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Al-Shabab

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Introduction

Al-Shabab, or "The Youth," is an al-Qaeda-linked militant group and U.S.-designated **Foreign Terrorist Organization** fighting for the creation of a fundamentalist Islamic state in Somalia. The group, also known as Harakat al-Shabab al-Mujahideen, and its Islamist affiliates once held sway over Mogadishu and major portions of the Somali countryside, but a sustained African Union military campaign in recent years has weakened the group considerably. Still, security analysts warn that the group remains the principal threat in a politically volatile, war-torn state.

Al-Shabab's terrorist activities have mainly focused on targets within Somalia, but it has also proven an ability to carry out deadly strikes in the region, including coordinated suicide bombings in Uganda's capital in 2010 and a deadly raid on a Nairobi mall in 2013. Washington fears the group, which has successfully recruited members of the Somali-American diaspora, may orchestrate strikes on U.S. soil. In recent years, the United States has pursued a two-pronged policy in Somalia: providing funding, training, and logistical support to UN-backed African forces battling al-Shabab, while escalating counterterrorism operations including Special Forces and armed drones.

What are the origins of al-Shabab?

Somalia, one of the **most impoverished countries** in the world, has seen a number of radical Islamist groups come and go in its decades-long political tumult. The group analysts cite as al-Shabab's precursor, and the incubator for many of its leaders, is Al-Ittihad Al-Islami (aka Unity of Islam), a militant Salafi extremist group that peaked in the 1990s after the fall of the Siad Barre military regime (1969-1991) and the outbreak of civil war.

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AIAI, which sought to establish an Islamist emirate in Somalia, sprang from a band of Middle Eastern-educated Somali extremists and was partly funded and armed by al-Qaeda chief Osama bin Laden. Many of its fighters, including current al-Shabab commanders, fled the country and fought in Afghanistan in the late 1990s after being pushed out by the Ethiopian army and its Somali supporters. The group was designated a terrorist organization by the U.S. State Department in the days after the September 11, 2001 attacks.

In 2003, a rift developed between AIAI's old guard, which had decided to create a new political front, and youth members who sought the establishment of a "Greater Somalia" under fundamental **Islamic**

rule. The hardliners eventually joined forces with an alliance of sharia courts, known as the Islamic Courts Union, serving as its youth militia in the battle to conquer Mogadishu's rivaling warlords. Al-Shabab and the ICU wrested control of the capital in June 2006, a victory that stoked fears of spillover jihadist violence in neighboring Ethiopia, a majority Christian nation.

An Interactive Timeline of al-Shabab

What were the turning points for al-Shabab?

Ethiopia invaded Somalia in December 2006 and ousted the ICU from Mogadishu with little resistance. The intervention, which came at the request of Somalia's transitional government, had a radicalizing effect on al-Shabab, analysts say. After much of the ICU fled to neighboring countries, al-Shabab remained and retreated to the south, from where it began organizing asymmetric assaults, including bombings and assassinations, on conventional Ethiopian forces. Some experts say it was during these years that the group morphed into a full-fledged guerilla movement and gained control over large pieces of territory in central and southern Somalia.

The **Ethiopian occupation** [PDF] was responsible for "transforming the group from a small, relatively unimportant part of a more moderate Islamic movement into the most powerful and radical armed faction in the country," writes Rob Wise, a counterterrorism expert at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

Addis Ababa says the intervention was a "**reluctant response**" to calls by the ICU for a jihad against Ethiopia and renewed territorial claims against both Ethiopia and Kenya. It has stressed that **the intervention was supported** by the United States and the African Union, among others.

New Islamist-nationalist fighters swelled al-Shabab's ranks from around four hundred into the thousands between 2006 and 2008. This was also a period when the group's ties to al-Qaeda began to emerge. Al-Shabab leaders publicly praised the international terrorist network and condemned what they characterized as U.S. crimes against Muslims worldwide. The State Department designated al-Shabab a foreign terrorist organization in February 2008. Two years later, the group vowed to "connect the **horn of Africa jihad** to the one led by al-Qaeda and its leader Sheikh Osama bin Laden." However, it was not until February 2012 that al-Shabab's leadership formally **declared allegiance to al-Qaeda**.

In June 2010, al-Shabab seemed to make good on its promises of jihad with coordinated suicide bombings that killed seventy-four people gathered to watch the World Cup in the Ugandan capital of **Kampala**. It was the group's first terrorist attack outside of Somalia. "We are sending a message to every country who is willing to send troops to Somalia that they will face attacks on their territory," said a spokesman at the time.

Uganda was the first nation to send forces into Somalia in March 2007 under the African Union Mission in Somalia (**AMISOM**), charged with defending the transitional government. As of July 2013, Kampala maintained the largest contingent in the UN-backed force with more than six thousand personnel. Other AMISOM troops come from Kenya (5,500), Burundi (5,430), Djibouti (960), and Sierre Leone (850).

What are al-Shabab's objectives?

Many analysts say the group is not monolithic and its objectives vary. Writing in 2012, former CFR fellow and Africa expert **Bronwyn E. Bruton** described some of the cleavages that divide al-Shabab's

leadership, including competing clan loyalties and rifts between the group's nationalists intent on ousting AMISOM and the central government, and Gulf-sponsored radicals with transnational terror aims.

The group continues to threaten neighboring countries as well as Western interests in Africa. In January 2013, Ethiopian authorities arrested more than a dozen **al-Shabab-linked militants** allegedly plotting attacks in the country's east. And in September, al-Shabab fighters claimed responsibility for a raid on a **Nairobi mall**, holding hostages for days and killing dozens of non-Muslims and foreign nationals. It was the deadliest terrorist attack in Kenya since al-Qaeda's East Africa affiliate bombed the U.S. Embassy in Nairobi in 1998.

In areas it controls, al-Shabab enforces its own harsh interpretation of sharia law, prohibiting various types of entertainment, such as movies and music, the sale of khat (a narcotic plant often chewed), smoking, the shaving of beards, and many other "un-Islamic" activities. Stonings and amputations have been meted out as punishment on adulterers and thieves. According to international rights groups, al-Shabab often **kidnaps young boys** from school and forces them to fight and die in battle.

The group also violently persecutes non-Muslims, including Christians, and is a major threat to humanitarian and other international workers, according to the U.S. State Department. Several beheadings of so-called apostates have been recorded. Al-Shabab also is known to have desecrated the graves of those from other religious groups, including moderate Islamic clerics.

Who are the group's leaders?

Sheikh Hassan Dahir Aweys, who fought against Ethiopia as a colonel in the Siad Biarre regime in the 1970s, is reportedly al-Shabab's spiritual leader. He commanded the military arm of the AIAI, and then took over leadership of the ICU. In 2006, Aweys handed operational command of al-Shabab to a young Somