujahidin-farmajo-false-promises-and-fading-hopes-6-the-fruits-of-failure/.

[210] "Farmajo: False Promises and Fading Hopes #2: Scramble for Somalia."

[211] "Farmajo: False Promises and Fading Hopes #2: Scramble for Somalia"; "Farmajo: False Promises and Fading Hopes #5: Somali National Army," Jihadology, February 13, 2021, https://jihadology.net/2021/02/13/new-video-message-from-%e1%b8%a5arakat-al-shabab-al-mujahidin-farmajo-false-promises-and-fading-hopes-5-somali-national-army/.

[212] Interview with scholar 2, July 2021, Virtual.

[213] Interview with retired US official 2, April 2021, Virtual; Matt Bryden, "Fake Fight: The Quiet Jihadist Takeover of Somalia," *The Elephant* (blog), November 8, 2021, https://www.theelephant.info/long-reads/2021/11/08/fake-fight-the-quiet-jihadist-takeover-of-somalia/; Michael Rubin, "Somalia's

understanding of the government's institutions, personnel, and plans. It also understands the election cycle and the recent disputes stemming from it.[214] Al-Shabaab has such an extensive presence in Mogadishu – the locale where the Somali government's writ is strongest – that some claim that the group actually de facto controls the capital.[215]

AMISOM Troop-Contributing Countries

Al-Shabaab views AMISOM troop contributing countries as its other central enemy because they are propping up the Somali Federal Government and preventing an al-Shabaab takeover in Somalia. It thus reserves substantial ire for AMISOM and views its expulsion as a critical step to achieving its goals. However, it breaks AMISOM into two tiers. Above all, it perceives Kenya and Ethiopia as Christian invaders and the group's top enemies in AMISOM, though the two countries also have forces within Somalia that do not fall under AMISOM. Both countries are frequently named together and are perceived as al-Shabaab's "eternal enemies."[216] Al-Shabaab propaganda often claims that the Somali government serves Kenyan and Ethiopian interests, that the two countries seek to plunder Somalia's resources,[217] and that Somalia is "a slave under the occupation of" Kenya and Ethiopia, narratives that genuinely reflect the group's perceptions.[218]

Al-Shabaab also regularly targets and decries other AMISOM-contributing countries, but it does not orient as much of its messaging specifically against them as Kenya and Ethiopia. Al-Shabaab frequently names Uganda and Burundi together, and it did so most frequently following their initial intervention in Somalia under AMISOM. The group claims the U.S., and to a lesser extent Ethiopia, deceived Uganda and Burundi into intervening in Somalia, by promising money.[219] It labeled Ugandan and Burundian

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intelligence chief worked with an al-Qaida affiliate, so why do we fund him?", *Washington Examiner*, November 16, 2020.

[214] Interview with former Somali government official, July 2021, Virtual.

[215] Interview with retired US official 2, April 2021, Virtual.

[216] "Shabaab Leader Slams 'Parliament of Mercenaries.'"

[217] "Shabaab Threatens Somali Tribal Elders"; "Shabaab Spokesman Delivers Speech for Eid Al-Fitr on Success of Fighters and Failure of Enemies, Calls for Jihad," SITE Intelligence Group, June 6, 2019, https://ent-siteintelgroup-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/Statements/shabaab-spokesman-delivers-speech-for-eid-al-fitr-on-success-of-fighters-and-failure-of-enemies-calls-for-jihad.html.

[218] "Shabaab Leader Slams 'Parliament of Mercenaries.'"

[219] "Young Mujahideen Movement Threatens Reprisals Against African Union Countries Present in Somalia, Including Burundi, Ethiopia and Uganda," SITE Intelligence Group, March 1, 2008, https://ent-siteintelgroup-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/Jihadist-News/site-intel-group-1-3-08-ymms-reciprocal-actions-against-au.html;"Shabaab Releases Posthumous Video Will of Suicide Bomber Involved in July 2010 Kampala Attack," SITE Intelligence Group, May 11, 2015, https://ent-siteintelgroup-

soldiers as "abnormally coward[ly]" in the statement that justified al-Shabaab's withdrawal from Mogadishu in 2011.[220] It branded them as crusaders and relatedly claimed that Uganda and Burundi occupy Somalia because they seek to conduct Christian missionary work there.[221] For its part, Djibouti is rarely specifically named in propaganda, but when it is, al-Shabaab focuses primarily on its hosting of U.S. and French military bases rather than its contribution to AMISOM.

Beyond its rhetoric, on the ground, al-Shabaab understands the different AMISOM forces and makes distinctions between them based on its perceptions of their relative capabilities. It assesses the strengths and weaknesses of each one, and plans operations accordingly.[222] For example, these assessments shaped how the group massed forces to attack different forward operating bases from 2015 onward.[223]

Kenya

Al-Shabaab's perception of Kenya as an adversary and its rhetoric against Kenya increased dramatically after the country's forces entered Somalia in October 2011. The group accused Kenya of supporting the U.S., Ethiopia, and the Somali government as early as January 2009.[224] In a March 2010 letter to bin Laden, Godane sought bin Laden's advice on al-Shabaab's "intentions to open fronts [in Kenya]," but the group refrained from making Kenya a focus of its operations until after Kenya entered the conflict.[225] As discussed in section 8, some saw al-Shabaab and Kenya as having a "gentleman's agreement" not to initiate attacks against one another prior to Kenya entering the

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com.proxyau.wrlc.org/Multimedia/shabaab-releases-posthumous-video-will-of-suicide-bomber-involved-in-july-2010-kampala-attack.html.

[220] "Changing the Tides of the War: The Strategic Retreat from Mogadishu," Jihadology, September 2, 2011, https://jihadology.net/2011/09/02/an%e1%b9%a3ar-al-mujahidin-english-forum-presents-a-new-essay-from-abu-qital-al-qarni-changing-the-tides-of-the-war-the-strategic-retreat-from-mogadishu/.

[221] "Shabaab Calls Upon Uganda and Burundi to Cease Sending Troops to Somalia," SITE Intelligence Group, June 28, 2010, https://ent-siteintelgroup-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/Multimedia/site-intel-group-06-28-10-shabaab-crus.html; "Shabaab Video Focuses on Failure of AMISOM Forces in Somalia (Part 1)," SITE Intelligence Group, June 21, 2011, https://ent-siteintelgroup-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/Multimedia/site-intel-group-6-21-11-shabaab-video-amisom-end-p1.html.

[222] Interview with international journalists, July 2021, Virtual.

[223] The author would like to thank one of the expert reviewers for this example.

[224] "Shabaab Commander Interviewed on Paltalk," SITE Intelligence Group, January 1, 2009, https://ent-siteintelgroup-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/Jihadist-News/shabaab-commander-interviewed-on-paltalk.html; "Shabaab Retakes Border Town, Bula Hawa," SITE Intelligence Group, August 20, 2009, https://ent-siteintelgroup-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/Statements/8-20-09-shabaab-retakes-bula-hawa.html; "Shabaab Threatens Kenya, Appoints New Gedo Region Governor," SITE Intelligence Group, February 28, 2011, https://ent-siteintelgroup-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/Jihadist-News/site-intel-group-2-28-11-shabaab-threatens-kenya-other.html.

[225] Maruf and Joseph, *Inside Al-Shabaab*, 2018, 212.

conflict in Somalia.[226] However, after a series of kidnappings targeting Westerners and aid workers, Kenya intervened,[227] although al-Shabaab denied responsibility for the kidnappings.[228] Al-Shabaab claimed that it warned the Kenyan government of "cataclysmic consequences" if it intervened.[229] After Kenya's intervention, one al-Shabaab fighter seemingly acknowledged the alleged agreement, repeatedly stating, "We have left you alone" but that Kenya's decision to "invade" was "exactly what the mujahideen have wanted."[230] Thus, al-Shabaab viewed Kenya as the party responsible for breaching the arrangement by invading Somalia, despite al-Shabaab's apparent eagerness to strike Kenya and its members' involvement in al-Qaida attacks in Kenya since the 1990s.

Particularly since the Kenyan intervention, the group perceives Kenya as an invader, crusader, and as a Christian government[231] that is "hostile to Islam and Muslims."[232] It has claimed that the government is immoral and corrupt[233] and that it serves Western

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[226] As quoted in Maruf and Joseph, 212.

[227] "The Kenyan Military Intervention in Somalia," Africa Report (Nairobi/Brussels: International Crisis Group, February 15, 2012), 6, https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/kenya/kenyan-military-intervention-somalia.

[228] "Shabaab Denies Role in Aid Worker Kidnappings, Addresses Kenyans," SITE Intelligence Group, October 17, 2011, https://ent-siteintelgroup-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/Jihadist-News/shabaab-denies-role-in-aid-worker-kidnappings-addresses-kenyans.html.

[229] "Shabaab Urges Kenyan Muslims to Resist 'State-Sponsored Oppression,'" SITE Intelligence Group, March 12, 2012, https://ent-siteintelgroup-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/Jihadist-News/shabaab-urges-kenyan-muslims-to-resist-qstate-sponsored-oppressionq.html.

[230] "Canadian Shabaab Fighter Threatens Kenyan Civilians in Posthumous Video," SITE Intelligence Group, August 6, 2017, https://ent-siteintelgroup-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/Multimedia/canadian-shabaab-fighter-threatens-kenyan-civilians-in-posthumous-video.html.

[231] Ali Dheere, "An Analysis of Events, Part 3: Message to the Muslims in Kenya," Jihadology, June 28, 2017, https://jihadology.net/2017/06/28/new-video-message-from-%e1%b8%a5arakat-al-shabab-al-mujahidins-shaykh-ali-ma%e1%b8%a5mud-rage-an-analysis-of-events-part-3-message-to-the-muslims-in-kenya/; "Shabaab Spokesman Calls for East African Muslims to Migrate, 'Join Hands to Expel the Disbelievers,'" SITE Intelligence Group, June 28, 2017, https://ent-siteintelgroup-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/Multimedia/shabaab-spokesman-calls-for-east-african-muslims-to-migrate-join-hands-to-expel-the-disbelievers.html.

[232] "Then Fight the Leaders of Disbelief #3, Part 1," Jihadology, August 12, 2019, https://jihadology.net/2019/08/12/new-video-message-from-%e1%b8%a5arakat-al-shabab-al-mujahidin-then-fight-the-leaders-of-disbelief-3-part-1/.

[233] Ali Dheere, "An Analysis of Events, Part 2: Message to the Disbelievers in Kenya," Jihadology, June 12, 2017, https://jihadology.net/2017/06/12/new-video-message-from-%e1%b8%a5arakat-al-shabab-al-mujahidins-shaykh-ali-ma%e1%b8%a5mud-rage-an-analysis-of-events-part-2-message-to-the-disbelievers-in-kenya/; "Shabaab Spokesman Tells Kenyan Government to Withdraw, Public to Embrace Islam or Face Unrelenting War," SITE Intelligence Group, June 12, 2017, https://ent-siteintelgroup-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/Multimedia/shabaab-spokesman-tells-kenyan-government-to-withdraw-public-to-embrace-islam-or-face-unrelenting-war.html.

interests, rhetoric that genuinely reflects its views.[234] Al-Shabaab has accused the Kenyan forces of rape, torture, and mass killings in Somalia.[235] But it also perceives Kenya as being saddled with serious weaknesses. It has claimed that the war has negatively impacted Kenya's economy and that Kenya has neither the military capabilities nor the "mental fortitude" to sustain a prolonged war against al-Shabaab.[236]

In its operations outside of Somalia, Kenya is the group's primary target. It has conducted five major attacks there, striking Westgate Mall (2013), Mpeketoni (2014), Garissa University (2015), the Dusit hotel and office complex (2019), and the U.S.-Kenyan Camp Simba joint military base (2020). It has also conducted numerous smaller scale attacks in Kenya, especially along the border area through its unit in Kenya, Jaysh Ayman, discussed later in this section. Within Somalia, al-Shabaab has conducted particularly destructive attacks on Kenyan Forward Operating Bases, most notably in El Adde (2016), which reportedly killed 170 Kenyan soldiers, and in Kulbiyow (2017), which killed nearly 70.[237]

Image 5: Kenyan soldiers carrying their fallen after the 2016 El Adde attack. Photo: Tony Karumba/AFP.

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[234] "Shabaab Issues Statement on Garissa University College Attack, Warns Kenyan Public of More Bloodshed to Come," SITE Intelligence Group, April 4, 2015, https://ent-siteintelgroup-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/Statements/shabaab-issues-statement-on-garissa-university-college-attack-warns-kenyan-public-of-more-bloodshed-to-come.html.

[235] Dheere, "An Analysis of Events, Part 2"; "Shabaab Spokesman Tells Kenyan Government"; "Shabaab Issues Statement on Garissa."

[236] "Manda Bay Raid: Kenya Must Take Heed," Jihadology, January 8, 2020, https://jihadology.net/2020/01/08/new-statement-from-%e1%b8%a5arakat-al-shabab-al-mujahidin-manda-bay-raid-kenya-must-take-heed/; Dheere, "An Analysis of Events, Part 2"; "Shabaab Spokesman Tells Kenyan Government"; "Shabaab Releases Video on January 2016 Raid at KDF Camp in El-Adde," SITE Intelligence Group, April 10, 2016, https://ent-siteintelgroup-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/Multimedia/shabaab-releases-video-on-january-2016-raid-at-kdf-camp-in-el-adde.html.

[237] Williams, Paul. "Why Kenya's defence forces fell at the battle of El Adde," *The Conversation*, October 29, 2020, https://theconversation.com/why-kenyas-defence-forces-fell-at-the-battle-of-el-adde-149001

Al-Shabaab perceives Kenya as ripe for radicalization and thus recruits heavily there. Kenyans are the group's largest and most organized foreign fighter cadre and have been so for at least a decade. To recruit, much of al-Shabaab's propaganda on Kenya focuses on local grievances, such as the crackdowns by the Kenyan government on Somalis in Kenya and the plight of Kenyan Muslims who reside primarily in the northeastern and coastal regions of the country.[238] It also accuses the Kenyan government of conducting atrocities against Muslims in Kenya, regularly citing the 1984 Wagalla massacre that killed as many as 1,000 ethnic-Somali Kenyans.[239] Invoking the concept of a "Greater Somalia," the group declares that the border between Somalia and Kenya is artificial,[240] and further claims Kenya annexed and subsequently occupies the northeast and coastal areas.[241] This rhetoric certainly aims to encourage Kenyans in the region to join support the group, and Swahili has become the second most prominent language in its propaganda after Somali.

Ethiopia

Given the historic animosity between Ethiopia and Somalia, al-Shabaab views Ethiopia as far more than simply an AMISOM-contributing enemy. In particular, Ethiopia's invasion in December 2006 was a formative moment for al-Shabaab that sealed the country's status as a preeminent enemy.[242] Initially, al-Shabaab gained significant support as an independent organization by framing the Ethiopians as invading Christian crusaders and binding the leaders' global jihadist ambitions to a sense of nationalism that galvanized many Somalis in the wake of the Ethiopian invasion. Opposition to Ethiopia's invasion was the formative cause for many current mid- and senior level officials in the group. Following the establishment of the Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed government and the withdrawal of Ethiopian forces in 2009, al-Shabaab claimed to have

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[238] Dheere, "An Analysis of Events, Part 3"; "Shabaab Spokesman Calls for East African Muslims to Migrate"; "Shabaab Leader Calls for Lone-Wolf Attacks."

[239] "Shabaab Issues Statement on Garissa"; "Shabaab Leader Links France, Missionaries To CAR Attacks," SITE Intelligence Group, May 14, 2014, https://ent-siteintelgroup-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/Multimedia/shabaab-leader-links-france-missionaries-to-car-attacks.html; David M. Anderson, "Remembering Wagalla: State Violence in Northern Kenya, 1962–1991," *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 8, no. 4 (October 2, 2014): 658–76, https://doi.org/10.1080/17531055.2014.946237.

[240] "Shabaab Photographs Toy Gun-Totting Children During Eid Celebrations, Claims 18 Attacks in One-Week," SITE Intelligence Group, May 28, 2020, https://ent-siteintelgroup-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/Statements/shabaab-photographs-toy-gun-totting-children-during-eid-celebrations-claims-18-attacks-in-one-week.html; "Shabaab Spokesman Threatens Non-Muslims."

[241] Ubaydah, "But Allah Will Complete His Light."

[242] Ethiopia was also the military force that ousted AIAI from Luuq in the 1990s.

defeated the Ethiopians, which boosted its confidence and morale.[243] However, al-Shabaab continued to see Ethiopia's hand in events in Somalia, often labeling Somali militias as backed by Ethiopia.[244] Indeed, Ethiopia has been intimately involved in events in Somalia and its forces subsequently returned to Somalia, both operating as part of AMISOM and an independent force.

Not surprisingly, Ethiopia still features prominently in the group's narratives. Al-Shabaab frames Ethiopia as seeking to occupy, colonize, and enslave Somalia, revive an Ethiopian empire, and control Somalia's seaports.[245] An al-Shabaab propaganda piece from 2020 featured a statement from Godane claiming that Ethiopians have "greater religious malice and ethnic hatred" towards Somali Muslims than other Christians because they seek to control Somalia's wealth and land.[246] A follow-up piece featured a statement from an al-Shabaab leader who was killed in 2015 asserting that Ethiopia is both the mortal, historical, and primary enemies of Muslims and it must be fought with "even greater animosity" than other "African crusaders."[247] In another statement from Diriye in March 2021, the emir labeled Ethiopia as "Somalia's arch-enemy."[248]

Despite al-Shabaab's intense antipathy and prominent anti-Ethiopian narratives, al-Shabaab has struggled to conduct operations in Ethiopia and has not enjoyed as much success in its recruitment there. An al-Shabaab statement justified this in the past by saying, "For now, our principal targets are the apostates in Somalia and Kenya. When the times comes, we will focus our attention on the Ethiopian crusaders. One day we will

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[243] "Shabaab on Ethiopian Withdrawal; Strikes AU Forces," SITE Intelligence Group, January 19, 2009, https://ent-siteintelgroup-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/Jihadist-News/shabaab-on-ethiopian-withdrawal-strikes-au-forces.html.

[244] "Shabaab Fights Tribal Militia in Central Somalia," SITE Intelligence Group, July 24, 2009, https://ent-siteintelgroup-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/Statements/7-24-09-shabaab-clashes-tribal-militia.html; "Shabaab, Islamic Party Eliminate Militia in Somali City," SITE Intelligence Group, March 17, 2009, https://ent-siteintelgroup-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/Jihadist-News/site-intel-group-3-17-09-shabaab-ip-eliminates-militia-wabho.html.

[245] "Shabaab Leader Slams 'Parliament of Mercenaries'"; "They Are Not Welcome, They Shall Burn In The Fire #3, Part 1," Jihadology, August 1, 2020, https://jihadology.net/2020/08/01/new-video-message-from-%e1%b8%a5arakat-al-shabab-al-mujahidin-they-are-not-welcome-they-shall-burn-in-the-fire-3-part-1/.

[246] "They Are Not Welcome #3, Part 1."

[247] "They Are Not Welcome, They Shall Burn In The Fire #3, Part 2," Jihadology, August 17, 2020, https://jihadology.net/2020/08/17/new-video-message-from-%e1%b8%a5arakat-al-shabab-al-mujahidin-they-are-not-welcome-they-shall-burn-in-the-fire-3-part-2%e2%80%b3/.

[248] Abu Ubaydah, "A Message to the People of Djibouti," Jihadology, March 27, 2021, https://jihadology.net/2021/03/27/new-video-message-from-%e1%b8%a5arakat-al-shabab-al-mujahidins-shaykh-abu-ubaydah-a%e1%b8%a5mad-umar-a-message-to-the-people-of-djibouti/.

absolutely, no doubt, target Ethiopia."[249] Some in al-Shabaab have recently claimed that day has arrived but have not delivered on that promise to date.[250] Indeed, the group is "delighted" at Ethiopia's descent into civil war, with indications that it intends to attempt to capitalize on the country's instability and target Ethiopia with new intensity.[251]

As noted earlier, Kenya and Ethiopia are often named in conjunction as seeking to loot Somalia's resources and control the Somali government. Additionally, similarly to the group's framing of the Kenyan "occupation" of the northeast and coastal regions, al-Shabaab asserts that the Ethiopians occupy "Western Somalia" – a reference to the Ogaden/Somali Region of Ethiopia – and that the Somalia-Ethiopia border is artificial or imaginary.[252] It also accuses Ethiopia of "killings, torture, rape, pillaging, destruction of livelihood and forced displacement" in Somalia and "persecution, harassment, imprisonment, death and displacement" in the "occupied" regions of Ethiopia.[253]

Uganda

Compared to Kenya and Ethiopia, al-Shabaab does not decry Uganda as often in its rhetoric since 2011 when Kenya entered and Ethiopia re-entered the conflict, though it perceives Ugandan forces as a key adversary on the ground. The group claims its attacks on Ugandan forces, but it currently does not prioritize commentary on Uganda's role in Somalia to the same degree as Kenya and Ethiopia. However, Ugandan forces were central to the early AMISOM force in the wake of the Ethiopian withdrawal in 2009 and

[249] Mary Harper, *Everything You Have Told Me Is True: The Many Faces of Al Shabaab* (London: Hurst, 2019), 159–60.
[250] Interview with international journalists, July 2021, Virtual.
[251] Interview with international journalists, July 2021, Virtual; Interview with former Somali government official, July 2021, Virtual.
[252] "They Are Not Welcome #3, Part 2"; "Ambush Against Ethiopian Crusaders," Jihadology, January 18, 2019, https://jihadology.net/2019/01/18/new-statement-from-%e1%b8%a5arakat-al-shabab-al-mujahidin-ambush-against-ethiopian-crusaders/; "Shabaab Claims Seizing Control Over Border Town, Multiple Attacks in Capital in 6-Day Period," SITE Intelligence Group, September 21, 2017, https://ent-siteintelgroup-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/Statements/shabaab-claims-seizing-control-over-border-town-multiple-attacks-in-capital-in-6-day-period.html; "Shabaab Claims Car Bombing in Mogadishu, Attacking Ethiopian Special Police in Border Town," SITE Intelligence Group, September 11, 2017, https://ent-siteintelgroup-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/Statements/shabaab-claims-car-bombing-in-mogadishu-attacking-ethiopian-special-police-in-border-town.html; "Shabaab Claims Attack on Ethiopian Special Police in Border Town, Shelling Joint American-Ethiopian-Kenyan Base," SITE Intelligence Group, July 21, 2017, https://ent-siteintelgroup-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/Statements/shabaab-claims-attack-on-ethiopian-special-police-in-border-town-shelling-joint-american-ethiopian-kenyan-base.html.
[253] "Ambush Against Ethiopian Crusaders."

were thus the main obstacle to the group's ability to take Mogadishu in 2009 and 2010. Al-Shabaab recognized the importance of Ugandan forces and conducted its first external attack in Kampala in 2010, targeting fans watching the World Cup at a restaurant and rugby club. The move backfired and resulted in a hardening of Uganda's resolve and even forced Kenyan forces to crack down on al-Shabaab networks in Nairobi and Mombasa as well.[254] In its propaganda, al-Shabaab warned the Uganda people to pressure the government to leave before the Kampala attacks.[255] Since then, it has accused Ugandan citizens of being complicit in their soldiers' 'crimes,' and argued that the Ugandan people "confirmed their unwavering commitment to the invasion and oppression of the innocent civilians of Somalia" by reelecting President Museveni in 2011.[256] Al-Shabaab also claimed that Uganda controlled Mogadishu Airport in 2013, tying in an economic component to Uganda's "occupation."[257] More recently, in a statement providing commentary on all AMISOM-contributing countries, al-Shabaab saw an opening during Uganda's unrest. Kenyan al-Shabaab ideologue Ahmed Iman Ali stated that President Museveni was a dictator and characterized Uganda as "very volatile" due to power struggles between Museveni and the opposition.[258]

Burundi

Like other AMISOM forces, Burundian forces are a central target of the group's operations in Somalia. However, Burundi does not feature prominently in its narrative and Al-Shabaab rarely identifies Burundi independently of Uganda or other AMISOM-contributing countries in its propaganda. The group appears to view Burundi as weaker than other AMISOM-contributing countries. For example, Godane demanded Burundi withdraw in 2011, claiming that "states and alliances much stronger than you were defeated [in Somalia]." In an earlier statement, al-Shabaab stated that the Burundians

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[254] The author would like to thank one of the expert reviewers for this point.

[255] Christopher Anzalone, "Addressing the Enemy: Al-Shabaab's PSYOPS Media Warfare," *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point* 13, no. 3 (March 24, 2020), https://ctc.usma.edu/addressing-enemy-al-shabaabs-psyops-media-warfare/.

[256] "Shabaab Threatens Ugandans over Museveni's Reelection," SITE Intelligence Group, May 15, 2011, https://ent-siteintelgroup-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/Jihadist-News/site-intel-group-5-15-11-shabaab-threat-uganda-museveni.html.

[257] "Shabaab Leader Calls for Attacks, Speaks on London Conference," SITE Intelligence Group, May 6, 2013, https://ent-siteintelgroup-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/Multimedia/shabaab-leader-calls-for-attacks-speaks-on-london-conference.html.

[258] "Shabaab Official Claims Political Instability and Ebola Virus Are God's 'Punishment' on AMISOM-Participating Countries," SITE Intelligence Group, June 27, 2016, https://ent-siteintelgroup-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/Multimedia/shabaab-official-claims-political-instability-and-ebola-virus-are-god-s-punishment-on-amisom-participating-countries.html.

"were weaker than the Ugandans."[259] Burundi was a temporary focus in propaganda after al-Shabaab's October 2011 ambush in Dayniile, when al-Shabaab claimed to have killed as many as 150 Burundian soldiers, and reportedly showed the bodies of over 70.[260] Al-Shabaab has not executed any attacks in Burundi nor has it plotted any major operations there, unlike the other AMISOM-contributing countries.

Djibouti

Because Djibouti is a Muslim-majority country, al-Shabaab does not view Djiboutian forces as "invading crusaders" like other AMISOM-contributing countries. Instead, it labels the government as "an agent and apostate government."[261] It characterizes the elections there as "fake" and paints them as an example of the hypocrisy of Western elections in a Muslim country, akin to the situation in Somalia.[262] Similarly to how the group characterizes Turkey, discussed below, al-Shabaab distinguishes between the people of Djibouti and their government. The group has even pointed to Djibouti as a location where Muslims are oppressed.[263] In the same way that al-Shabaab sees the United States as behind Ethiopian actions, al-Shabaab calls Djiboutian forces "the agents of France"[264] and holds Djibouti's President Ismail Omar Guelleh responsible for the country's participation in AMISOM and the establishment of French and American military bases in the country.[265] Al-Shabaab recognizes the importance of Camp

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[259] "Shabaab Claims Bombings in Kampala, Uganda," SITE Intelligence Group, July 12, 2010, https://ent-siteintelgroup-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/Multimedia/site-intel-group-7-12-10-shabaab-strikes-kampala.html.

[260] "Al-Shabab Claims Peacekeepers' Killings," *Al Jazeera*, October 12, 2011, sec. News, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2011/10/21/al-shabab-claims-peacekeepers-killings; "Shabaab Calls on Burundians to Demand Withdrawal," SITE Intelligence Group, October 24, 2011, https://ent-siteintelgroup-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/Jihadist-News/shabaab-calls-on-burundians-to-demand-withdrawal.html.

[261] "Shabaab Claims Bombings in Djibouti, Calls French Primary Target in Attack," SITE Intelligence Group, May 27, 2014, https://ent-siteintelgroup-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/Jihadist-News/shabaab-claims-bombings-in-djibouti-calls-french-primary-target-in-attack.html.

[262] The author would like to thank one of the expert reviewers for this point.

[263] Abu Ubaydah, "And the Honorable Journey Continues: Message of Congratulations to the Islamic Nation on the Occasion of the Blessed ʿĪd al-Fiṭr For the Year 1436 H," Jihadology, July 17, 2015, https://jihadology.net/2015/07/17/al-kataib-media-presents-a-new-statement-from-%E1%B8%A5arakat-al-shabab-al-mujahidins-shaykh-abu-ubaydah-a%E1%B8%A5mad-umar-and-the-honorable-journey-continues-message-of-congratu/.

[264] "Shabaab Continues Holding Anti-France Demonstrations in Areas of Control, Civilians Demand 'Discipline' Through Violence and Boycott," SITE Intelligence Group, November 10, 2020, https://ent-siteintelgroup-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/Statements/shabaab-continues-holding-anti-france-demonstrations-in-areas-of-control-civilians-demand-discipline-through-violence-and-boycott.html.

[265] Ubaydah, "A Message to the People of Djibouti."

Lemonier in the U.S. military activities in Somalia. In an address from March 2021, prior to Djibouti's elections, Diriye called on the people of Djibouti to fight against Guelleh but also, "Make American and French interests in Djibouti the highest priority of your targets" in lone-wolf style attacks.[266] Al-Shabaab conducted a suicide attack on a restaurant in Djibouti in 2014, killing two and injuring several more.[267] It has called for attacks against Djibouti, including against its 2021 elections.[268]

Image 6: Djibouti soldiers serving with AMISOM stand watch as a Somali girl walks to school. Photo: AMISOM Public Information

United States

Following the Somali Federal Government and AMISOM, al-Shabaab perceives the United States as a key enemy.[269] Since its inception, al-Shabaab has viewed the U.S. as an enemy, but that perception has grown with the increased U.S. military involvement in the conflict over the past five years. Consistent with that view, it has increasingly issued threats against the United States, targeted the U.S. presence in Somalia, conducted an attack against U.S. forces in Kenya, and even plotted against the U.S. homeland in recent years. Al-Shabaab encourages attacks on American interests globally and labels the U.S. "the greatest Satan."[270] Its propaganda has conveyed the group's perception

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[266] Ubaydah.

[267] "Al Shabaab claims responsibility for Djibouti suicide attack," *Reuters*, May 27, 2014, https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-djibouti-attacks/al-shabaab-claims-responsibility-for-djibouti-suicide-attack-idUSKBN0E72AA20140527

[268] "Al-Shabab Issues Threats Ahead of Elections in Djibouti," *Voice of America*, March 28, 2021. https://www.voanews.com/africa/al-shabab-issues-threats-ahead-elections-djibouti

[269] At times, the U.S. has risen to be an enemy on par with the other two, depending on the level of U.S. CT pressure.

[270] "The Blessed Manda Bay Raid," Jihadology, January 29, 2021, https://jihadology.net/2021/01/29/new-video-message-from-%e1%b8%a5arakat-al-shabab-al-mujahidin-the-blessed-manda-bay-raid/; "Shabaab Spokesman Urges Muslims Respond with Weapons to U.S. Recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's Capital," SITE Intelligence Group, December 6, 2017, https://ent-siteintelgroup-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/Statements/shabaab-spokesman-urges-muslims-respond-with-weapons-to-u-s-recognition-of-jerusalem-as-israel-s-capital.html; "Shabaab Spokesman Urges Muslims Respond"; "Shabaab Congratulates AQAP for NAS Pensacola Attack, Promotes Lone-Wolf Operations," SITE Intelligence Group, February 5, 2020, https://ent-siteintelgroup-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/Statements/shabaab-congratulates-aqap-for-nas-pensacola-attack-promotes-lone-wolf-operations.html.

of the U.S. as arrogant, conceited, and insolent.[271] The group views the U.S. as lacking "moral conduct and integrity" for allegedly lying about the absence of civilian casualties in U.S. airstrikes.[272]

Broadly, al-Shabaab has always and continues to propagate al-Qaida's narrative that the U.S. and other Western states are spearheading a global campaign against Islam, though it overstates the degree to which this perception drives the group's behavior. Its highlighting of al-Qaida's narrative has been heightened in recent years. Specifically, in its rhetoric, it has linked some of its attacks to America's support of Israel, especially with its "Al-Quds (Jerusalem) Will Never Be Judaized" campaign.

Al-Shabaab's leaders have outlined their perceptions of U.S. goals in Somalia. Godane and Diriye's statements from 2014 and 2019 respectively are consistent, although Diriye explicitly wraps the U.K. into the U.S. agenda in his statement. Both leaders have claimed the U.S. seeks to prevent the application of *Sharia* law and plunder Somalia's resources. They claim the U.S. has established a weak Somali government that benefits Kenya and Ethiopia and otherwise continues a colonial agenda.[273] Godane also claimed the U.S. sought to encourage clan war to keep Somalia weak, a view Diriye likely shares.[274] The group also highlights civilians allegedly killed in U.S. airstrikes as evidence that the U.S.-led global war on Islam includes killing Muslims in Somalia.

Al-Shabaab currently views the U.S. as growing weary in Somalia and in its broader "war on Islam." Following the announced "re-positioning" of U.S. forces from Somalia into Djibouti and Kenya by the outgoing Trump Administration, Diriye claimed that the move demonstrated that U.S. forces had admitted failure and left humiliated and with their arrogance smashed.[275] The six month suspension of U.S. airstrikes in Somalia from

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[271] Abu Ubaydah, "And [That] Indeed, Our Soldiers Will Be Those Who Overcome," Jihadology, January 3, 2021, https://jihadology.net/2021/01/03/new-video-message-from-%e1%b8%a5arakat-al-shabab-al-mujahidins-shaykh-abu-ubaydah-a%e1%b8%a5mad-umar-and-that-indeed-our-soldiers-will-be-those-who-overcome/; "American Massacres in Somalia," Jihadology, February 29, 2020, https://jihadology.net/2020/02/29/new-statement-from-%e1%b8%a5arakat-al-shabab-al-mujahidin-american-massacres-in-somalia/.

[272] "American Massacres in Somalia."

[273] Ubaydah, "But Allah Will Complete His Light"; "Shabaab Leader Calls to Fight Ethiopians in Somalia," SITE Intelligence Group, March 10, 2014, https://ent-siteintelgroup-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/Jihadist-News/shabaab-leader-calls-to-fight-ethiopians-in-somalia.html.

[274] "Shabaab Leader Calls to Fight Ethiopians in Somalia."

[275] Ubaydah, "And [That] Indeed, Our Soldiers Will Be Those Who Overcome."

January–July 2021 has probably confirmed this perception.[276] More recently, the group is "gleeful" about the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Taliban's victory.[277]

Turkey

Since Turkey began heavily investing in Somalia, al-Shabaab has vilified the Turkish government for its economic "exploitation" of Somalia. Over time, Turkey has received more attention from al-Shabaab as an adversary, at times even more so than the United States. Its animosity has escalated under the Farmajo government, which is quite close to Turkey and which has used Turkish trained units as its pretorian guard.[278] More broadly, al-Shabaab sees Turkey as engaged in economic warfare in Somalia,[279] and as seeking only to protect and promote its economic interests in the country.[280] The group accuses Turkey of taking control of the Somali business sector and, most importantly, of the Mogadishu seaport.[281] The group believes Turkey's strategy is to fund militias[282] affiliated with the "apostate government" that will protect its economic interests.[283] It also resents Turkey's relationship with Islamist elements in Somalia like al-Islah.[284]

Importantly, like with Djibouti, in the group's messaging, al-Shabaab separates the Turkish government from the Turkish people. In fact, al-Shabaab has specifically stated that "when we say the 'Turks,' we do not mean the Turkish people; rather, we specifically mean the Turks who work or deal with the secular Turkish regime that invaded our

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[276] Charlie Savage, "Afghanistan Collapse and Strikes in Somalia Raise Snags for Drone Warfare Rules," *The New York Times*, August 28, 2021. https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/28/us/politics/biden-drones.html

[277] Interview with international journalists, July 2021, Virtual.

[278] Interview with international journalists, July 2021, Virtual. The author would like to thank one of the expert reviewers for this point.

[279] "Shabaab Claims Bombing on Djibouti-Bound Plane, Threatens Additional Attacks," SITE Intelligence Group, February 13, 2014, https://ent-siteintelgroup-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/Jihadist-News/shabaab-claims-bombing-on-djibouti-bound-plane-threatens-additional-attacks.html.

[280] "In Eid Al-Adha Speech, Shabaab Spokesman Threatens Foreign Institutions Seeking to Extract Somali Resources," SITE Intelligence Group, 15 August 2019, https://ent-siteintelgroup-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/Statements/in-eid-al-adha-speech-shabaab-spokesman-threatens-foreign-institutions-seeking-to-extract-somali-resources.html.

[281] "Accepting Heavy Civilian Casualties, Shabaab Takes Responsibility for Mogadishu Blast Killing Dozens," SITE Intelligence Group, December 30, 2019, https://ent-siteintelgroup-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/Statements/accepting-heavy-civilian-casualties-shabaab-takes-responsibility-for-mogadishu-blast-killing-dozens.html; "Shabaab Leader Calls for Lone-Wolf Attacks."

[282] This stems from Turkish training and financing of the Gorgor forces and Haramad/Haramacad as well as Turkish contractor and construction businesses.

[283] "In Eid Al-Adha Speech, Shabaab Spokesman Threatens Foreign Institutions."

[284] The author thanks one of the expert reviewers for this point.

land."[285] Al-Shabaab acknowledges that Turkey is a Muslim-majority country, but labels the regime as secular and therefore independent of the religion of its citizens.[286] Al-Shabaab has also vilified the regime for being a member of "Crusader NATO" and accuses the government of providing an Islamic "cover" for NATO's actions.[287]

Gulf States: UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar

The Gulf countries occupy a more ambiguous position in al-Shabaab's roster of adversaries. Overall, al-Shabaab has never conducted or plotted an external attack in the Gulf, and it does not prioritize messaging against Gulf states. But the group recognizes that Gulf monarchies' donations to the Somali government heavily influence Somali politics.[288] Diriye has branded these regimes as Western puppets and claimed that they seek to ignite wars and civil strife in Somalia.[289]

The UAE is arguably al-Shabaab's most prominent Gulf enemy, and the group has labeled the Emirati government as a "tyrannical regime."[290] Al-Shabaab has included the UAE along with Turkey as a country seeking economic exploitation in Somalia by attempting to take control of ports.[291] The group has targeted UAE interests in Somalia, such as a 2015 strike on a diplomatic convoy, but it does not prioritize striking the Gulf state to the same degree as the enemies discussed above.[292]

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[285] "Accepting Heavy Civilian Casualties."

[286] "Shabaab Meets with Somali Merchants, Claims Attacks," SITE Intelligence Group, February 20, 2012, https://ent-siteintelgroup-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/Jihadist-News/shabaab-meets-with-somali-merchants-claims-attacks.html; "Shabaab Official Remarks on Mogadishu Operations; Desire to Target UN, Turkish Figures," SITE Intelligence Group, June 14, 2014, https://ent-siteintelgroup-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/Jihadist-News/shabaab-official-remarks-on-mogadishu-operations-desire-to-target-un-turkish-figures.html; "Shabaab Leader Speaks on London Somalia Conference, Joining al-Qaeda," SITE Intelligence Group, March 22, 2012, https://ent-siteintelgroup-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/Jihadist-News/shabaab-leader-speaks-on-london-somalia-conference-joining-al-qaeda.html.

[287] "Accepting Heavy Civilian Casualties"; "Shabaab Leader Slams 'Parliament of Mercenaries.'"

[288] "Farmajo: False Promises and Fading Hopes #1: Election or Selection," Jihadology, February 5, 2021, https://jihadology.net/2021/02/05/new-video-message-from-%e1%b8%a5arakat-al-shabab-al-mujahidin-farmajo-false-promises-and-fading-hopes-1-election-or-selection/.

[289] Ubaydah, "And [That] Indeed, Our Soldiers Will Be Those Who Overcome."

[290] "Shabaab Leader Rallies AQAP in Audio Speech, Advises Attack Escalation," May 1, 2018, https://ent-siteintelgroup-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/Multimedia/shabaab-leader-rallies-aqap-in-audio-speech-advises-attack-escalation.html.

[291] "Shabaab Leader Slams 'Parliament of Mercenaries'"; Ubaydah, "And the Honorable Journey Continues."

[292] https://english.alarabiya.net/News/africa/2015/06/24/Al-Shabab-attack-UAE-embassy-in-Somalia-

Al-Shabaab has also deemed Saudi Arabia as a tyrannical regime – a position consistent with al-Qaida and al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula's staunch opposition to the Kingdom – and characterized the Saudi government as disingenuously claiming to protect and promote Islam.[293] However, the group rarely discusses Saudi Arabia unless it is also making statements regarding   al-Qaida or its affiliates, suggesting that al-Shabaab likely does not view the Saudi regime as a major enemy itself but rather is symbolically aligning with al-Qaida's narrative.[294]

Qatar occupies a different, and less clear, position than other Gulf countries or any of the other governments discussed thus far. It is rarely mentioned in the group's propaganda although al-Shabab has stated that Qatar, along with other countries, has established militias to protect its interests in Somalia.[295] The group has also condemned Qatar for hosting U.S. and UN bases[296] and for hosting Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed on "his obvious journey of treason" before he became President.[297] But the group also has backchannel ties to Qatar, including through al-Shabaab associated individuals who reside in Qatar or seek medical treatment there (consider the allegations that Dheere will go there for cancer treatment discussed in section 1).[298] In addition, Somalia has been a site of the Qatar–UAE rivalry, allegedly including Qatar–financed attacks executed by al-

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[293] "Shabaab Mourns Scholars and Fighters Executed by Saudi Arabia, Applauds AQIM for Burkina Faso Attack," SITE Intelligence Group, January 24, 2016, https://ent-siteintelgroup-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/Statements/shabaab-mourns-scholars-and-fighters-executed-by-saudi-arabia-applauds-aqim-for-burkina-faso-attack.html; "Shabaab Leader Rallies AQAP"; "Shabaab Gives Eulogy for Slain AQAP Official Ibrahim Al-Rubeish," SITE Intelligence Group, April 17, 2015, https://ent-siteintelgroup-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/Statements/shabaab-gives-eulogy-for-slain-aqap-official-ibrahim-al-rubeish.html.

[294] Interview with international think tank analyst 1, July 2021, Virtual.

[295] "In Eid Al-Adha Speech, Shabaab Spokesman Threatens Foreign Institutions."

[296] "Shabaab Video of Unification with Hizb Al-Islam," SITE Intelligence Group, January 31, 2011, https://ent-siteintelgroup-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/Jihadist-News/site-intel-group-1-31-11-shabaab-video-year-unity.html.

[297] "Shabaab Vilifies Islamist Leader, Ahmed Madobe," December 15, 2009, https://ent-siteintelgroup-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/Jihadist-News/shabaab-vilifies-islamist-leader-ahmed-madobe.html; "GIMF Writer Remarks on Somali Peace Accord," SITE Intelligence Group, June 23, 2008, https://ent-siteintelgroup-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/Jihadist-News/site-intel-group-6-23-08-asad-al-jihad-2-somalia-fruits-shabaab.html.

[298] Sahan Commentary, *Somalia Wire*, June 22, 2022; Sahan Commentary, Somalia Wire, November 18, 2021; "Gulf Social Media Reacts to Reports on Qatar Links in Al-Shabaab Hostage Release," Al Arabiya English, May 18, 2020, https://english.alarabiya.net/News/gulf/2020/05/18/Gulf-social-media-reacts-to-reports-on-Qatar-links-in-al-Shabaab-hostage-release; Harun Maruf, "Detained Former Al-Shabab Commander Says Detention Political," VOA, accessed March 3, 2022, https://www.voanews.com/a/detained-former-al-shabab-commander-says-detention-political/6283642.html.

Shabaab.[299] Qatar is on such sufficiently good terms with al-Shabaab that the Trump Administration reached out to Doha with a view to striking a deal with the group that would end attacks against the United States.[300] Qatar has tried to act as a mediator in various conflicts, including those involving Somalia, seeking to portray itself as a successful broker after the country hosted a Taliban office in Qatar and was the site of the U.S.–Taliban negotiations. Overall, there is a degree of uncertainty about how al-Shabaab perceives Qatar.[301]

Other Western States and the EU

Al-Shabaab characterizes other Western states in fairly simplistic and stark terms. All Western countries are crusaders, are engaged in a global war on Islam, and seek to invade then occupy Muslim lands.[302] As noted above, al-Shabaab's references to the U.K. indicate that the group holds it responsible for allocating the Somali-dominated regions to Kenya and Ethiopia and thereby hindering the realization of "Greater Somalia."[303] It also accuses the U.K. of trying to "recolonize" Somalia,[304] and condemns it for backing

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[299] Ronen Bergman and David D. Kirkpatrick, "With Guns, Cash and Terrorism, Gulf States Vie for Power in Somalia," *The New York Times*, July 22, 2019. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/22/world/africa/somalia-qatar-uae.html

[300] Charlie Savage and Eric Schmitt, "He Sidestepped Pompeo and Got Slapped Down. Now He's the New Pentagon Chief," *The New York Times*, November 11, 2020. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/11/us/politics/christopher-miller-pentagon-shabab.html

[301] Interview with international think tank analyst 1, July 2021, Virtual; Interview with scholar 2, July 2021, Virtual; Interview with former Somali government official, July 2021, Virtual; Interview with international journalists, July 2021, Virtual.

[302] Ubaydah, "And [That] Indeed, Our Soldiers Will Be Those Who Overcome"; "Congratulations to the Muslim Nation on the Occasion of the Heroic Operations in Defense of the Honor of Our Beloved Prophet," Jihadology, October 31, 2020, https://jihadology.net/2020/10/31/new-statement-from-%e1%b8%a5arakat-al-shabab-al-mujahidin-congratulations-to-the-muslim-nation-on-the-occasion-of-the-heroic-operations-in-defense-of-the-honor-of-our-beloved-prophet/.

[303] "Shabaab Releases Video on Westgate Mall Raid, Threatens More Attacks," SITE Intelligence Group, February 21, 2015, https://ent-siteintelgroup-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/Jihadist-News/shabaab-releases-video-on-westgate-mall-raid-threatens-more-attacks.html; "Shabaab Official Aweys Speaks on Group's Internal Issues, Losing Ground," SITE Intelligence Group, May 17, 2013, https://ent-siteintelgroup-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/Jihadist-News/shabaab-official-aweys-speaks-on-group-s-internal-issues-losing-ground.html.

[304] "Shabaab Vows to Receive British Troops with Gunfire, Publishes Photos of Yaaqbariweyne Base Attack," SITE Intelligence Group, October 7, 2015, https://ent-siteintelgroup-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/Statements/shabaab-vows-to-receive-british-troops-with-gunfire-publishes-photos-of-yaaqbariweyne-base-attack.html; *Al-Shabaab: Exclusive Interview with Sheikh Ali Dhere* (Channel 4 News, 2013), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TIhHxlm_WZE; "Shabaab Releases Video on June 2013 UN Compound Attack in Mogadishu," SITE Intelligence Group, October 4, 2014, https://ent-siteintelgroup-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/Jihadist-News/shabaab-releases-video-on-june-2013-un-compound-attack-in-mogadishu.html; "Shabaab Official Aweys Speaks."

AMISOM[305] and hosting the 2012 London conference.[306] It places the U.K. in the same category as the U.S., though it is not such a prominent adversary.

France is occasionally cited as a Western enemy. Statements on France generally conform to al-Qaida's commentary and seek to inspire attacks for insults in France to the Prophet Mohamed. For example, in late October and November 2020 several propaganda pieces highlighted anti-France demonstrations in al-Shabaab-controlled areas for these insults.[307] As noted, al-Shabaab characterizes Djibouti as under French occupation,[308] while also claiming that attacking Djiboutian forces is a strike against France because Djiboutian troops are agents of France.[309] Despite these views on France, al-Shabaab claimed to have been willing to negotiate the release of the French hostage, Denis Allex, in January 2013. The group demanded an end to French support to the Somali government and the withdrawal of AMISOM troops, the latter being a demand beyond the control of the French.[310] The group accused France of being apathetic and uncooperative, while characterizing its own demands as "fairly legitimate and feasible."[311] Al-Shabaab killed Allex shortly after a French raid to rescue him failed.[312] The group has also condemned Denmark for the cartoons published of the Prophet Mohamed,

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[305] "Kenyan Shabaab Fighter Incites Muslims in East Africa to Fight Collectively in Posthumous Video," SITE Intelligence Group, July 11, 2017, https://ent-siteintelgroup-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/Statements/kenyan-shabaab-fighter-incites-muslims-in-east-africa-to-fight-collectively-in-posthumous-video.html; "Shabaab Official Rallies Fighters, Mocks U.S.'s Rewards for Justice Program," SITE Intelligence Group, October 13, 2015, https://ent-siteintelgroup-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/Multimedia/shabaab-official-rallies-fighters-mocks-u-s-s-rewards-for-justice-program.html.

[306] "Shabaab Releases Video on June 2013."

[307] "Shabaab Reports Demonstrations in Held Territories Condemning France, Inciting Revenge for Insults to Islam," SITE Intelligence Group, October 26, 2020, https://ent-siteintelgroup-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/Statements/shabaab-reports-demonstrations-in-held-territories-condemning-france-inciting-revenge-for-insults-to-islam.html; "Shabaab Holds Rallies Defending Prophet, Poster Depicts French President Kicked with Boots and Stabbed," SITE Intelligence Group, November 3, 2020, https://ent-siteintelgroup-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/Statements/shabaab-holds-rallies-defending-prophet-poster-depicts-french-president-kicked-with-boots-and-stabbed.html; "Shabaab Continues Holding Anti-France Demonstrations."

[308] Ubaydah, "A Message to the People of Djibouti."

[309] "Shabaab Continues Holding Anti-France Demonstrations."

[310] Feisal Omar, "Somali Islamist Rebels Sentence French Hostage to Death," *Reuters*, January 16, 2013, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-somalia-hostage-idUSBRE90F0CV20130116.

[311] "Shabaab Announces Execution of French Hostage Denis Allex," SITE Intelligence Group, January 2013, https://ent-siteintelgroup-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/Jihadist-News/shabaab-announces-execution-of-french-hostage-denis-allex.html.

[312] Nadya Masidlover, "Somali Militants Claim Execution of French Hostage," *Wall Street Journal*, January 17, 2013, sec. World, https://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424127887323468604578247151807659488.html.

a common jihadist talking point. It enjoyed early success recruiting from the diaspora in Scandinavia and other parts of Europe, such as Germany. Al-Shabaab has also claimed attacks on EU convoys and officials and has condemned the EU for financing the Somali government.[313]

Rivals: Islamic State in Somalia

Image 7: An Islamic State video release showcases ISS fighters training for battle.

As discussed in sections 1 and 2, al-Shabaab opted to maintain its alliance with al-Qaida and violently rejected those in its ranks who supported ISIS. Nonetheless, an ISIS splinter faction emerged in Puntland in 2015.[314] Abdulqadir Mumin's group of about 340 ISIS-affiliated fighters is currently al-Shabaab's only jihadist rival in Somalia.[315] While the Islamic State in Somalia (ISS) poses little threat to al-Shabaab's dominance in the insurgency, al-Shabaab's leadership views ISS as an unacceptable ideological competitor. Al-Shabaab branded ISS as a "cancer" and "spreader of *fitna*," meaning disunity, that needed to be confronted "with force and wisdom."[316] Additionally, al-Shabaab labeled ISS as liars, immoral, and treacherous.[317] Dheere rebuked ISIS in 2018, asserting that it violated the Koran, and corrupted its followers, the religion, and the world. Specifically, al-Shabaab accused ISIS of killing Muslims, looting their money, spreading lies, as well as

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[313] "Shabaab Claims Suicide Bombing on 'EU' Convoy in Mogadishu, Seizing Control Over Villages and Town in Southern Somalia," SITE Intelligence Group, October 1, 2018, https://ent-siteintelgroup-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/Statements/shabaab-claims-suicide-bombing-on-eu-convoy-in-mogadishu-seizing-control-over-villages-and-town-in-southern-somalia.html; "Shabaab Claims Killing US and Israeli Forces in Baledogle, EU Forces Killed in Mogadishu Car Bombing," SITE Intelligence Group, September 30, 2019, https://ent-siteintelgroup-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/Statements/shabaab-claims-killing-us-and-israeli-forces-in-baledogle-eu-forces-killed-in-mogadishu-car-bombing.html; "False Promises and Fading Hopes #1."

[314] During its first few years, the group had a presence in parts of southern Somalia, like the Afgooye Corridor, which declined under al-Shabaab pressure.

[315] This 2019 estimate comes from Puntland security services and is an increase from the UN Monitoring Group's 2018 estimate of 200 fighters. U.N. Security Council, "Resolution 2444, Report of the Panel of Experts on Somalia Submitted in Accordance with Resolution 2444," S/2019/858, November 1, 2019, para. 56, https://undocs.org/S/2019/858.

[316] As quoted in Weiss, "Reigniting the Rivalry," 32.

[317] Weiss, 32.

"establishing suspicious relationships with infidel regimes."[318] For its part, ISIS criticized al-Shabaab for its attacks against civilians in Somalia, admittedly a strange criticism given ISIS's gruesome record.[319]

During 2018, ISS began to expand its operations south and began taxing businesses in Puntland. Al-Shabaab responded with a series of attacks against ISS in late 2018 through March 2019.[320] Since then, the two groups have largely avoided major clashes, although al-Shabaab reportedly killed Mumin's deputy in battle during 2020.[321] ISS has carved out a limited space in the north and modest operational tempo.[322] With ISS largely constrained to operating in the north, al-Shabaab almost certainly views the group as a secondary threat compared to AMISOM and the Somali government. Still, al-Shabaab has in the past been willing to expend significant manpower to eliminate ISS, such as when it sent 350 to 400 fighters to eliminate ISS in 2016, only to be intercepted by Puntland forces and unable to reach the intended ISS target.[323]

PERCEPTIONS OF ALLIES

Al-Qaida and Other Al-Qaida Affiliates

Al-Shabaab's alliance with al-Qaida is noticeably different from its relationships with fellow Somali or regional groups. Its alliance with al-Qaida has been one of veneration and affinity by al-Shabaab's leaders. Al-Shabaab's earliest leaders trained with al-Qaida in Afghanistan and Somalia during the 1990s. East African al-Qaida operatives received shelter under al-Shabaab's future leaders after conducting a terrorist attack in Mombasa in 2002. While al-Shabaab's future leaders were initially in positions supporting al-Qaida

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[318] As presented in Weiss, 32. The full document in Arabic is available from "And God Knows The Corrupter From The Amender," Jihadology, December 20, 2018, https://jihadology.net/2018/12/20/new-statement-from-%e1%b8%a5arakat-al-shabab-al-mujahidin-and-god-knows-the-corrupter-from-the-amender/.

[319] Hansen, Lid, & Okwany, (2019). "Countering violent extremism in Somalia and Kenya", NIBR Working Paper: 2019:106, https://oda.oslomet.no/oda-xmlui/bitstream/handle/20.500.12199/1318/2019-106.pdf?sequence=4&isAllowed=y.

[320] Weiss, "Reigniting the Rivalry," 30–32.

[321] U.N. Security Council, "Resolution 2498, Report of the Panel of Experts on Somalia Submitted in Accordance with Resolution 2498," S/2020/949, September 28, 2020, para. 67, https://undocs.org/S/2020/949.

[322] Jason Warner et al., "Outlasting the Caliphate: The Evolution of the Islamic State Threat in Africa," *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point* 13, no. 11 (November 20, 2020): 24, https://ctc.usma.edu/outlasting-the-caliphate-the-evolution-of-the-islamic-state-threat-in-africa/.

[323] U.N. Security Council, "Resolution 2244, Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 2244," S/2016/919, October 31, 2016, paras. 33–35, https://www.undocs.org/S/2016/919.

operatives, over time the partnership grew into one of equals.[324] Then soon after al-Shabaab emerged as an independent organization, it sought to ally with al-Qaida. It regularly revered al-Qaida leaders in its propaganda and even portrayed itself as an affiliate before it gained that status. It was not until August 2010 that al-Shabaab officially became an affiliate, albeit only privately at that time. Bin Laden emphasized the increased counterterrorism pressure al-Shabaab would face from a public affiliation as justification for keeping the alliance secret.[325] There were also practical reasons for publicly announcing the alliance in February 2012: Zawahiri sought to proclaim al-Qaida's resilience following bin Laden's death in 2011. In becoming a public affiliate, al-Shabaab solidified its position in the jihadist movement, and Godane tightened his control over the group.[326]

The group's commitment to the relationship was reaffirmed when Diriye immediately renewed the *baya* upon becoming leader and in 2015 when it remained allied with al-Qaida in spite of the potential benefits of an ISIS affiliation.[327] Of note, unlike al-Qaida, ISIS had no qualms with al-Shabaab's *takfiri* ideology. ISIS also had access to greater resources and could offer greater prestige than al-Qaida. But Godane's fervent desire for an al-Qaida affiliation instilled a commitment that persisted after he was killed, even though few remaining leaders have direct, personal relationships with al-Qaida's central leadership, which the group's founding leaders enjoyed.

It is unclear how regularly the two groups communicate or the nature of their current cooperation. While al-Shabaab has enjoyed a relative respite in drone strikes under the Biden Administration and al-Qaida is benefitting from the Taliban's success in Afghanistan, the leaders of both al-Shabaab and al-Qaida are acutely aware of the need to maintain high levels of personal and communications security to avoid detection. Nonetheless, al-Shabaab has propagated broader pan-Islamic positions consistent with al-Qaida's narrative on issues of little direct relevance to the group, such as denouncing Saudi Arabia, France, and Israel,[328] and claimed attacks that are clearly motivated by its parochial agenda under al-Qaida's slogan "Jerusalem will not be Judaized."[329]

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[324] This partnership dynamic lasted until the al-Qaida operatives died, the last one being in 2011. The author would like to thank one of the expert reviewers for this point.

[325] "Letter from Usama Bin Laden to Mukhtar Abu Al-Zubayr."

[326] Bacon, *Why Terrorist Groups Form International Alliances*, 208.

[327] Like other al-Qaida affiliates, al-Shabaab has also sworn baya to the Afghan Taliban.

[328] Admittedly, the group has some local basis for antipathy towards Israel because of Israel's close relationship with Kenya.

[329] For discussion of al-Qaida's slogan, see Thomas Joscelyn, "Ayman al Zawahiri promotes 'Jerusalem will be not Judaized' campaign in new video," *Long War Journal*, September 11, 2021. For an example of al-Shabaab declaring a parochial attack under this slogan, see Amanda Sperber, "Al-Shabab Wants You

Conversely, al-Qaida has in the past sought to moderate aspects of al-Shabaab's behavior, especially the harm it afflicts on Muslim civilians and its hardline approach to governance, but with limited results.

In addition to al-Shabaab's affinity for al-Qaida, it has relationships with the other al-Qaida affiliates. Most importantly, it has long-standing ties with al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), which may be the linchpin in the relationship. This is partly due to geographic proximity: the regular flow of commerce and people between Somalia and Yemen dates back centuries. More specifically, founding members of AQAP came to Somalia in 2006-2007 and fought with al-Shabaab against Ethiopia.[330] Since that time, the two groups have engaged in episodic cooperation. Most notably AQAP has provided al-Shabaab with explosives capabilities, though al-Shabaab is not nearly as sophisticated as AQAP in this realm.[331] Its leaders have also heralded al-Shabaab, even before al-Qaida publicly formalized the relationship. Overall, al-Shabaab and AQAP's alliance reinforces al-Shabaab's connections to al-Qaida.

Image 8: A 2019 video message from AQAP's Ibrahim al-Qosi entitled "To Our People in Somalia."

Al-Hijra (formerly known as the Muslim Youth Center)

Al-Shabaab gained its own affiliate when it recognized the Muslim Youth Center (MYC), quickly renamed al-Hijra, as its wing in Kenya in January 2012. The MYC had been a steady provider of funds, fighters, and propaganda for al-Shabaab since its leader Ahmed Iman Ali took over the Pumwani Riyadha Mosque.[332] Iman Ali relocated to Somalia in

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To Know It's Alive and Well," Foreign Policy, January 19, 2019, https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/01/19/al-shabab-wants-you-to-know-its-alive-and-well-kenya-somalia-terrorism/.

[330] Figures who later went on to found the original AQAP in Saudi Arabia, including Abd al-Aziz al-Muqrin and Yusuf al-Uyayri, were in Somalia as early as the 1990s.

[331] Tricia Bacon and Daisy Muibu, "Al-Qaida and Al-Shabaab: A Resilient Alliance," in *War and Peace in Somalia*, ed. Michael Keating and Matt Waldman (Oxford University Press, 2018), 395–96.

[332] Fredrick Nzes, "Al-Hijra: Al-Shabab's Affiliate in Kenya," *Combating Terrorism Center Sentinel* 7, no. 5 (May 29, 2014): 24–26, https://ctc.usma.edu/al-hijra-al-shababs-affiliate-in-kenya/; Nyambega Gisesa, "A Portrait of a Jihadist Born and Bred in Nairobi," *Nation*, January 29, 2012, sec. Life & Style,

2009 but was named as al-Shabaab's "supreme *Amiir* (leader) of Kenya" when al-Shabaab initially recognized al-Hijra as an affiliate.[333] Al-Hijra conducted low-level attacks in Kenya using grenades between late 2011 and 2013, but was unable to execute the complex attacks al-Shabaab sought.[334] While al-Shabaab sometimes relied on al-Hijra's resources and personnel, the group's headline-grabbing attacks in Kenya were managed by the Amniyat, not its local affiliate.[335] As analysts Matt Bryden and Premdeep Bahra explained, al-Hijra's "methods were crude and amateurish; the targeting lacked strategic focus, messaging around the explosions was absent, and the absence of 'martyrs' willing to deliver the devices and to die in the attempt appeared to demonstrate a lack of genuine commitment among the Kenyan 'mujahideen.'"[336] After Westgate, Kenyan security services cracked down on al-Hijra. Senior leaders and ideological mentors were mysteriously killed between 2012 and 2014,[337] al-Hijra's command and control structures devolved, and many of its operatives relocated to Somalia.[338]

Still, al-Shabaab's desire to recognize an affiliate in Kenya was likely more than simply a recognition of al-Hijra's support, which was longstanding. Instead, the announcement of the affiliation was likely in part a response to Kenya's intervention in Somalia in October 2011. Al-Shabaab likely sought to illustrate its connections inside Kenya, adding weight to its warnings of violent retribution for Kenya's intervention. Thus, al-Shabaab again proved to be opportunistic. It highlighted its Kenyan connections when advantageous but created a new wing to conduct attacks in Kenya, Jaysh Ayman, once al-Hijra proved unable to realize al-Shabaab's ambitions.

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https://nation.africa/kenya/life-and-style/dn2/a-portrait-of-a-jihadist-born-and-bred-in-nairobi--798132.

[333] "S/2011/433," Annex 2.2 para. 7; U.N. Security Council, "Resolution 2002, Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 2002," S/2012/544, July 13, 2012, 16, https://undocs.org/en/S/2012/544; Bernard Momanyi, "Kenyan Picked to Head Local Al Qaeda Wing," *Capital News*, January 17, 2012, sec. News, https://www.capitalfm.co.ke/news/2012/01/kenyan-picked-to-head-local-al-qaeda-wing/; Office of the Spokesperson, "State Department Terrorist Designations of Ahmad Iman Ali and Abdifatah Abubakar Abdi," U.S. Department of State, March 8, 2018, https://2017-2021.state.gov/state-department-terrorist-designations-of-ahmad-iman-ali-and-abdifatah-abubakar-abdi/.

[334] "Al-Shabaab as a Transnational Security Threat" (Addis Ababa: IGAD Security Sector Program (ISSP) and Sahan, March 2016), 23, https://igadssp.org/index.php/documentation/4-igad-report-al-shabaab-as-a-transnational-security-threat/file.

[335] Maruf and Joseph, *Inside Al-Shabaab*, 220.

[336] Matt Bryden and Premdeep Bahra, "East Africa's Terrorist Triple Helix: The Dusit Hotel Attack and the Historical Evolution of the Jihadi Threat," *CTC Sentinel*, July 2019, Vol 12, Issue 6. https://ctc.usma.edu/east-africas-terrorist-triple-helix-dusit-hotel-attack-historical-evolution-jihadi-threat/

[337] Nzes, "Al-Hijra."

[338] Hansen, *Horn Sahel and Rift*, 156.

Jaysh Ayman

With al-Shabaab dissatisfied with al-Hijra's ability to execute al-Shabaab's mission in Kenya, the group relied increasingly on a unit formed in 2013, Jaysh Ayman, to conduct attacks in Kenya's border and coastal regions. Though technically responsible for al-Shabaab operations in Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda, Jaysh Ayman is primarily a Kenya-focused unit, with its attacks concentrated in the Boni Forest in Lamu County.[339] Jaysh Ayman consists of a core contingent of both ethnic Somali and non-Somali Kenyans, Tanzanians, Europeans, and other foreign fighters.[340] Its foot soldiers often hail from the areas they are tasked to attack.[341] Jaysh Ayman has proven much more effective than its predecessor. It has raised funds, recruited, conducted operations, and overseen the group's cadre of Kenyan and foreign fighters.[342]

In its early years, Jaysh Ayman was closely managed by al-Shabaab leaders in Somalia. It was led by a Somali-Kenyan, unlike al-Hijra, which had been led by Iman Ali, a non-Somali Kenyan, who was reportedly dismayed at being passed over for the top spot in Jaysh Ayman.[343] IGAD and the Sahan Foundation noted that Jaysh Ayman received "direction and support… from Al-Shabaab proper."[344] Similarly, analyst Stig Hansen notes that while Jaysh Ayman units draw on foreigners or Kenyan-Somalis with dual citizenship, attack units were trained and launched from Somalia and "controlled by Somalia's Shabaab."[345] Over time, it appears that Jaysh Ayman has developed more autonomy in its local actions, an indication that it has earned some trust from al-Shabaab leaders.[346]

Hizbul Islam

In contrast, al-Shabaab was heavy-handed in its dealings with a fellow Somali entity, Hizbul Islam. In early 2009, Hizbul Islam emerged as coalition of four Islamist groups, largely divided along clan lines, and was led by Hassan Dahir Aweys, known as the

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[339] IGAD and Sahan Foundation, "Al Shabaab as a Transnational Security Threat," 20. UN 2016, Paragraph 45, citation 13

[340] IGAD and Sahan Foundation, 23; Ngala Chome, "Why Raids Are a Cause for Worry as Al Shabaab Changes Face," *The Standard*, July 23, 2017, https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/kenya/article/2001248735/why-raids-are-a-cause-for-worry-as-al-shabaab-changes-face.

[341] IGAD and Sahan Foundation, "Al Shabaab as a Transnational Security Threat," 20.

[342] Taiwo

[343] Ombati, "Police: Six Kenyan Al Shabaab Members Desperate to Quit Group."

[344] IGAD and Sahan Foundation, 25.

[345] Stig Jarle Hansen, *Horn Sahel and Rift: Fault-Lines of the African Jihad* (London: Hurst, 2019),154.

[346] Author Interview with UN Monitoring Group Official, January 2017, Nairobi

"Godfather of Somali jihadism."[347] Although, to some degree, it shared an ideology with al-Shabaab, Hizbul Islam was more clan based and interested in power than in implementing an Islamic state, and it did not embrace al-Qaida's global agenda.[348] Nevertheless, the two groups did cooperate on military operations, such as the takeover of Kismayo in August 2008 and the May 2009 Mogadishu Offensive.[349]

However, relations between the two groups were far from smooth. Al-Shabaab was clearly the senior partner and behaved as such, seeking to absorb Hizbul Islam, rather than have a genuine partnership. In early discussions of a merger between the two groups, al-Shabaab showed no willingness to accommodate Hizbul Islam.[350] By mid-2010 internal schisms and military defeats meant Hizbul Islam was on the verge of collapse. Instead of facing complete defeat, Aweys "conceded" and initiated a merger with al-Shabaab.[351] Aweys then gained a leadership position in al-Shabaab, but most Hizbul Islam figures did not get senior positions in al-Shabaab.[352] Parts of Hizbul Islam followed, while others defected or established smaller militias. However, ultimately, Aweys was among those who opposed Godane's effort to establish uncontested power within al-Shabaab and defected from the group in 2013 amidst Godane's purge of challengers; he has reportedly been held under house arrest in Somalia since that time. Overall, this relationship is no longer operating, but it does reflect how al-Shabaab would likely approach any potential Somali partners.

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[347] Hizbul Islam included former AIAI elements and was also a descendant of that organization.
[348] Maruf and Joseph, *Inside Al-Shabaab*, 2018, 107.
[349] Maruf and Joseph, *Inside Al-Shabaab,* 109–11; Hansen, *Al-Shabaab in Somalia*, 68.
[350] Maruf and Joseph, *Inside Al-Shabaab*, 2018, 165.
[351] "Shabaab Video of Unification."
[352] When al-Shabaab defeated / absorbed Hizbul Islam, it effectively succeeded in forcing a generational change in jihadi leadership in Somalia. The author thanks one of the expert reviewers for this point.

Section 3: State of Mind and Biases

The group's circumstances and thus the mindsets of its members vary locally. However, as discussed in section 2 and section 8, the group's current overall mindset is that it enjoys the upper hand in the conflict – and that God and time are on their side.[353] This positive view of the group's circumstances is not a misperception or indication of overconfidence; rather, it is based on an accurate assessment of its current position. The group does not assume the current state will last, as it is aware that that its position has and will "seesaw," corresponding to previous fluctuations in strength.[354] Consistent with its clear-eyed mindset, the group has proven highly adaptable and resilient, which reflects its ability to assess its situation and correct for past mistakes, including overconfidence.[355] As discussed in section 2, the group generally perceives its enemies accurately, but the group does have some biases in terms of polarization, denial, and attribution error.

POLARIZATION/MORAL AMPLIFICATION

One of al-Shabaab's most salient biases is its moral polarization: it presents itself as righteous and its adversaries – anyone who assists the Somali Federal Government – as evil. Al-Shabaab's use of religion as the moral basis for its military campaign predetermines the way it defines its enemies. Given that the group is fighting to implement a "true" interpretation of Islam and a better, purer society, the group and its members are axiomatically good and just. All those who oppose the group –

Image 9: A video message from al-Shabaab's Al-Kata'ib Media Foundation attempts to frame the group's cause on religious-historical narratives.

and therefore its cause – must be malevolent. Of course, not all the group's members take this Manichean outlook, but many do, especially those subjected to al-Shabaab indoctrination from an early age.
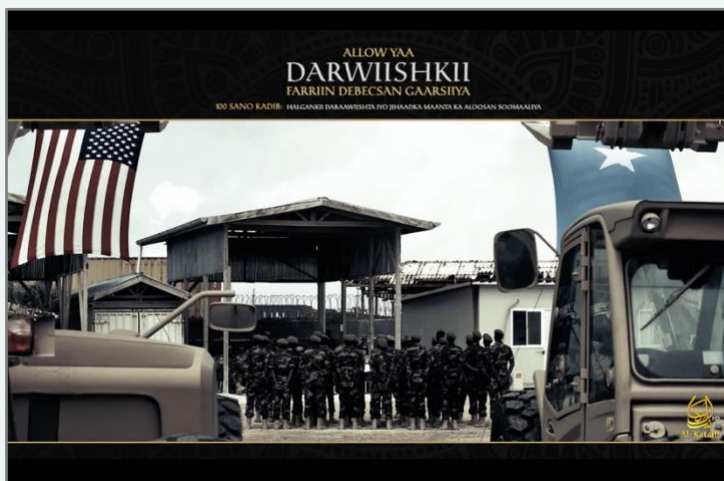
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[353] Interview with international think tank analyst 1, July 2021, Virtual.
[354] Interview with Somali military officer, July 2021.
[355] Interview with international think tank analyst 1, July 2021, Virtual.

Al-Shabaab frames the U.S., Kenya, and Ethiopia as evil because their populations are predominantly Christian and therefore supposedly oppose the imposition of *Sharia* and are engaged in a crusade against Muslims. Other AMISOM troop-contributing countries are similarly framed as crusaders and "evil Christians."[356] As noted, with respect to Turkey, it is the secular regime which is denounced as immoral by al-Shabaab for its association with Western states through NATO, and for its military and financial support of the apostate Somali government.[357] The Somali government is framed as "founded by Satan" and enemies of Islam for the support it receives from these crusader countries and for following a different interpretation of Islam than that followed by al-Shabaab.[358]

DENIAL

Al-Shabaab and its members engage in denial in several notable ways, such as the group's characterization of the government as apostate, while many individual members have extensive relations with government officials. The group unequivocally condemns the Somali government, yet many members in al-Shabaab have family who are in the Somali government. Many Somali families pragmatically hedge, sending family members both to the government and al-Shabaab.[359] Thus, the group's characterization of the Somali government is at odds with members' individual relationships with brothers and cousins, whom they do not view as apostates.

The group (and its members) are also in denial about the extent of its harm to the Somalia people. Al-Shabaab harms Somali people in a myriad of ways, ranging from terrorist attacks to hindering humanitarian aid to extortion rackets. At times, especially after major incidents like the 2011 drought or the 2017 Zoobe junction attack in Mogadishu, there is internal recognition and concern among some in the group about the suffering caused to civilians. Yet, the group often places the blame for this on the Somalia government and its adversaries or persuades itself that any harm is a necessary consequence of its pursuit of an Islamic state.

In addition, the group's pragmatic and opportunistic approach on the ground is in tension with its proclaimed ideological purity, something the organization denies. For example, as discussed in sections 1 and 2, al-Shabaab opposes democracy in principle, but then seeks to manipulate the outcome of elections by coercing clan elders. In

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[356] "Shabaab Video Documentary of Somali Jihad, ARS," SITE Intelligence Group, December 29, 2008, https://ent-siteintelgroup-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/Jihadist-News/shabaab-video-documentary-of-somali-jihad-ars.html. Ubaydah, "And the Honorable Journey Continues."
[357] "Accepting Heavy Civilian Casualties."
[358] "Shabaab Leader Slams 'Parliament of Mercenaries.'
[359] Interview with scholar 2, July 2021, Virtual.

addition, though it claims to eschew clannism in favor of ideology, the group recruits from marginalized clans that primarily seek to improve their position vis-à-vis dominant clans. Finally, as the group has evolved into a successful mafia and militia, it attracts some with no ideological commitment and who simply seek a means of gaining a financial or power advantage.[360]

ACTOR-OBSERVER DISCREPANCY/ATTRIBUTION ERROR

Violence against civilians is another area where al-Shabaab's cognitive biases affect its outlook on the conflict. Attribution error describes the tendency to attribute the behavior of other actors to dispositional rather than situational factors, while explaining their own behavior in terms of situational rather than dispositional factors. As this cognitive bias predicts, Al-Shabaab views the U.S., AMISOM, and the Somali National Army as driven by hostility to Islam and therefore intentionally harming civilians, whereas the civilian casualties it causes are attributable to the situation in which it is forced to operate. The group has claimed civilian deaths in U.S. airstrikes "are not isolated incidents due to faulty intelligence or military mishaps but rather a systematic campaign rooted in the innate hatred of the disbelievers towards Muslims."[361] Conversely, although al-Shabaab undeniably kills civilians in its operations, the group attributes civilian casualties in its operations to incidental mistakes, blames its adversaries for operating in civilian-dominated locations, or chastises civilians for being in locations with its adversaries.[362] It is rare that al-Shabaab publicly acknowledges killing civilians in its operations, instead adopting a narrow interpretation of who constitutes a civilian. It excludes those who are affiliated with foreign actors and tries to deny anyone who provides even the most innocuous support to the government or AMISOM as being a civilian. Still, the group recognizes the detrimental impact of killing civilians on its popular support as well as its internal cohesion and has made statements claiming it does not intend to target civilians.[363] Yet, al-Shabaab does not acknowledge that the Somali government and other actors might face similar constraints. Instead, al-Shabaab believes – or at least many of its members believe – that its adversaries are intrinsically motivated to kill civilians as part of their strategy.

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[360] The author thanks one of the expert reviewers for the latter two examples.

[361] "American Massacres in Somalia."

[362] "Accepting Heavy Civilian Casualties"; "Targeting the Turkish Convoy," Jihadology, December 30, 2019, https://jihadology.net/2019/12/30/new-statement-from-%e1%b8%a5arakat-al-shabab-al-mujahidin-targeting-the-turkish-convoy/.

[363] "Then Fight the Leaders of Disbelief #3, Part 2," Jihadology, August 20, 2019, https://jihadology.net/2019/08/20/new-video-message-from-%e1%b8%a5arakat-al-shabab-al-mujahidin-then-fight-the-leaders-of-disbelief-3-part-2/; Karate, "The Sanctity of Muslim Blood."

PAST OVERCONFIDENCE

Although conflict parties often suffer from overconfidence or wishful thinking, as noted above, al-Shabaab is generally realistic in its current assessment of the conflict, including the limitations of the group's enemies and its own capabilities. However, there have been periods of overconfidence in its past. Most significantly, the group has historically proven overconfident in its willingness to the directly confront superior military forces. The nascent al-Shabaab was behind the attacks on Ethiopian forces that spurned the initial invasion in December 2006 and initiated the attacks against the will of the broader Islamic Courts Union leadership.[364] Again, following the group's first Mogadishu offensive in May 2009, al-Shabaab's leadership proved to be overconfident in its ability to successfully challenge military forces. In July 2009, Godane claimed the government was on the brink of collapse and in December of that year he sought to declare a caliphate in southern Somalia, although he never made the announcement.[365] The group's offensive in May 2009 was a significant threat to the government's stability. There appeared to be the potential for a complete government collapse.[366] However, despite holding much of Mogadishu and another offensive in 2010, al-Shabaab was ultimately unable to overcome AMISOM, and thereby topple the TFG. It sustained major losses in trying and was forced to withdraw from the capital in August 2011.

When al-Shabaab began directly engaging military forces again in mid-2015 the group proved successful at assaulting forward operating bases. It overran a Burundian base in Leego, a Ugandan base in Janaale, and a Kenyan base in El Adde. There is evidence of overconfidence in the group's failed attack on the Ethiopian base in Halgan in 2016.[367] With the massive increase in drone strikes under the Trump Administration, al-Shabaab reduced its mass attacks on AMISOM forward operating bases,[368] indicating, once again, that it adapts and effectively calibrates its operations to its capabilities. In other words, it corrects for overconfidence.

Despite some instances of overconfidence, al-Shabaab is more willing to announce the defeat of its enemies than it is willing to predict its own victory. For example, al-Shabaab has claimed multiple enemies, including the Ethiopians,[369] "apostates" and "African

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[364] Hansen, *Al-Shabaab in Somalia*, 46.

[365] Maruf and Joseph, *Inside Al-Shabaab*, 131-142; "Shabaab Leader Tells Somalis to Prepare for Islamic State," SITE Intelligence Group, July 13, 2009, https://ent-siteintelgroup-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/Jihadist-News/site-intel-group-7-13-09-shabaab-leader-audio-prepare-state.html.

[366] Maruf and Joseph, *Inside Al-Shabaab*, 2018, 113, 128.

[367] Maruf and Joseph, 250–52.

[368] It did not entirely halt these attacks.

[369] "Shabaab on Ethiopian Withdrawal."

mercenaries,"[370] and U.S. forces,[371] have been defeated. When Uganda and Burundi threatened to withdraw their forces from Somalia over funding in March 2019, al-Shabaab responded by saying that, "We see these withdrawals as the harbinger of their defeat."[372] But the group did not go so far as to claim victory directly. Again in 2019, Karate claimed that "victory was, without a doubt, on their [al-Shabaab's] side despite facing an enemy greater in number and more technologically advanced."[373] Even in this claim of inevitable victory al-Shabaab recognizes that it faces significant disadvantages and Karate avoids claiming that the group will outright defeat its enemies within any defined period.

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[370] "The Blessed Manda Bay Raid," 3.

[371] "Shabaab Claims 135 Casualties and Reiterates Mission to 'Paralyze' Government in Formal Communique for Makka al-Mukaraha Hotel Raid," SITE Intelligence Group, March 3, 2019, https://ent-siteintelgroup-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/Statements/in-formal-communique-for-makka-al-mukaraha-hotel-raid-shabaab-claims-135-casualties-and-reiterates-mission-to-paralyze-government.html.

[372] "Shabaab Spokesman Speaks on Hotel Attacks, Calls Protesting Somali Soldiers to Repent and Leave Service," SITE Intelligence Group, April 3, 2019, https://ent-siteintelgroup-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/Statements/shabaab-spokesman-speaks-on-hotel-attacks-calls-protesting-somali-soldiers-to-repent-and-leave-service.html.

[373] Karate, "The Sanctity of Muslim Blood," min 2:48; Thomas Joscelyn, "Shabaab Official Justifies Attacks on Civilians While Preaching the Sanctity of Muslim Blood," *Long War Journal* (blog), May 13, 2019, https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2019/05/shabaab-official-justifies-attacks-on-civilians-while-preaching-the-sanctity-of-muslim-blood.php.

Figure 2: A map of approximate territorial control in Somalia as of December 14, 2021. Map by: Evan Centanni and Djordje Djukic. 2021. PolGeoNow. www.polgeonow.com. [Accessed at: https://www.polgeonow.com/2021/12/who-controls-somalia-crisis-timeline.html].
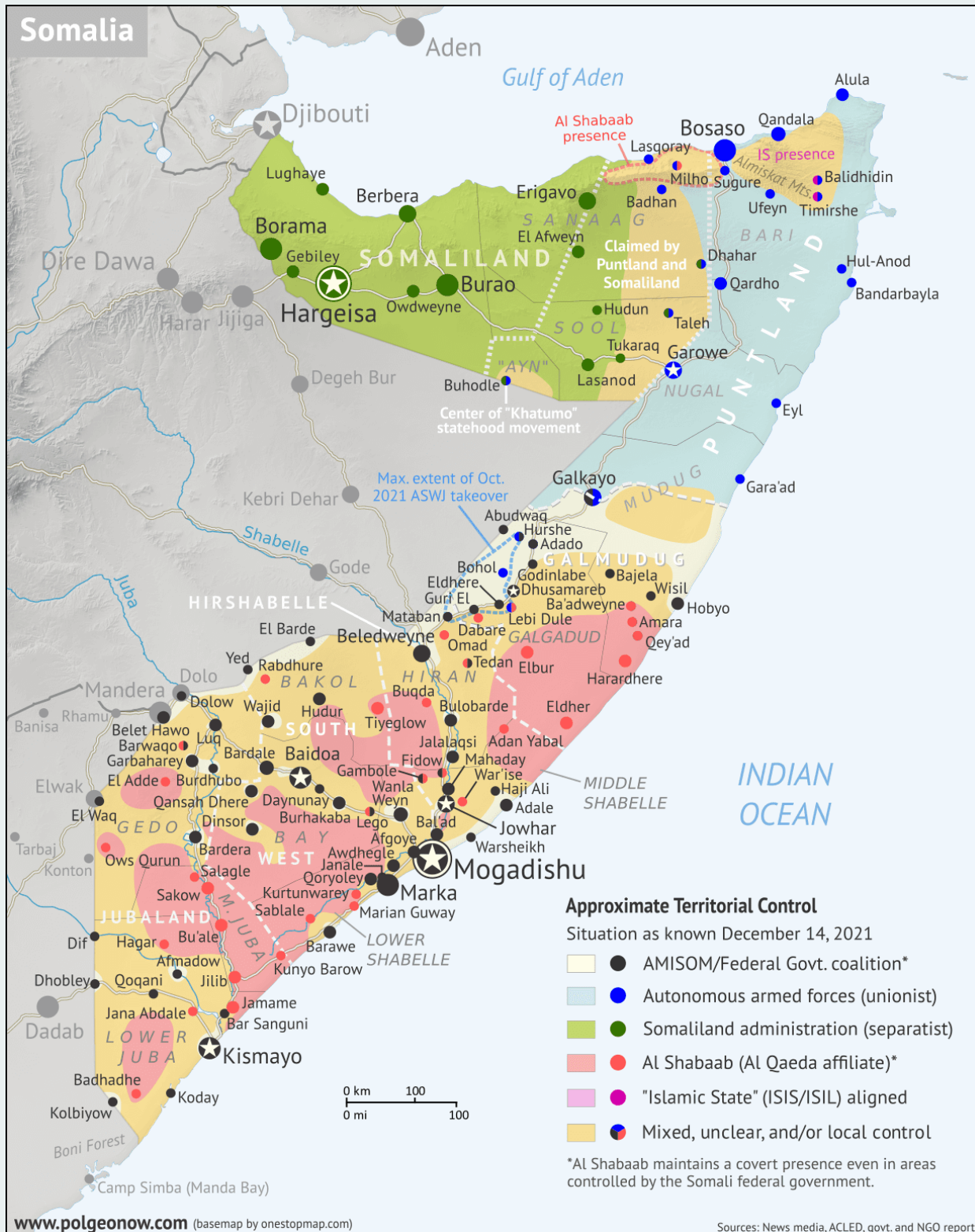
Section 4: Emotions

Current emotions and sentiments are perhaps the most speculative section of the IMEP analysis in the absence of field research, including direct (and candid) interviews with members of the organization. In addition, emotions will vary widely among al-Shabaab members, especially by status within al-Shabaab. Those who have only known life in the group or under its control may have come to accept their circumstances, while those who have been forcibly recruited recently may feel resentment. For some in the group, the day-to-day living conditions in the bush and rural areas are difficult, though others are accustomed to such conditions and may enjoy exercising power in their clan localities.[374]

Nonetheless, there is a degree of expert consensus about some of the current emotions and sentiments within the organization overall. Perhaps most notably, the group's current sentiments are generally positive and optimistic, given its strong position in the conflict. Given the duration of the conflict as well as the broader state collapse, there may be some war weariness in parts of the organization. Offsetting any serious war weariness, as noted earlier, there is also a sentiment within the group that its foreign adversaries are fatigued and drained by the Somalia mission.[375]

More broadly, there is a pervasive culture of trauma in Somalia. Though al-Shabaab is actually the perpetrator of some of that trauma, its members are not immune from this wider cultural phenomenon.[376] Indeed, the group is so deeply intertwined with society that its violence is likely to affect members, their family, and clansmen, creating a psychological trauma as well as cognitive dissonance when the group is responsible for the trauma.[377] Moreover, members of the group have undoubtedly lost family and friends over the course of the conflict as well as due to the poor living conditions for many Somalis.

In addition, the group experiences a range of emotions that have varied over the course of the conflict. Its feeling of contempt towards the Somali government is fairly constant but has increased at certain phases of the conflict. Its sense of smugness and self-satisfaction reflects its current circumstances and the downfall of its adversaries. Its sense of fear probably subsided with the virtual absence of drone strikes, but it is unlikely to have disappeared entirely. The sense of hatred and hostility that was triggered with

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[374] Interview with scholar 2, July 2021, Virtual; Interview with retired US official 2, April 2021, Virtual. The author thanks one of the expert reviewers for this insight as well.

[375] Interview with scholar 2, July 2021, Virtual; Interview with retired US official 1, April 2021, Virtual.

[376] Interview with international expert, April 2021, Virtual.

[377] Interview with scholar 2, July 2021, Virtual.

the 2006 Ethiopia invasion persists, as does its sense of self-righteousness in the conflict overall.

CONTEMPT/DISGUST

Al-Shabaab feels a significant degree of contempt and disgust towards the Somali government.[378] The group views the government as completely illegitimate, rife with corruption, and as little more than a puppet of foreign powers.[379] In its 2021 six-part commentary on the government, al-Shabaab seemingly asserts that the Somali government has failed in all respects on governance, security, and maintaining the country's sovereignty.[380] Meanwhile, according to a September 2019 Diriye statement, "The Islamic *Wilayaat* (al-Shabaab) serves as a viable alternative to the apostate regime propped up by the disbelievers and that is built upon fighting the religion, oppression, corruption and tribal prejudice based upon the discriminative 4.5 system."[381]

This contempt and disgust towards the Somali government originated with the establishment of the Ethiopian-backed Transitional Federal Government, before the group was an independent organization. However, it grew when Sheikh Sharif became President and declared *Sharia* in Somalia. A betrayal of this nature from a former ICU leader and the perceived perversion of *Sharia* created outrage within al-Shabaab.[382] Since that point, al-Shabaab likely loathes the fact that the government continues to claim to follow *Sharia,* as well as its willingness to abdicate control to foreign powers, as the group sees it, in contrast to al-Shabaab, which sees itself as able to control and govern Somalia in accordance with "true" *Sharia*. A caveat is in order though: the group's general sentiment towards the government may be somewhat mitigated by how embedded al-Shabaab has become in Somali society, and the personal and family connections that members of al-Shabaab have to government officials.[383]

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[378] Interview with scholar 1, April 2021, Virtual.

[379] Interview with scholar 1, April 2021, Virtual.

[380] "False Promises and Fading Hopes #1"; "Farmajo: False Promises and Fading Hopes #2: Scramble for Somalia"; "Farmajo: False Promises and Fading Hopes #3: Economy," Jihadology, February 9, 2021, https://jihadology.net/2021/02/09/new-video-message-from-%e1%b8%a5arakat-al-shabab-al-mujahidin-farmajo-false-promises-and-fading-hopes-3-economy/; "Farmajo: False Promises and Fading Hopes #4: Federalism: The Balkanization of Somalia"; "False Promises and Fading Hopes #5"; "False Promises and Fading Hopes #6."

[381] Ubaydah, "But Allah Will Complete His Light."

[382] "Somalia's Divided Islamists," 6.

[383] Interview with international journalists, July 2021, Virtual; Interview with scholar 2, July 2021, Virtual.

SMUGNESS/SELF-SATISFACTION

Related to its sense of contempt and disgust towards the Somali government, the group has a current sentiment of smugness and self-satisfaction as a result of the government's woes. The Somali government's very public and significant failures – most notably clashes between the opposition and Farmajo loyalists in Mogadishu in April 2021 over Farmajo's extension of power – are seen as validating al-Shabaab's views of government ineptitude and the bankruptcy of the current system.[384] The group is pleased that it is prevailing in its rivalry with the government, particularly in the effectiveness of its courts. Reinforcing this sense of satisfaction is Ethiopia's political implosion and the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Somalia. The Taliban's rapid seizure of power in Afghanistan in August 2021 is likely to have strengthened those feelings.[385]

Image 10: An al-Shabaab video message released in February 2021 targets Farmajo.

Members of al-Shabaab hailing from marginalized clans may also feel a sense of self-satisfaction. In Somalia, dominant clans have long used their powerful positions against marginalized or weaker clans. Al-Shabaab has provided disadvantaged clans with an avenue to improve their circumstances, and it is likely that al-Shabaab members from such clans, who are doing well within the organization, feel a sense of satisfaction about that.

FEAR

While individual members may experience fear – fear of government forces, of retaliation from local communities, or of falling on the wrong side of the group's leaders – fear is not a dominant emotion overall in the group, except in three respects. First, the group fears U.S. drone strikes.[386] The threat of drone strikes looms over the group, particularly senior leaders, and is, or at least was, a source of significant fear. This concern intensified significantly after the strike that killed Godane in 2014 as well as

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[384] Declan Walsh and Hussein Mohamed, "Gunfire Erupts in Mogadishu as Somalia's Political Feud Turns Violent," *The New York Times*, April 25, 2021, sec. World,
https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/25/world/africa/somalia-fighting.html.

[385] Interview with scholar 2, July 2021, Virtual.

[386] Interview with former Somali government official, July 2021, Virtual; Interview with international expert, April 2021, Virtual; Interview with former US military officer, April 2021, Virtual.

during the escalation in strikes under the Trump Administration.[387] While at the time of writing there has only been a handful of drone strikes since the Biden Administration came into office, the group's experience of such attacks since 2007 will prevent the fear from subsiding too quickly as it knows a strike could occur at any time without warning.[388] Most fear that strikes could resume at any time, and senior leaders still fear that even less frequent drone strikes will target them.[389] Second, the group fears the public rising up and pushing back against the group, especially if it appears that it might lose the support of a clan that is vital to al-Shabaab's finance, recruitment, access, or territory. To manage this, the organization currently uses coercion more extensively than attempts to win hearts and minds.[390] Leaders are concerned when communities oppose it for demanding they provide children as recruits, as well as when there is a significant public backlash to attacks that kill significant numbers of civilians.[391] Third, members of the group fear the wrath of the organization, especially the intelligence unit, the Amniyat. This notorious unit is charged with rooting out spies, punishing those engaging in corruption, or eliminating defectors. It is notorious for imprisoning such individuals as well as dissidents of al-Shabaab leaders.[392]

HOSTILITY AND HATRED

Al-Shabaab feels hostility and hatred towards foreign forces in Somalia, particularly Somalia's regional neighbors Kenya and Ethiopia for their respective interventions into Somalia. As noted in section 2, the group views both countries with animosity. Importantly, hatred towards Ethiopia is not exclusive to al-Shabaab and is linked to the historic conflicts between the two countries.[393] Al-Shabaab labels Ethiopia as the group's, and Somalia's, historic arch enemy. Parallel to this historically rooted hostility, for al-Shabaab leaders who were active in AIAI, their hatred towards Ethiopia may be compounded by their involvement in conducting attacks in Ethiopia and the Ethiopian incursion into Somalia that scattered AIAI in 1996.[394] However, for most of al-Shabaab's fighters and commanders, most viscerally, hatred towards Ethiopia was activated by

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[387] Interview with Somaliland security official, May 2021, Virtual.
[388] Interview with international think tank analyst 1, July 2021, Virtual.
[389] Interview with international think tank analyst 1, July 2021, Virtual.
[390] Interview with international think tank analyst 1, July 2021, Virtual.
[391] Interview with scholar 2, April 2021, Virtual.
[392] Interview with international expert, April 2021, Virtual.
[393] Gebru Tareke, "The Ethiopia-Somalia War of 1977 Revisited," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 33, no. 3 (2000): 635–67, https://doi.org/10.2307/3097438.
[394] Mapping Militant Organizations. "Al Ittihad Al Islamiya." Stanford University. Last modified February 2019. https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/al-ittihad-al-islamiya

Ethiopia's 2006 invasion.[395] The subsequent occupation that propped up the Transitional Federal Government and then Ethiopians' subsequent military involvement in the conflict both through AMISOM and unilaterally cemented the group's feelings.[396] To some extent, al-Shabaab also seeks to liberate the Ogaden/Somali Region from Ethiopian "occupation" and is resentful that ethnic Somalis live under a Christian Ethiopian government, but this is secondary to anger and hostility towards Ethiopia for its current and historic role in the state of Somalia.

Comparatively, al-Shabaab's animosity towards Kenya is more recent and is more directly connected to Kenya's decision to intervene in Somalia in 2011.[397] As noted in section 2, al-Shabaab saw the North-East of Kenya as rightly part of "Greater Somalia" and recognized Kenya's role as a base for U.S. operations but, until the Kenyan entry into the conflict, it largely refrained from labeling Kenya as an enemy. Indeed, if there was a tacit or even explicit agreement between Kenya and al-Shabaab to avoid attacks against one another as some contend, al-Shabaab also likely felt betrayed by Kenya's decision to breach this agreement.[398] Since the intervention, al-Shabaab's references to Kenya increasingly refer to the North-East region of Kenya where most ethnic Somalis reside.[399] As with ethnic Somalis in Ethiopia, al-Shabaab likely resents the fact that ethnic Somalis live in areas controlled by its enemies and seek to liberate them from that control.

As noted in section 2, al-Shabaab espouses rhetoric that claims the U.S. is evil. It feels hostility towards the U.S. because it views the U.S. as engaging in a global war on Islam. At a more immediate level al-Shabaab hates the U.S, for its involvement in Somalia, particularly its role in killing al-Shabaab members directly in air strikes.[400] The presence of U.S. troops in the country until the 2021 withdrawal, as well as the ongoing presence of U.S. military contractors, their involvement in training Somali special forces, known as Danab, and accompanying them on missions stoke hostility within the group as this undercuts al-Shabaab's goal of expelling foreign forces and establishing an Islamic

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[395] Jeffrey Gettleman, "Ethiopia Hits Somali Targets, Declaring War," *The New York Times*, December 25, 2006, sec. World, https://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/25/world/africa/25somalia.html.

[396] Ken Menkhaus, "The Crisis in Somalia: Tragedy in Five Acts," *African Affairs*, 106, no. 424 (2007): 357–390, https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/adm040.

[397] International Crisis Group, "The Kenyan Military Intervention in Somalia," Africa Report (Nairobi/Brussels: International Crisis Group, February 15, 2012), 6,

https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/kenya/kenyan-military-intervention-somalia.

[398] Maruf and Joseph, *Inside Al-Shabaab*, 2018, 212.

[399] Dheere, "An Analysis of Events, Part 3"; "Shabaab Spokesman Calls for East African Muslims to Migrate"; "Shabaab Leader Calls for Lone-Wolf Attacks."

[400] Tricia Bacon, "Strategic Progress Remains Elusive in America's Expanded Air Campaign Against Al-Shabaab," *War on the Rocks* (blog), March 5, 2018, https://warontherocks.com/2018/03/strategic-progress-remains-elusive-americas-expanded-air-campaign-al-shabaab/.

state.[401] Indeed, al-Shabaab hates the idea that the U.S. influences the Somali government to any degree and despises the government's willingness to acquiesce to foreign influence, especially from the country al-Shabaab sees as Islam's greatest enemy.

HUMILIATION

Related to the group's sentiments of hatred and hostility towards foreigners, there is also a sense of humiliation.[402] The group feels humiliated by foreign forces' "occupation" of Somalia. The Ethiopian invasion of Somalia in 2006 was the "original sin" that ignited those feelings, especially given Somalia's loss to Ethiopia in 1978 and Ethiopia's role in breaking Somalia into five parts.[403] The sense of humiliation has not subsided with Ethiopia's (temporary) withdrawal in 2009; rather it has persisted due to AMISOM's continuing presence.[404] This sentiment is not limited to feelings towards foreigners. Al-Shabaab members also harbor a sense of humiliation resulting from predation by the government or oppression by dominant clans.

REVENGE

There is a desire for revenge amongst some in the organization, especially at the individual level.[405] This can stem from the conduct of the Somali government, foreign forces, or other clans. Revenge can be a motive for joining the group, albeit this was more prevalent in the earlier years of the organization.[406] There is an element of revenge in some of the group's attacks.[407] It is not a dominant emotion within the group, but retaliating for past wrongs does appear to play a limited role in some individual or group attacks.

SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS AND ENTITLEMENT

Because al-Shabaab's leadership views the conflict as a binary fight between good and evil (as noted in section 3), its views of its own actions are rooted in the idea that

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[401] Declan Walsh, "In Somalia, U.S. Troop Withdrawal Is Seen as Badly Timed," *The New York Times*, December 5, 2020, sec. World, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/05/world/africa/somalia-us-troops-withdraw.html; Amanda Sperber, "The Danab Brigade: Somalia's Elite, US-Sponsored Special Ops Force," Pulitzer Center, August 11, 2020, https://pulitzercenter.org/stories/danab-brigade-somalias-elite-us-sponsored-special-ops-force.

[402] More broadly, humiliation is a key emotion that underpins jihadist ideology. The author thanks one of the expert reviewers for this point.

[403] Interview with scholar 1, April 2021, Virtual.

[404] Interview with scholar 2, July 2021, Virtual.

[405] Interview with international think tank analyst 1, July 2021, Virtual.

[406] Interview with international journalists, July 2021, Virtual; Interview with former Somali government official, July 2021, Virtual; Interview with international think tank analyst 1, July 2021, Virtual.

[407] Interview with international think tank analyst 1, July 2021, Virtual.

everything it does is good, or at the very least, justified. This creates a sentiment of moral superiority as they perceive themselves to be worthy, pious Muslims who make sacrifices for the greater goal of serving God and creating an Islamic state that follows the "correct" interpretation of Islam. This self-righteousness is clear in its apology for a devastating attack in Mogadishu in December 2019 when Dheere stated that, "the mujahideen are the most hurt that Muslims were afflicted in this operation" while its enemies used this "to achieve their personal goals."[408] Meanwhile, a press release from al-Shabaab on the attack stated that, "The protection and defence of Islam, however, always takes a firm precedence over the protection of life."[409] Thus, the fact that the group sees itself as fighting for Islam, which is amplified by the group's rhetoric, entrenches and perpetuates a sense of self-righteousness.

Stemming from the group's self-righteousness is a sense of entitlement. The group's leaders in particular feel entitled to power. They feel they deserve the resources the group has and are the rightful leaders of Somalia.

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[408] "Accepting Heavy Civilian Casualties."
[409] "Targeting the Turkish Convoy."

Section 5: Core Interests and Concerns

What really matters to leaders and other key individuals in the group has become a source of increasing debate as the group evolves. Some analysts see senior figures as becoming power-hungry or motivated by greed, while others still see them as ideologically motivated. The reality is probably an interrelated combination of these factors, rather than any single interest predominating. While the core interests of key figures are probably a combination of the pursuit of power, acquisition of resources, and its ideological mission, the group is also aware that it needs public acquiescence, if not its support, especially from clans that are important to its revenue generation, recruitment, or territorial control.

POWER AND IDEOLOGY

Gaining power is a fundamental core interest for the leaders and other key figures in the organization.[410] At the same time, the group's ideological mission is what provides the basis for its leaders to seek power.[411] Religion is the tool through which the group seeks to attain power; thus, the two are deeply interwoven. Some leaders are deeply ideologically committed and, by extension, deeply committed to gaining power in order to implement their ideological vision. Others are more motivated by the trappings of power and use ideology as a justification for the pursuit of power. They seek to gain power and status through al-Shabaab that they otherwise could not have in Somali society because of clan affiliation, age, or other factors.

The group is not candid about its pursuit of power either in its rhetoric or internally. In its public statements, it consistently emphasizes its ideological mission – expelling foreign forces, overthrowing the government, and installing an Islamic state – without acknowledging that the imagined Islamic state must be ruled by the group's leaders. The desire for power is also a potential hurdle to negotiations, discussed in section 8, as al-Shabaab leaders would probably demand significant power in any negotiated settlement, especially in the current environment.[412] On the other hand, actually coming to power would result in an array of debates, conflicts, and identity crises within the group. One expert went so far as to argue that al-Shabaab should be given a Federal Member State, if only because being in power would cripple the group by bringing its internal tensions

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[410] Interview with retired US official 1, April 2021, Virtual.
[411] Interview with former Somali government official, July 2021, Virtual; Interview with international think tank analyst 1, July 2021, Virtual; Interview with UK defense and security think tank analysts, January 2017, Nairobi.
[412] Interview with retired US official 1, April 2021, Virtual.

to the fore, as occurred when the organization controlled much of southern Somalia from 2009 to 2013.[413]

RESOURCES

Gaining resources has increasingly become a core interest for key individuals in the group. Over the past decade, al-Shabaab has developed an efficient and effective extortion racket, which it frames as 'taxation.' Its taxation[414] produces some services for those who live under the group as well as some services available to those who use the group's courts or roads. But the demands of the extortion system outstrip the services provided and mainly provide protection from the group. It threatens, kidnaps, and even kills those who do not pay its taxes. The group has become so effective at extortion that it runs an annual surplus, and some argue that it is more of a mafia than an ideological organization at this point.[415] While that may overstate the case, it is clear that the senior and mid-level leaders have developed a core interest in accruing resources, and a subset of the organization may be more motivated by material gain than religious convictions or political objectives. The desire to accrue resources is not something the group acknowledges publicly or includes its rhetoric. It frames its extortion as a function of its legitimate Islamic shadow government, even though its taxation approach does not adhere to a traditional zakat approach and relies on coercion and violence.

For many rank and file members, being paid regularly and offered a secure job is a core interest that al-Shabaab is able to meet. Indeed, for some, al-Shabaab is the main entity able to offer a viable livelihood, which is why they joined and what keeps them in the organization, as discussed in section 6.

GARNERING PUBLIC ACQUIESCENCE

Al-Shabaab's most important goal is to establish an Islamic state in Somalia. Thus, one of the group's core interests is to ensure, at a minimum, that the public capitulates to its rule and does not actively resist it. Much of the group's governance operations, detailed further in section 7, aim to establish such conditions, particularly through providing justice and order as well as protecting marginalized clans from more powerful clans. For

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[413] Analysis at a not for attribution event.

[414] Its taxation comes in several forms, including annual and bi-annual demands for zakat. Different leaders oversee different forms of taxation and use different justifications for them. The author would like to thank one of the expert reviewers for this point.

[415] "A Losing Game: Countering Al-Shabab's Financial System" (Mogadishu: Hiraal Institute, October 2020), https://hiraalinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/A-Losing-Game.pdf; "Somali Concern at US Troop Withdrawal," BBC News, January 18, 2021, sec. Africa, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-55677077.

example, Fiidow claimed in a 2019 meeting with clan elders that al-Shabaab seeks to provide education, medical services, and humanitarian aid to address people's needs and problems.[416] Some of the group's propaganda depicts its fighters redistributing livestock[417] as part of its charitable giving.[418] The group's propaganda portrays itself as more   oriented towards the population than it is in practice. It currently relies heavily on coercion and violence, including in recruitment as discussed in section 7, which suggests that it is more concerned with public acquiescence than gaining active public support.[419]

In particular, the group's military operations hurt its ability to garner support. The group's December 2009 attack on a graduation ceremony caused widespread outrage.[420] And while al-Shabaab never claimed the attack, following its 2017 Zoobe intersection bombing, it was widely known to be responsible and Somalis poured into the streets to protest the deaths of the more than 500 people killed.[421] In late December 2019, the group conducted a VBIED attack on a junction outside Mogadishu that killed more than 80 people. Al-Shabaab did accept responsibility but claimed to have killed only 23 Muslims while all others killed were deemed acceptable apostate or foreign targets.[422] The group extended its "condolences" to those affected by the operation and stated, "under no circumstance, whatsoever, do we permit the unlawful spilling of Muslim blood," but

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[416] "Shabaab Alleges 635 Tribal Elders Repented for Facilitating Democracy, Extends Deadline for Others to Follow," SITE Intelligence Group, September 3, 2019, https://ent-siteintelgroup-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/Statements/shabaab-alleges-635-tribal-elders-repented-for-facilitating-democracy-extends-deadline-for-others-to-follow.html.

[417] One expert reviewer noted that the collection of the livestock from pastoralists 'owing' zakat of livestock appears to be done according to the Shafi'i legal school, perhaps because of the Shafi'i adherence predominant among Somalis.

[418] "Shabaab Continues Promoting Its Winning Hearts and Minds of Somali Civilians in Video Series on Charitable Giving," SITE Intelligence Group, December 20, 2019, https://ent-siteintelgroup-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/Statements/shabaab-continues-promoting-its-winning-hearts-and-minds-of-somali-civilians-in-video-series-on-charitable-giving.html; "Shabaab Video Focuses on Charitable Giving of Camels to Needy Somalis, Winning of Hearts and Minds," SITE Intelligence Group, December 17, 2019, https://ent-siteintelgroup-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/Statements/shabaab-video-focuses-on-charitable-giving-of-camels-to-needy-somalis-winning-of-hearts-and-minds.html; "Shabaab Documents Charitable Giving of Livestock to Somali Civilians in 5th Episode of Video Series," SITE Intelligence Group, September 15, 2020, https://ent-siteintelgroup-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/Statements/shabaab-documents-charitable-giving-of-livestock-to-somali-civilians-in-5th-episode-of-video-series.html.

[419] Interview with former Somali government official, July 2021, Virtual.

[420] Maruf and Joseph, *Inside Al-Shabaab*, 141.

[421] Alastair Leithead, "Anger over Mogadishu Bomb Attack Boils over into Streets," *BBC News*, October 19, 2017, sec. News, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-41680829.

[422] "Targeting the Turkish Convoy."

quickly followed up with its justification for the attack.[423] Nonetheless, again Somalis protested the group's indiscriminate targeting.[424] The group's unwillingness to claim its most condemned attacks and its apology, of sorts, may indicate that the group maybe becoming more sensitive to these reactions. The subsequent decline in al-Shabaab's large-scale suicide operations may reflect the public backlash to the 2017 Zoobe bombing.

PERSONAL SECURITY

Some, but not all, al-Shabaab leaders have a core interest in their personal security. While personal security may appear to be an obvious core interest, at least some al-Shabaab leaders have embraced the notion of becoming a martyr and do not expect to survive.[425] Others have gone to great lengths to survive. During the heightened U.S. drone campaign under the Trump Administration, al-Shabaab leaders made strenuous efforts to avoid detection. As noted, some even signaled an interest in talks with other actors or backchannels of communication, which might have been linked to concerns for their own safety. However, there is insufficient information to clearly delineate which leaders are ideologically disposed to martyrdom and which are intent on survival.

AL-SHABAAB AS AN AL-QAIDA AFFILIATE: CONFLICTING RHETORIC AND ACTION

One conflict between al-Shabaab's rhetoric and its interests is the group's highlighting of al-Qaida's global agenda while remaining operationally focused on Somalia.[426] Despite publicly adhering to and extolling al-Qaida's global jihadist ambitions, the group has initiated only one known attack outside of East Africa: its failed plan to train a pilot for a 9/11-style attack inside the U.S.[427] Even still, this attack, like its operations in Uganda, Kenya, Djibouti, and attempted attacks in Ethiopia, may have been aimed at least in part at compelling the withdrawal of foreign forces from Somalia – in this case, U.S. forces.

Further, al-Shabaab's "Al Quds (Jerusalem) shall never be Judaized" campaign highlights how al-Shabaab pays lip service to al-Qaida's agenda while remaining focused on Somalia. Al-Shabaab has initiated several attacks which it claims were connected to the

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[423] "Targeting the Turkish Convoy."

[424] "Somalia Attack: Demonstrations Held in Mogadishu," *BBC News*, January 2, 2020, sec. Africa, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-50971759.

[425] Interview with scholar 2, July 2021, Virtual.

[426] Interview with international think tank analysts 2, July 2021, Virtual.

[427] U.S. Department of Justice, "Kenyan National Indicted For Conspiring To Hijack Aircraft On Behalf Of The Al Qaeda-Affiliated Terrorist Organization Al Shabaab," Department of Justice, December 16, 2020, https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/kenyan-national-indicted-conspiring-hijack-aircraft-behalf-al-qaeda-affiliated-terrorist.

Trump Administration's decision to relocate the US embassy in Israel to Jerusalem. Specifically, al-Shabaab claimed its attacks on the DusitD2 hotel in Nairobi in January 2019, the Baledogle airport in September 2019, and a joint US-Kenya military base Camp Simba in Manda Bay in January 2020 as part of this campaign. The attack on Manda Bay is particularly telling since al-Shabaab's spokesman claimed the operation was "aiding the oppressed, repelling the transgressor and defending the sanctities of Islam" and carried out at Zawahiri's direction.[428] In another press release it called for Kenya to withdraw its forces from Somalia.[429] In his address to the attackers, Diriye emphasized that they should focus their efforts on destroying military hardware and stated Manda Bay was the base from

Image 11: An Al-Kata'ib Media Foundation video release following the Manda Bay attack.

which the U.S. conducted surveillance and staged attacks.[430] Al-Shabaab's operational priority thus appeared to be a desire to protect its insurgency in Somalia and compel the withdrawal of foreign forces rather than a terrorist attack in furtherance of al-Qaida's global agenda.

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[428] Ali Dheere, "Manda Bay Raid: Storming the U.S. Naval Base in Kenya," Jihadology, January 8, 2020, https://jihadology.net/2020/01/08/new-video-message-from-%e1%b8%a5arakat-al-shabab-al-mujahidins-shaykh-ali-ma%e1%b8%a5mud-rage-manda-bay-raid-storming-the-u-s-naval-base-in-kenya/.

[429] "Manda Bay Raid."

[430] "The Blessed Manda Bay Raid."

Section 6: Motivations

As a sprawling and multi-faceted organization, al-Shabaab members have an array of motivations. Nonetheless, there are some general common motivators, including ideology, religion, economic hardship, political or communal grievances, friendship, coercion, nationalism, and a desire for adventure, most of which are not mutually exclusive. Moreover, the motivation that initially attracted an individual to the group may not be – arguably is often not – the reason they stay.[431]

IDEOLOGY

There is an important subset of the group, especially in the senior and mid-level leadership, who are "purists" or at least genuine ideologues.[432] They are motivated by the desire to establish an Islamic state that implements *Sharia*.[433] As discussed in section 1, the current form of jihadism in the group's senior ranks is homegrown, rather than gained through experience overseas. And while few of the current generation of al-Shabaab leaders trained with al-Qaida, some have a long pedigree of jihadism within Somalia. As noted earlier in section 1, Diriye and Karate were both members of AIAI, as was the military leader, Ma'alim Osman, and likely more al-Shabaab leaders and commanders whose pedigrees are less clear.[434] Why these leaders initially joined AIAI is unclear; however, their experience in AIAI established the ideological foundation for their time in al-Shabaab.

RELIGION

Since a Salafi Muslim identity is vigorously promoted by the group, it is unsurprising that many claim to have joined al-Shabaab for religious reasons.[435] At times, the religious justification for joining is simple. For example, one defector explained how he joined after a friend in the group contacted him to urge him to "come fight for God" with al-Shabaab.[436] One study found that mid-level leaders initially claimed to have joined al-Shabaab for religious reasons, although they most often remained in the group because they believed they were standing for their beliefs, felt they were part of change, held a

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[431] Interview with international think tank analyst 1, July 2021, Virtual.
[432] Interview with international journalists, July 2021, Virtual.
[433] Interview with retired US official 1, April 2021, Virtual.
[434] Maruf and Joseph, *Inside Al-Shabaab*, 2018, 242–44; Maruf and Joseph, "No End in Sight," 17.
[435] Mohamed Haji Ingiriis, "The Anthropology of Al-Shabaab: The Salient Factors for the Insurgency Movement's Recruitment Project," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 31, no. 2 (February 17, 2020): 365, https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2020.1713548.
[436] Interview with international journalists, July 2021, Virtual.

sense of responsibility for their tasks, or were afraid of al-Shabaab retaliation.[437] On the other hand, foot soldiers most often stayed within the group in defense of Islam or felt they were standing for their beliefs, while they joined primarily for personal reasons rather than out of religious convictions.[438] Current members of the group who remain subject to the group's indoctrination would likely cite commitment to defense of Islam as a primary motivation, if not the sole motivation for their involvement in the conflict, even if that is not necessarily true.

ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY/HARDSHIP

For some, al-Shabaab is simply the best option available, given the lack of other opportunities.[439] With most of Somalia's population under 30 and unemployment for those under 30 at about 70 per cent, some al-Shabaab members see few alternatives.[440] Even army wages have been irregularly paid in the past,[441] although there have been some improvements in government pay systems.[442] But al-Shabaab's taxation system provides the group with a significant budgetary surplus, and it has been able to pay its troops a regular salary for years.[443] The opportunity for regular pay combined with lack of alternative employment apparently motivated 50 per cent of individuals interviewed in one RUSI study.[444] However, while economic vulnerability and the potential for stable

[437] Anneli Botha and Mahdi Abdile, "Al-Shabaab Attitudes Towards Negotiations," in *War and Peace in Somalia*, ed. Michael Keating and Matt Waldman (Oxford University Press, 2018), 464.

[438] Botha and Abdile, 464.

[439] Interview with scholar 2, April 2021, Virtual; Interview with international think tank analyst 1, July 2021, Virtual.

[440] According to the most recent estimates available from 2012. Conisia Shumba, Ahmed Hared Abdi, and Ibrahim Mohamed Hassan, "The Terminal Evaluation Report: Joint Programme on Youth Employment Somalia" (U.N. Development Program, November 28, 2019), 9, https://erc.undp.org/evaluation/evaluations/detail/12343.

[441] Harper, *Everything You Have Told Me Is True*, 32; Adriane Ohanesian, "In Photos: Tracking al Shabaab in Somalia," *France 24*, May 16, 2014, sec. Africa, https://www.france24.com/en/20140516-operation-eagle-somalia-fight-against-al-shabaab-african-union-al-qaeda.

[442] Nick Perry, "Under Siege, Somalia Moves to Reform Its Army, Pay Troops," *Agence France Presse*, July 25, 2019, https://au.news.yahoo.com/under-siege-somalia-moves-reform-army-pay-troops-020208149--spt.html.

[443] Roland Marchal, "The Rise of a Jihadi Movement in a Country at War. Harakat al-Shabaab al Mujaheddin in Somalia," *Sciences Po CERI*, March 2011, 18, http://www.sciencespo.fr/ceri/en/content/rise-jihadi-movement-country-war-harakat-al-shabaab-al-mujaheddin-somalia; "South and Central Somalia: Security Situation, al-Shabaab Presence, and Target Groups" (Copenhagen: Danish Immigration Service, March 2017), 29, http://www.ft.dk/samling/20161/almdel/uui/bilag/140/1730460.pdf; "A Losing Game: Countering Al-Shabab's Financial System" (Mogadishu, Somalia: Hiraal Institute, October 2020), 1, https://hiraalinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/A-Losing-Game.pdf; "S/2020/949," paras. 3–6.

[444] James Khalil et al., "Deradicalisation and Disengagement in Somalia: Evidence from a Rehabilitation Programme for Former Members of Al-Shabaab," Whitehall Report (RUSI, 2019), 14,

earnings may be a factor in recruitment, it is insufficient to fully explain recruitment patterns especially because al-Shabaab has had some success in recruiting "among the middle and middle upper classes."[445] Nonetheless, a subset of the rank and file of organization would probably leave if there was a viable alternative and a way out.[446]

POLITICAL AND COMMUNAL GRIEVANCES

Al-Shabaab has exploited political and communal grievances stemming from the clan system to recruit and motivate its fighters. Politically, some are motivated by frustration at the government's abuses and corruption. The government has not only failed to provide services and govern well, but it also engages in predation that can motivate individuals to turn towards al-Shabaab. Communally, al-Shabaab has exploited minority and marginalized clans' grievances to recruit whilst offering them a method of dispute resolution and justice through its courts.[447] On the government side, Somalia's 4.5 quota system allocates disproportionately fewer government positions to members of minority clans compared to the major clans, and these clans also cannot rely on the government to provide protection or deliver justice or other services. Inequitable distribution of resources to majority clans leaves marginalized clans without access to the few resources the government provides and with limited avenues to power.[448] In addition, since the effective collapse of the state in 1991, "might equals right," which means that majority clan members can rely on their militias while minority clan members usually cannot.[449] Al-Shabaab presents itself to minority clans that have been exposed to prejudice, subjugation, and violence from the major clans as a means of wielding power over such clans, retaliating against them or otherwise opposing their authority.[450] By bringing its militias under al-Shabaab, a minority or weaker clan can gain greater protection against rival clans.[451] In practice, al-Shabaab perpetuates traditional clan hierarchy, with

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https://rusi.org/publication/whitehall-reports/deradicalisation-and-disengagement-somalia-evidence-rehabilitation.

[445] Ingiriis, "The Anthropology of Al-Shabaab," 363; Roland Marchal, "Motivations and Drivers of Al-Shabaab," in *War and Peace in Somalia*, ed. Michael Keating and Matt Waldman (Oxford University Press, 2018), 315.

[446] Interview with retired US official 1, April 2021, Virtual.

[447] Ingiriis, "The Anthropology of Al-Shabaab," 365, 370–71.

[448] Hansen, *Al-Shabaab in Somalia*, 76, 80.

[449] Bronwyn Bruton, "Clan and Islamic Identity in Somalia," in *Clan and Islamic Identities in Somali Society*, ed. David Last, and Anthony Seaboyer (Toronto: Defence R&D Canada, 2011), 20–33. http://cradpdf.drdc-rddc.gc.ca/PDFS/unc157/p536953_A1b.pdf.

[450] Hansen, 76; Paul D. Williams and Bronwyn E. Bruton, "Counterinsurgency in Somalia: Lessons Learned from the African Union Mission in Somalia, 2007-2013," JSOU Report (MacDill Air Force Base, Florida: Joint Special Operations University, September 2014), 27, https://jsou.libguides.com/jsoupublications/2014.

[451] Interview with international expert, April 2021, Virtual.

minority clans often serving as foot soldiers and "cannon fodder" while dominant clans, most notably the Hawiye, enjoying significant power. Nonetheless, al-Shabaab presents itself to marginalized clans as an alternative, with some success. For example, a Bantu clan elder spoke about how al-Shabaab provided members willing to marry Bantu girls, something that sets the group apart and makes it an attractive option.[452]

Of note, the group's success in imposing itself among the dominant clans, and gaining their acceptance, may be reducing the prevalence of marginalized clan motivation.[453] "Al-Shabaab does not have to rely on marginalized clans as much when it has been accepted or has succeeded in breaking into the major clans."[454] For example, al-Shabaab has made significant inroads with the Habr Gedir/Ayr in Lower Shabelle, a clan that is strong in the Somali National Army. In that case, the clan appears to be hedging to secure its long-term interests by providing personnel to both sides.[455]

FRIENDS

Friends who are members of al-Shabaab can both provide motivation for joining and facilitate recruitment. Analyst Roland Marchal found that foot soldiers joined the group in part because they were following friends.[456] Further, Barrett found a small sample of mid- to high-level defectors joined through membership with another related group (such as Hizbul Islam) and because friends had joined or sought opportunity in al-Shabaab's ranks.[457] In one study, 64 per cent of interviewees, who were overwhelmingly fighters, joined the group with friends; additionally, 22 per cent proceeded to recruit friends.[458] Friends not only provide motivation to join the group but also provide the first point of contact when joining, thereby reducing practical hurdles to recruitment.[459]

FORCED RECRUITMENT

Some of al-Shabaab's recruitment is through the group's clan-based forced conscription, particularly of children, who are generally more ideologically malleable than adults. This

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[452] Interview with international think tank analyst 1, July 2021, Virtual.

[453] Interview with former Somali government official, July 2021; Virtual; Interview with international journalists, July 2021, Virtual.

[454] Interview with international think tank analyst 1, July 2021, Virtual.

[455] The author would like to thank one of the reviewers for this helpful example.

[456] Marchal, "Motivations and Drivers of Al-Shabaab," 314.

[457] Barrett, "Why They Fight and Why They Quit," 323.

[458] Anneli Botha and Mahdi Abdile, "Radicalisation and Al-Shabaab Recruitment in Somalia," ISS Paper (Institute for Security Studies, September 26, 2014), 3, 9, https://issafrica.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/Paper266.pdf.

[459] Khalil et al., "Deradicalisation and Disengagement in Somalia," 15. This pattern is true of many organizations and is not unique to al-Shabaab.

coerced conscription is presented as a transactional arrangement in which al-Shabaab 'requests' that clan leaders hand over children in areas it controls in return for the group bringing stability.[460] However, when communities have refused to provide the demanded recruits, al-Shabaab has threatened clans and abducted elders to compel them to hand over children.[461] In some cases, al-Shabaab has accepted payment of cash, weapons, or livestock to exempt some clans from handing over children.[462] In other instances, clans and families pay for children from poorer clans who are handed over to al-Shabaab in place of their own children.[463] This approach inadvertently strengthens al-Shabaab's recruitment among marginalized groups as affluent clans are better able to pay to exempt their children from al-Shabaab recruitment.

Children recruited in this way are then indoctrinated in al-Shabaab's educational facilities, which socializes these forced recruits into the group's belief system and tends to produce "deeply ideologically committed fighters."[464] During their education, boys have disappeared en masse from al-Shabaab madrasas,[465] and the group does sometimes deploy untrained children from its madrasas to fight.[466] Coercion, particularly this process of requiring clans to send a certain number of children to its indoctrination institutes, was named as the principal al-Shabaab recruitment method by several interviewees.[467] However, researcher Mohamed Ingiriis argued that forced recruitment to al-Shabaab is rare but occurs when "Al-Shabaab leadership feels increasingly threatened by external forces."[468] According to the UN Monitoring Group, from 2018 to 2019 al-Shabaab's forcible recruitment of children declined from 2,300 to 1,169, a decline it attributed to greater community resistance to al-Shabaab's recruitment campaigns.[469] Indeed, in addition to its extortive 'taxes,' these recruitment methods are one of the main causes of community uprisings and mass displacement.[470]

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[460] Marchal, "Motivations and Drivers of Al-Shabaab," 315.

[461] "S/2020/949," Annex 7.2.

[462] "S/2015/801," Annex 6.4 para. 54.

[463] "The Fighters Factory: Inside Al-Shabab's Education System" (Mogadishu, Somalia: Hiraal Institute, May 15, 2018), 3, https://hiraalinstitute.org/the-fighters-factory-inside-al-shababs-education-system/.

[464] "S/2019/858," para. 144; U.N. Security Council, "Resolution 2317, Somalia Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea Submitted in Accordance with Resolution 2317 (2016)," S/2017/924, November 2, 2017, Annex 11.2 para. 13, https://www.undocs.org/S/2017/924.

[465] "S/2015/801," Annex 6.4 para. 54.

[466] "The Fighters Factory," 3.

[467] Interview with international think tank analyst 1, July 2021, Virtual; Interview with former Somali government official, July 2021, Virtual. Sometimes clans also provide recruits to appease al-Shabaab.

[468] Mohamed Haji Ingiriis, "Al-Shabaab's Youth Recruitment Project," in *War and Peace in Somalia*, ed. Michael Keating and Matt Waldman (Oxford University Press, 2018), 342.

[469] "S/2020/949," para. 138.

[470] Interview with international think tank analyst 1, July 2021, Virtual, para. 138.

PRAGMATISM

Some join al-Shabaab simply because it is a practical choice in their local environment, for their family, or for their clan.[471] When al-Shabaab takes over an area, joining the group can be a practical decision in order to survive or gain greater power. In some instances, the group may not directly coerce individuals into joining, but the tacit threat of violence is nonetheless constantly present. Or when Somali or AMISOM forces withdraw and al-Shabaab enter into an area, individuals may see joining the group as the prudent option. Al-Shabaab provides a "predictable order," that while harsh, can be preferable to alternatives, thus creating incentives to join the group.[472]

PATH DEPENDENCY

Once the decision is made to join al-Shabaab, there is a high degree of path dependency, and a range of factors work against members leaving the organization. Not least, it is difficult to leave al-Shabaab and extremely dangerous to try to defect. The group does not allow people living in its territory to readily leave either. Not only is there substantial risk to any individual attempting to leave the organization, but also to their family. Thus, some members may not be genuinely motivated to remain in the organization; rather they stay in the organization because of the costs and risks associated with seeking to leave.[473] Numbers quitting the group are currently low, most likely because of overall conflict dynamics and the government's state of disarray.

NATIONALISM

Aside from religious convictions, nationalism, anger, a desire for revenge, and perceived humiliation were significant motivations for joining al-Shabaab's following the Ethiopian invasion. The ICU had been popular in Somalia, so when many Somalis reacted with nationalist anger when Ethiopia, long distrusted by Somalis, invaded in December 2006 to oust the ICU.[474] Al-Shabaab was the most effective opposition to the Ethiopians and the Ethiopian-backed Transitional Federal Government, and many Somalis joined the group for this reason.[475] This was a particularly strong motivation for members of the diaspora.[476] This motivation lost some traction with the Ethiopian withdrawal in 2009, but some recruits who had joined underwent al-Shabaab's indoctrination processes and

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[471] Interview with scholar 1, April 2021, Virtual.
[472] Interview with retired US official 2, April 2021, Virtual.
[473] Interview with scholar 2, July 2021, Virtual.
[474] Maruf and Joseph, *Inside Al-Shabaab*, 2018, 47–48.
[475] Hansen, *Al-Shabaab in Somalia*, 63; U.N. Security Council, "Resolution 1811, Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 1811," S/2008/769, December 10, 2008, para. 72, https://www.undocs.org/S/2008/769.
[476] Hansen, *Al-Shabaab in Somalia*, 66.

stayed with the group.[477] Additionally, the group's internal security and intelligence unit, the Amniyat, threatened and killed those who left.[478] Thus, many recruits may have joined for nationalist reasons, but remained in the group due to a range of other factors, including ideological and personal reasons. Al-Shabaab's propaganda continues to highlight the presence of foreign troops and interests in Somalia, attempting to draw on nationalist and xenophobic sentiments. However, it is not clear how effective this messaging is, and such motives are likely not as pronounced in current circumstances as other factors discussed in this section.

EMOTIONS AS MOTIVATORS

Emotions, discussed in more detail in section 4, are another component of individuals' motivations in joining al-Shabaab, and many are derived from factors and events described above. Marchal found that many Somalis joined al-Shabaab because of a desire for revenge "against foreigners and Somalis who destroyed their family or properties."[479] Relatedly, anger and fear were significant motivations for joining al-Shabaab, according interviews with individuals who had left al-Shabaab, thereby leading to hatred and desire for revenge.[480] Ingiriis found resentment about their own powerlessness and the desire to punish the Somalis and non-Somalis they see as exacerbating the conflict were two interrelated motivations for individuals joining al-Shabaab.[481] Similarly, Yusuf Ali found that recruitment stemmed from resentment of the looting of public resources by foreigners and Somali public officials.[482]

A SENSE OF PURPOSE/ADVENTURE

Not only negative emotions propel individuals to join al-Shabaab. 'Positive' sentiments connected to a desire to lead a meaningful or adventurous life can also be significant. Ingiriis characterized al-Shabaab as an "anti-politics machine," whereby individuals could seek to change their powerless position.[483] Similarly, Marchal found that the desire to achieve something tangible motivated some fighters as they sought "to prove that they are building a better world, not only destroying an unfair one."[484] Barrett found that in a sample of 27 defectors, 50 per cent of interviewees noted a sense of adventure as a

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[477] Hansen, 67.

[478] Hansen, 74.

[479] Marchal, "Motivations and Drivers of Al-Shabaab," 314.

[480] Botha and Abdile, "Radicalisation and Al-Shabaab Recruitment in Somalia," 4–5.

[481] Ingiriis, "Al-Shabaab's Youth Recruitment Project," 343–44.

[482] Hussein Yusuf Ali, "Youth Radicalization," in *War and Peace in Somalia*, ed. Michael Keating and Matt Waldman (Oxford University Press, 2018), 334.

[483] Ingiriis, "The Anthropology of Al-Shabaab," 366.

[484] Marchal, "Motivations and Drivers of Al-Shabaab," 316.

motivation for joining al-Shabaab, although this was not a motivation in the other two samples he reviewed. He suggested that al-Shabaab's ability to project itself as engaging in daring and exciting work attracted some young recruits.[485]

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[485] Barrett, "Why They Fight and Why They Quit," 323.

Section 7: Goals and Objectives

OVERALL GOALS

As noted above, Al-Shabaab's goal is to expel foreign forces, defeat the Somali Federal Government and Federal Member States, and establish an Islamic state in Somalia in accordance with its interpretation of Islam. In a 2019 statement, al-Shabaab's emir, Diriye, explicitly laid out al-Shabaab's goals. First, he named the implementation of *Sharia* "that accepts neither concession nor compromise." He then highlighted the goals of reviving an Islamic caliphate, confronting crusaders, establishing a unified Muslim society, and encouraging jihad and liberating Muslim lands from occupation. Other objectives he noted were to unify the Muslim ummah, ensure its self-sufficiency, and encourage the ummah to "liberate themselves from invading crusaders and their apostate allies."[486]

Expelling Foreign Forces

To achieve an Islamic state, the group has a predicate goal of expelling foreign forces from Somalia, the "confronting crusaders." Al-Shabaab rejects foreign intervention in Somalia and has done so since the United States backed a warlord coalition during the Islamic Courts Union era and the Ethiopian invasion of 2006.[487] With the Ethiopian withdrawal in 2009, the group simply shifted its goal to expelling the AMISOM troops that protected the Transitional Federal Government.[488] The expulsion of AMISOM and other foreign forces remains a primary objective for al-Shabaab, and the group uses its external attacks in an effort to compel troop-contributing countries to withdraw from Somalia and to punish them for their presence.[489] As noted above, alongside Ethiopia,

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[486] Ubaydah, "But Allah Will Complete His Light."

[487] Maruf and Joseph, *Inside Al-Shabaab*, 2018, 48–49.

[488] "Al-Shabaab Rebels Seize Town Close to Kenyan Border," *Nation*, November 29, 2009, sec. News, https://nation.africa/kenya/news/al-shabaab-rebels-seize-town-close-to-kenyan-border-616054.

[489] Bill Roggio, "Uganda Attack Carried out by Shabaab Cell Named after Slain al Qaeda Leader," *Long War Journal* (blog), July 15, 2010, https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2010/07/shabaab_cell_that_ca.php; Hansen, *Al-Shabaab in Somalia*, 147; Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Henry Appel, "Al-Shabaab Strikes in Djibouti," *War on the Rocks* (blog), June 3, 2014, https://warontherocks.com/2014/06/al-shabaab-strikes-in-djibouti/; "Al-Shabab Statement on Deadly Campus Assault in Kenya," *Washington Post*, April 4, 2015, sec. Africa, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/africa/al-shabab-statement-on-deadly-campus-assault-in-kenya/2015/04/04/4577ce52-dad9-11e4-8103-fa84725dbf9d_story.html; "Shabaab Media Unit Presents Detailed Report on Nairobi Attack, Suggests That Attack Bears Message to Jerusalem," SITE Intelligence Group, January 16, 2019, https://ent-siteintelgroup-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/Statements/shabaab-media-unit-presents-detailed-report-on-nairobi-attack-suggests-that-attack-bears-message-to-jerusalem.html.

Kenya has featured prominently as one of al-Shabaab's "crusader enemies" ever since it sent troops into Somalia to secure a buffer zone along the border in 2011.[490] The goal of expelling foreign forces also appeals to a sense of Somali nationalism, and it is unsurprising that mid-level al-Shabaab members believe that the withdrawal of AMISOM as "extremely important to resolving the conflict." Additionally, many al-Shabaab members view the withdrawal of the United Nations mission in Somalia as equally important.[491] Other non-AMISOM contributing countries al-Shabaab seeks to expel include the U.S. for its air strikes, its role in advising and training the Somali military, and its political backing for the SFG; Turkey for its support of the SFG and military presence; and the UAE for its economic interests in Somali ports and military bases on the Red Sea.

Establishing an Islamic State

The expulsion of foreign forces is not al-Shabaab's ultimate goal. The group seeks to establish an Islamic state in Somalia, which requires achieving multiple subordinate objectives. The first is a religious and ideological goal: to implement al-Shabaab's version of *Sharia* law. As mentioned above, although Somalia's constitution states that all laws are subordinate to *Sharia*, al-Shabaab rejects the government's interpretation and implementation. Diriye explicitly declared that *Sharia* should be implemented without "concession nor compromise." As noted in section 2 al-Shabaab's approach to *Sharia* law includes harsh punishments and justifies the killing of other Muslims, though there is local variation to its implementation of *Sharia*.[492]

Image 12: A procession of al-Shabaab fighters released by the group's media arm.

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[490] Ahmed Godane, "The Eidu Al-Adha Message 1433 From Ahmed Abdi Godane" (Labeik Media Foundation, November 2012), 4, https://www.scribd.com/document/116962700/Translation-of-the-Eidu-al-Adha-Message-1433-from-Ahmed-Abdi-Godane-English; Ubaydah, "We Bow To None Other Than Allah," 13.

[491] Botha and Abdile, "Al-Shabaab Attitudes Towards Negotiations," 467.

[492] Interview with international journalists, July 2021, Virtual.

Governing Somalia

The group's underlying political, social, and cultural goals are evident in its desire to govern territory. The group controls significant swaths of the rural areas of Somalia.[493] Al-Shabaab sees itself as a genuine alternative to the Somali government.[494] The group benefits from the multitude of grievances arising from the Somali government's corruption, ineptitude, and inability to provide security, justice, or services. Thus, one of the group's objectives is to provide services where the government has failed, demonstrating its relative legitimacy.[495] Al-Shabaab established institutions dedicated to promoting its governance objectives; in some cases, these are more effective than their government counterparts.[496]

One example of this is the group's shadow court system. These courts often handle land disputes and offer pathways to justice for any Somalis, but are especially useful for marginalized groups including women, who can access family courts.[497] The rulings purportedly adhere to the group's interpretation of *Sharia* law but also incorporate *xeer* (traditional Somali customary law). People who live both in and outside al-Shabaab's areas of direct control turn to al-Shabaab's courts for their consistent, clear, and what many say describe as equitable rulings, as compared to the official courts.[498] People also choose al-Shabaab courts because unlike those of the state, its rulings are enforced, since those concerned fear al-Shabaab punishment if they fail to abide by its courts' decisions.[499]

As noted, the group also has an extensive 'taxation' system that surpasses any of the Somali governments' taxation abilities.[500] The group's financial operations are highly institutionalized, with money flowing to al-Shabaab's central leadership which then reallocates the money, with little corruption.[501] Al-Shabaab taxes an array of sources, including transportation, businesses, and importers operating through the Mogadishu

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[493] Hussein Sheikh Ali, "The Future of the Al-Shabaab Conflict: Time to Rethink?" (The International Institute for Strategic Studies, December 11, 2019), https://www.iiss.org/events/2019/12/the-future-of-the-al-shabaab-conflict.

[494] Ubaydah, "But Allah Will Complete His Light."

[495] Bacon, "This Is Why Al-Shabab Won't Be Going Away Anytime Soon."

[496] Maruf and Joseph, *Inside Al-Shabaab*, 2018, 84–88.

[497] "S/2019/858," para. 35.

[498] Daisy Muibu, "Justice and Terror: Al-Shabaab's Informal Justice Mechanism," The Africa Center, *Africa Security Lab* (blog), January 5, 2019, https://africasecuritylab.com/justice-and-terror-al-shabaabs-informal-justice-mechanism/; "S/2019/858," para. 34.

[499] "S/2019/858," para. 34.

[500] "A Losing Game," 3, 5.

[501] U.N. Security Council, "Resolution 2385, Somalia Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea Submitted in Accordance with Resolution 2385," S/2018/1002, November 9, 2018, paras. 82–89, https://undocs.org/S/2018/1002.

port.[502] Al-Shabaab does provide some services to businesses in exchange,[503] although the main benefit for 'taxpayers' is protection from the group itself.[504] It forcibly collects zakat, the annual charitable contribution required for Muslims, as another form of taxation.[505] Al-Shabaab propaganda videos highlight its redistribution of wealth, often livestock, to the needy;[506] however, most of al-Shabaab's zakat collection bolsters its own coffers rather than being redistributed.[507]

Al-Shabaab also establishes schools in areas it controls. Al-Shabaab believes schools that follow a Western curriculum are an "intellectual invasion" meant to corrupt the youth.[508] Meanwhile its schools follow an al-Shabaab-approved curriculum set by the Da'wa department.[509] Some of the group's schools do provide education, including courses on Islamic education history, geography, mathematics, and Somali. All courses are taught through al-Shabaab's lens, and clans must contribute youths to the group's institutes before sending students to 'traditional' schools. Even in the group's traditional schools, al-Shabaab approved curriculum is taught, and children are sometimes fast-tracked into positions in al-Shabaab's Da'wa department.[510]

These institutes serve to bolster and indoctrinate al-Shabaab's child recruits. Children are taught the Koran as well as literature on jihad. Some are sent to training camps when they turn 15 and are, according to some al-Shabaab defectors, "among the most ideological and fanatical fighters."[511]

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[502] "S/2020/949," paras. 9–16; "A Losing Game," 3–4.

[503] This includes protection from other actors who attempt to extort them. When the Islamic State faction in Somalia tried to establish itself around Mogadishu, it targeted Somali businesses for extortion. The businesses complained to al-Shabaab and, al-Shabaab forcibly purged the Islamic State from the area. The author would like to thank one of the expert reviewers for this comment.

[504] "A Losing Game," 7–8.

[505] "S/2020/949," paras. 17–22.

[506] "Shabaab Continues Promoting Its Winning"; "Shabaab Video Focuses on Charitable Giving"; "Shabaab Documents Charitable Giving."

[507] "The AS Finance System" (Mogadishu, Somalia: Hiraal Institute, July 2018), 1–2, https://hiraalinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/AS-Finance-System.pdf.

[508] "Shabaab Threatens Educators Backing 'Western Curricula' in Somalia," SITE Intelligence Group, April 19, 2017, https://ent-siteintelgroup-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/Statements/shabaab-threatens-educators-backing-western-curricula-in-somalia.html.

[509] "Shabaab Promotes Its Educational Curricula in Controlled-Areas Despite Alleged U.S. Attempts to Undermine Them," SITE Intelligence Group, March 19, 2019, https://ent-siteintelgroup-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/Statements/shabaab-promotes-its-educational-curricula-in-controlled-areas-despite-alleged-u-s-attempts-to-undermine-them.html.

[510] "The Fighters Factory," 4.

[511] "The Fighters Factory," 3.

The group has also engaged in some efforts beyond primary education. There are reports that al-Shabaab-affiliated universities and Islamic charities help the best al-Shabaab students to study abroad in Sudan, Pakistan, Malaysia, and elsewhere.[512]

Finally, al-Shabaab seeks to intervene in clan disputes to prove it can resolve these conflicts.[513] Indeed, al-Shabaab stated in an October 2020 press release on its clan mediation efforts that it "is keen to solve the problems and differences that arise between the tribes, and it has shown remarkable success in settling decades-long disputes among them."[514] The group sees its mediation of clan disputes as central to its ability to establish a unified Islamic state.

Expanding the Caliphate

Al-Shabaab has a further, secondary goal, which is to expand its Islamic state beyond Somalia. Diriye's call to liberate Muslim lands and encourage jihad relates most immediately to the regions of "Greater Somalia," where al-Shabaab is already working to recruit and operate. Some within al-Shabaab have goals that go far beyond East Africa, although this is likely a minority. This subset of al-Shabaab adherents seeks to spread its Islamic state to connect all parts of al-Qaida's imagined caliphate. Al-Shabaab has held global ambitions since its founding as an independent group and confirmed its aims by becoming an al-Qaida affiliate in 2010. Still, overall, the group's goal of expanding its areas of territorial control is long-term and abstract. Consequently, its rhetoric on its broader global and regional goals is incoherent and contradictory.[515] In reality, the goals beyond Somalia are a distant second, and should al-Shabaab achieve its goals in Somalia, it would likely to consumed by trying to run its state, manage internal divisions, and respond to external threats.

One caveat is that, as noted in section 2, al-Shabaab's propaganda and operations have increasingly targeted the northeast and coastal regions of Kenya, potentially reflecting an increased interest in liberating these areas from Kenyan "occupation." Operationally, the group has been successful in exporting its strategy to Kenya: initiating cross-border attacks, taking control of highways, collecting taxes, and briefly taking control of towns. According to the governor of Mandera county, al-Shabaab currently controls more than

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[512] The author would like to thank one of the expert reviewers for this point.

[513] Ubaydah, "And the Honorable Journey Continues."

[514] "In Hearts and Minds Effort, Shabaab Boasts of Settling Dispute Between Conflicting Tribes in Southern Somalia," SITE Intelligence Group, October 6, 2020, https://ent-siteintelgroup-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/Statements/in-hearts-and-minds-effort-shabaab-boasts-of-settling-dispute-between-conflicting-tribes-in-southern-somalia.html.

[515] The author thanks one of the expert reviewers for this point.

half of Northern Kenya and over 60 per cent of the territory in Mandera county.[516] Between Jaysh-Ayman and al-Hijra, discussed above, and its activities in Mandera Country, al-Shabaab has extended into most Muslim areas of Kenya.[517]

If al-Shabaab genuinely views these areas to be under Kenyan occupation, as it claims, it may include the northeastern and coastal regions in its more immediate goals. This would mean al-Shabaab seeks more than the withdrawal of Kenyan forces from Somalia. The group's propaganda has demanded that the Kenyan government stop oppressing its Muslim population, which it argues are not equally protected by the Kenyan government despite its claims to be a democracy, and, paradoxically, provide security before al-Shabaab will stop attacking in Kenya.[518] Yet, the group's successes reinforce its rhetoric. Al-Shabaab may be focusing on where it can operate freely rather than believing these regions are essential, near-term components of the Islamic state they are seeking to establish.

HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS

Many of the group's goals and objectives have historical connections to earlier groups. AIAI, formed in the 1980s, had the goal of establishing an Islamic state in "Greater Somalia" under *Sharia* law. It established a military force following the state collapse in 1991 and clashed with clan militias and warlords before carving out an area to govern alongside locals in Luuq in the Gedo region. It provided some forms of governance to locals in Luuq, including courts, schools, and a police force. But it struggled to balance its ostensibly pan-clan goals with clan considerations in an area heavily influenced by the Marehan clan.[519] Ethiopia grew concerned about the growing power of AIAI, particularly after some elements of the group conducted attacks in Ethiopia, and it conducted a military offensive in Gedo to oust the group.[520] Despite its eventual downfall, AIAI provided much of the underpinning for al-Shabaab's goals and objectives as many of al-Shabaab's future leaders were AIAI members. However, its goals were more clearly nationalist and limited to Somalia than al-Shabaab's, though AIAI's goals did extend to the Somali-dominated region of Ethiopia and included several attacks in Addis Ababa

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[516] Ali Roba, "Mandera Is at Risk of Being under Shabaab," *The Standard*, January 12, 2021, sec. Opinion, https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/amp/opinion/article/2001399769/mandera-is-at-risk-of-being-under-shabaab.

[517] The author thanks one of the expert reviewers for this point.

[518] "Manda Bay Raid"; "Shabaab Issues Statement on Garissa."

[519] Ken Menkhaus, "Political Islam in Somalia," *Middle East Policy* 9, no. 1 (December 17, 2002): 112, https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-4967.00045.

[520] Menkhaus, 113.

during the 1990s.[521] Despite enticement from al-Qaida, AIAI rejected the idea of connecting its goals to al-Qaida's global agenda and refused to attack U.S. forces in Somalia.[522] Al-Shabaab's al-Qaida affiliate status means the AIAI's successor group is more receptive to goals that extend beyond the borders of the Somali state.

The Islamic Courts Union (ICU) also influenced al-Shabaab since the latter emerged as one of several militias for the umbrella group. Islamic courts emerged in the wake of the state collapse in response to a lack of security and rule of law.[523] The earliest instances of Islamic courts operated within the area of influence of a single clan or sub-clan, and thus could not enforce rulings across clan lines. A coalition of cross-clan courts emerged in 2000 only to have its influence undercut by the formation of the Transnational National Government, another unsuccessful attempt to forge a central government.[524] Then the ICU formed in 2004 as a cross clan coalition of Islamic courts in response to challenges from warlords and associated businessmen.[525] By mid-2006 it had ousted a hastily formed alliance of warlords from Mogadishu, achieving its goal of establishing security through Islam and becoming to first force to control Mogadishu since the collapse of the state.[526] Al-Shabaab coalesced as a collection of the ICU's most radical elements and gained prominence as a faction within the ICU. Al-Shabaab leaders held some senior positions in the ICU and exerted disproportionate influence because of their cross-clan and well-trained militia.[527] Al-Shabaab's experience in the ICU helped the group's leadership to unite, and when al-Shabaab became independent, it rejected the ICU's nationalist stance and its willingness to negotiate with secular parties.[528]

 It was from this historical foundation of AIAI and the ICU that al-Shabaab emerged, first as a major anti-Ethiopian insurgent group, then as a quasi-state, eventually developing into the powerful hybrid entity it is now: part insurgent group, part terrorist organization, part shadow government, and part mafia. Elements of these foundations

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[521] "Somalia's Islamists," Africa Report (Nairobi/Brussels: International Crisis Group, December 12, 2005), https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/somalia/somalias-islamists.

[522] Clint Watts, Jacob Shapiro, and Vahid Brown, "Al-Qa'ida's (Mis)Adventures in the Horn of Africa," Harmony Project (Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, July 2, 2007), 40–41, https://ctc.usma.edu/al-qaidas-misadventures-in-the-horn-of-africa.

[523] Menkhaus, "Political Islam in Somalia," December 17, 2002, 116.

[524] Cedric Barnes and Harun Hassan, "The Rise and Fall of Mogadishu's Islamic Courts," *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 1, no. 2 (July 1, 2007): 153, https://doi.org/10.1080/17531050701452382.

[525] "Somalia's Islamists," Africa Report (Nairobi/Brussels: International Crisis Group, December 12, 2005), 21-22, https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/somalia/somalias-islamists.

[526] Barnes and Hassan, 153–55.

[527] Hansen, *Al-Shabaab in Somalia*, 36–37; Marchal, "The Rise of a Jihadi Movement," 16–17.

[528] Hansen, *Al-Shabaab in Somalia*, 57, 63.

remain part of the group, ranging from the antipathy towards Ethiopia to its relatively effective provision of justice.

Section 8: Views on Dialogue and Negotiations

Since an early point, the group's rhetoric has conveyed hardline opposition to negotiations, particularly with the Somali government. Indeed, in the current environment, the prospects for al-Shabaab to engage in negotiations to resolve the conflict are not good. The Somali government is weak, divided, and lacks credibility.[529] A desire to negotiate is seen, perhaps unjustifiably, as an indication of weakness, and al-Shabaab sees itself, with justification, as being in a strong position.[530] At present, it would likely only be interested in a "U.S.-Taliban-like" deal, in which international actors would agree to leave Somalia in exchange for minimal assurances about not conducting attacks in third countries.[531] It might see such an agreement as an interim step towards acquiring power, especially in light of developments in Afghanistan.[532] Indeed, the Taliban's success could have a significant impact on the leadership's views on negotiations. At a minimum, the group needs to feel a sense of weakness or vulnerability to be seriously interested in negotiations to resolve the conflict. That may depend on the emergence on dynamics approximating to a mutually hurting stalemate.[533]

Image 13: U.S. Envoy for Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad and Afghan Taliban co-founder Abdul Ghani Baradar shake hands after signing the Doha Agreement in Qatar in February 2020. Photo: BBC News

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[529] Interview with international think tank analyst 1, July 2021, Virtual.

[530] Interview with former Somali government official, July 2021, Virtual; Interview with scholar 2, July 2021, Virtual.

[531] Interview with former US military officer, April 2021; Virtual; Interview with retired US official 2, April 2021, Virtual; Interview with former Somali government official, July 2021, Virtual.

[532] Interview with retired US official 1, April 2021, Virtual.

[533] Interview with scholar 2, April 2021, Virtual; Interview with scholar 2, July 2021, Virtual; Interview with retired US official 2, April 2021, Virtual. This analysis factors in the Somali government's position as well. In the current environment, both al-Shabaab and the Somali government benefit from the conflict, while the Somali people suffer. The Somali government gets substantial international aid and attention because of the al-Shabaab threat. It also does not currently view al-Shabaab as its primary threat.

However, al-Shabaab is not as opposed to negotiations as its rhetoric or current stance would suggest. There have been confidential expressions of interest in negotiations from senior figures of the organization.[534] There are also more pragmatic and clan-oriented elements of the group that would be receptive to negotiations, if they were permitted by the leadership.[535]

With regard to issues short of conflict resolution, the group has demonstrated a degree of pragmatism in engaging in negotiations on specific or local level issues. According to some reports in Kenyan news media, al-Shabaab and the Kenyan government also negotiated through Kenyan-Somali clan elders for the release of two hostages, Edward Mule Yesse and Fredrick Irundu Wainaina.[536] The group has been and will likely continue to be receptive to negotiations on issues such as improving humanitarian access or reducing harm to civilians.[537] However, the group's willingness to allow humanitarian aid varies on a case by case basis depending on whether it has something to gain or lose with affected communities.[538] Civilian causalities are a problem for the group so there may be mileage in negotiations on that issue.[539] The group might even be open to a ceasefire if it saw such a pause as beneficial to its operations.[540] Even in its current position of strength, al-Shabaab may be receptive to confidence building dialogue that can help facilitate future negotiations.[541]

BOTTOM LINES, REDLINES, AND AREA FOR CONCESSION

The group is highly unlikely to accept a negotiated settlement if it derives less power and influence than it has at the time of any negotiations.[542] Thus, what al-Shabaab might be willing to accept will depend on the group's circumstances at the time of negotiations. At present, for example, al-Shabaab would at least look to secure the withdrawal of foreign forces coupled with a "Saudi Arabia like" scenario in which al-Shabaab controls religion, education, and policies about what is religiously permissible.[543] Al-Shabaab

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[534] Interview with international expert, April 2021, Virtual.

[535] Interview with scholar 1, April 2021, Virtual.

[536] Kipchumba Some, "Al Shabaab threatens to kill captives," Standard, January 27, 2013; Julius Kithuure, "Kenya: Edward Mule Yesse Free After 18 Months in Al-Shabaab Captivity," allafrica.com, August 2, 2013.

[537] Interview with scholar 2, July 2021, Virtual; Interview with scholar 2, April 2021, Virtual; Interview with international expert, April 2021, Virtual; Interview with retired US official 2, April 2021, Virtual.

[538] The author would like to thank one of the expert reviewers for this point.

[539] Interview with international think tank analyst 1, July 2021, Virtual.

[540] Interview with former US military officer, April 2021, Virtual.

[541] Interview with scholar 2, April 2021, Virtual.

[542] Interview with international journalists, July 2021, Virtual.

[543] Interview with former Somali military official, July 2021, Virtual; Interview with international expert, April 2021, Virtual.

would probably not accept having to earn such a role through elections.[544] Above all, the group's redline for negotiations is the withdrawal of foreign forces, on which it will not compromise.[545] The organization may also have a hardline position on the application of *Sharia* law, but "the devil is in the details" in terms of what aspects of *Sharia* law it will insist upon.[546] At present, there is significant local variation in how *Sharia* is implemented in the places al-Shabaab controls, a dynamic the group also grappled with during its period as a quasi-government.[547]

VIEWS ON NEGOTIATING WITH THE GOVERNMENT

In principle, al-Shabaab rejects all negotiations with the government, and as noted in section 2, views the government as apostates. On several occasions in the past, the group spurned dialogue with the government. As discussed in section 7, it emerged as an organization independent from the Islamic Court Union in part because of the Union's willingness to negotiate with the Transitional Federal Government and secular warlords. Godane rejected negotiations as early as June 2008 in one of his first statements as emir when he stated, "there is no dialogue or negotiations with the ignorant secularists, nationalists, and all apostates."[548] In early 2009, Islamic scholars approached al-Shabaab's leadership to facilitate negotiations with Sheikh Sharif's new government. Three prominent al-Shabaab figures, Mukhtar Robow, Zakariya Hersi, and Abdullahi Yare, supported the idea while Godane, Ibrahim al-Afghani, and Mahad Karate opposed it. Reflecting his increasingly authoritarian leadership style, Godane subsequently barred al-Shabaab from engaging in negotiations with the government.[549] He even released a statement that July stating that "it's not allowed to hold meetings and negotiations with people who have apostated [sic]."[550]

Today, all the leaders who had supported negotiations with the government in 2009 are no longer al-Shabaab members.[551] And the group continues to publicly reject

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[544] Interview with former US military officer, April 2021, Virtual.

[545] Interview with scholar 2, April 2021, Virtual; Interview with international expert, April 2021, Virtual; Interview with scholar 4, July 2021, Virtual.

[546] Interview with former Somali government official, July 2021, Virtual.

[547] Interview with international journalists, July 2021, Virtual.

[548] Paz, "The Youth Are Older."

[549] Maruf and Joseph, *Inside Al-Shabaab*, 2018, 107–8.

[550] "Shabaab Leader Tells Somalis to Prepare for Islamic State."

[551] Robow fled from Godane's purge in 2013 and defected to the government in 2017, Hersi defected to the government in 2014 and was sidelined a year earlier. According to one source Abdullahi Yare also went by the alias Abdullahi Haji Da'ud and had served as an Amniyat leader. An individual identified as Abdullahi Haji Da'ud—and named as an al-Shabaab commander and former Amniyat leader—was killed in a US airstrike in 2016. Still Abullahi Yare remains on the US State Department Rewards for Justice website and thus may still be alive. "Somali Insurgent Leader Robow Defects to Government: Military,"

negotiations: in 2018, the group's spokesman called negotiations "more dangerous than the weapons of mass destruction," and said they served only to divide Muslims and empower moderate groups.[552]

Yet, there have been recurrent reports of interest in negotiations. Some al-Shabaab leaders were open to negotiations with the government following the December 2009 attack on the Hotel Shamo that cost the group significant public support and stoked internal divisions.[553] In 2011 and 2015, al-Shabaab discreetly and indirectly explored possible de-escalation or ceasefire prior to political talks with the government, which ultimately never took place. Comparable, cautious, indirect outreach reportedly took place in 2016–2017.[554]

The attempted dialogue in 2009 illustrates the challenges involved in convening talks. According to one Islamic scholar involved, dialogue stalled because of al-Shabaab's two bottom lines. First, al-Shabaab refused to step back from its *takfir* ideology, which provided justification for labelling the government apostates. Second, the group required that AMISOM withdraw, a demand the intermediaries refused.[555] Indeed, in response to questions about why the group did not negotiate with Sheikh Sharif's government, Ali Dheere stated that al-Shabaab rejected the government's interpretation of *Sharia* and Sheikh Sharif's cooperation with "the Crusaders." He continued "there is to be no truce with him; it is either war or shameful peace."[556] However, the group's former hardline emir, Godane, was killed and replaced in 2014, and, as discussed in section 2, the group was more ideologically dogmatic at that time than it is at present.

Reuters, August 13, 2017, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-somalia-defection-idUSKCN1AT09P; "Al-Shabab Militant Zakariya Ahmed Ismail Hersi 'Surrenders,'" *BBC News*, December 27, 2014, sec. Africa, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-30611758; Muhyadin Ahmed Roble, "Targeting Al-Shabaab's Leadership as Government Offensive Gains Ground," *Jamestown Terrorism Monitor* 10, no. 16 (August 10, 2012), https://jamestown.org/program/targeting-al-shabaabs-leadership-as-government-offensive-gains-ground/; "Statement by Pentagon Press Secretary Peter Cook on U.S. Airstrike in Somalia," U.S. Department of Defense, June 1, 2016, https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Releases/Release/Article/788062/statement-by-pentagon-press-secretary-peter-cook-on-us-airstrike-in-somalia/; "Rewards for Justice - Wanted for Terrorism - Abdullahi Yare," Rewards for Justice, accessed May 18, 2021, https://rewardsforjustice.net/english/abdullahi_yare.html.

[552] As quoted in Harun Maruf, "After Taliban, Will Al-Shabab Negotiate?," *Voice of America*, March 2, 2020, sec. Africa, https://www.voanews.com/africa/after-taliban-will-al-shabab-negotiate.

[553] Maruf and Joseph, *Inside Al-Shabaab*, 2018, 142.

[554] Confidential source

[555] Maruf.

[556] "Shabaab Releases Part 1 of Spokesman's Answers to Jihadists' Questions," SITE Intelligence Group, August 24, 2012, https://ent-siteintelgroup-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/Multimedia/shabaab-releases-part-1-of-spokesmans-answers-to-jihadists-questions.html.

Currently, there are numerous informal channels of communication between the Somali government and al-Shabaab. As noted in sections 3 and 4, many families have some members in al-Shabaab and others in the Somali government as a hedging strategy. In addition, al-Shabaab has deeply penetrated the government, and individuals can work for al-Shabaab at times without being fully committed members or because of coercion. The group allegedly has ties with senior government officials. The lines delineating actors in the conflict are blurry and fluid, of which the group's leaders are well aware.

VIEWS ON NEGOTIATING WITH SOMALI SOCIETY

Al-Shabaab has extensive experience negotiating with elements of Somali society, specifically clan elders and businessmen, who, unlike the government, have legitimacy for many in Somali society, including in al-Shabaab.[557] Additionally, al-Shabaab needs at least the tacit support of these two groups to govern and operate; thus, it is willing to engage in dialogue with and sometimes make concessions to them.[558] For their part, clan elders have played a role in negotiating with al-Shabaab to ensure the delivery of aid, arranging temporary truces or the release of hostages.[559] In at least one case clan elders prevented al-Shabaab from executing former Somali army soldiers.[560] Clan elders have also been a vehicle for defection; indeed defection through one's clan is more prevalent than defection through the Somali government.[561]

The business community negotiates with al-Shabaab on a regular basis to ensure access to areas under the group's control.[562] Indeed, in such cases both sides benefit: al-Shabaab generates revenue from 'taxing' businesses, and in exchange allows businesses to operate. Much of the business community's interactions with the group is under duress, and executives and business owners are threatened with their lives if they do not pay what the group demands. The clan elders and businessmen are likely best positioned to promote local–level negotiations with local or regional al-Shabaab commanders with

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[557] Interview with international expert, April 2021, Virtual.

[558] Mohammed Ibrahim Shire, "Dialoguing and Negotiating with Al-Shabaab: The Role of Clan Elders as Insider-Partial Mediators," *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 15, no. 1 (January 2, 2021): 15, https://doi.org/10.1080/17531055.2020.1863099; Harmonie Toros and Stephen Harley, "Negotiations with Al-Shabaab: Lessons Learned and Future Prospects," in *War and Peace in Somalia* (Oxford University Press, 2018), 442–43.

[559] Shire, "Dialoguing and Negotiating with Al-Shabaab," 12–13.

[560] Hamza Mohamed, "Somalia: Elders Negotiate with al-Shabab over Soldiers," *Al Jazeera*, November 24, 2016, sec. Features, https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2016/11/24/somalia-elders-negotiate-with-al-shabab-over-soldiers.

[561] The author would like to thank one of the expert reviewers for this point.

[562] Interview with international expert, April 2021, Virtual.

whom they have an established connection, rather than negotiations with top al-Shabaab leaders.[563]

VIEWS ON NEGOTIATIONS WITH AMISOM AND AMISOM CONTRIBUTING COUNTRIES

Al-Shabaab has a singular goal regarding AMISOM and its troop contributing countries: the full withdrawal of their troops. Publicly, al-Shabaab demands foreign troops' withdrawal as a precondition for negotiations rather than as a potential outcome. In a response to a question of why al-Shabaab rejected dialogue with AMISOM, Ali Dheere stated there was no basis for negotiations, claiming "I don't have other options but to deter the attacker and fight him until I remove him completely from this land, or he gets out with defeat and humiliation."[564]

Kenya reportedly attempted to negotiate with al-Shabaab over the presence of Kenyan troops in Somalia but was rebuffed by Godane. According to former al-Shabaab senior leader Mukhtar Robow, Godane immediately rejected Kenya's first two negotiation attempts. Then once Kenyan troops entered Somalia, Godane insisted that the group would not pursue a truce until Kenya left Somalia.[565] But because Kenyan forces refused to retreat to their border, al-Shabaab's view on negotiations has remained tied to the presence of Kenyan troops in Somalia. During the Westgate attack, al-Shabaab responded to speculation on negotiations to end the siege with a tweet stating it would not negotiate with Kenya if its forces remained in Somalia.[566] Since, al-Shabaab has warned of "perpetual war" if Kenya does not withdrawal its forces.[567]

VIEWS ON THIRD PARTIES

There are no fully neutral third-party actors in Somalia, though there are some potential third-party facilitators who might be acceptable to both sides, including Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Norway and potentially the United Nations. Researchers have found some al-Shabaab members were open to negotiations facilitated by Qatar or Saudi Arabia; however, members of the group overwhelmingly opposed the participation of foreign donors, neighboring countries, and AMISOM.[568] The group has a long list of perceived

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[563] Interview with international expert, April 2021, Virtual.

[564] "Shabaab Releases Part 1 of Spokesman's Answers."

[565] Maruf and Joseph, *Inside Al-Shabaab*, 2018, 215.

[566] Mark Gollom, "Kenya Attack: Why al-Shabaab Live-Tweeted the Assault," *CBC*, September 24, 2013, sec. World, https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/kenya-attack-why-al-shabaab-live-tweeted-the-assault-1.1865566; "Shabaab Rejects Negotiated End to Mall Standoff," SITE Intelligence Group, September 22, 2013, https://ent-siteintelgroup-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/Jihadist-News/shabaab-rejects-negotiated-end-to-mall-standoff.html.

[567] Dheere, "An Analysis of Events, Part 2"; "Shabaab Spokesman Tells Kenyan Government."

[568] Botha and Abdile, "Al-Shabaab Attitudes Towards Negotiations," 470–71.

foreign enemies, identified in section 2 above. As discussed, in the right conditions, senior leaders may be willing to negotiate with some of these actors, but they would not regard them as facilitators. Thus, while international buy-in will be necessary for the Somali government to initiate negotiations with al-Shabaab, countries with less direct and historic involvement in Somalia are likely more readily acceptable facilitators than states who are and have been directly involved in the conflict in support of the Somali government.

Conclusion

As the application of the eight components of the IMEP framework in this report revealed, al-Shabaab is a complex organization with a multi-faceted identity. Unlike many actors in the conflict, its leaders possess a shared set of core beliefs, particularly religious and political beliefs about the group's superiority to the Somali government, opposition to foreign interventions, and the need for an Islamic state in Somalia based on *Sharia* law. It has a long list of adversaries, including most importantly the Somali Federal Government, AMISOM, Turkey, and the United States. Nonetheless, al-Shabaab generally has accurate perceptions of its adversaries and its current position in the conflict. The group correctly assesses that it enjoys the upper hand in the conflict and that time is on its side. Its corresponding sense of smugness and self-satisfaction reflects the group's current circumstances and the downfall of its adversaries. In addition, the group has little to fear with the reduction in drone strikes.

Al-Shabaab's goal is to expel foreign forces, defeat the Somali Federal Government and Federal Member States and establish an Islamic state in Somalia in accordance with its interpretation of Islam. As a multi-faceted organization that combines insurgency, terrorism, shadow governance, and mafia-like conduct, some senior figures have become power-hungry or motivated by greed, while others remain ideologically motivated. While the core interests of key figures are probably a combination of the pursuit of power, acquisition of resources, and the group's ideological mission, they are also aware that the organization needs public acquiescence, if not its support, especially from clans that are important to al-Shabaab's revenue generation, recruitment, or territorial control.

The group's rhetoric has long conveyed hardline opposition to negotiations, particularly with the Somali government. Indeed, in the current environment, al-Shabaab has few incentives to engage in negotiations to resolve the conflict. The Somali government is weak, divided, and lacks credibility. A desire to negotiate is seen, perhaps unjustifiably, as an indication of weakness, and al-Shabaab sees itself as being in a strong position. At present, the group's leaders would likely only be interested in a "U.S.-Taliban-like" deal, in which international actors would agree to leave Somalia in exchange for minimal assurances about not conducting attacks in third countries. At a minimum, al-Shabaab leaders would have to feel a degree of weakness or vulnerability to be seriously interested in negotiations to resolve the conflict. That willingness may depend on the emergence of dynamics approximating to a mutually hurting stalemate.

However, al-Shabaab is not as opposed to negotiations writ large as its rhetoric or current stance would suggest. There have been confidential expressions of interest in dialogue

from senior figures in the organization and past steps towards negotiations. There are also more pragmatic and clan-oriented elements of the group that would be receptive to negotiations, if they were permitted by the leadership. The group has demonstrated a degree of pragmatism in engaging in negotiations on specific or local level issues. Even in its current position of strength, al-Shabaab may be receptive to confidence building dialogue that could help bring about negotiations in the future.

Some of these findings reflect well-known conventional wisdom about al-Shabaab, while others offer new insight into its current state. Overall, the IMEP offered a framework to understand al-Shabaab more deeply as an actor in the protracted conflict. It presents an alarming, albeit familiar, picture: a government focused on maintaining power and lacking legitimacy, an international community weary of the financial commitment and frustrated by the lack of political progress, and a militant organization that sees itself in a strong position with time on its side. While military pressure is essential, there is no viable military path to victory with a group as deeply embedded in society as al-Shabaab, not to mention little appetite among troop-contributing countries for such a commitment. At the same time, there are few indications of political progress on the horizon, such as the Somali Federal Government prioritizing al-Shabaab over its parochial struggles for power or improving governance in a way that will meaningfully discredit al-Shabaab's predictable order. While the prospects for a negotiated settlement are currently poor, there may be merit in at least beginning dialogue with al-Shabaab in an effort to alleviate the suffering of the Somali people. It is clear that continuing to pursue the same approach and hoping for different results will not weaken the group or bring the conflict closer to a resolution.

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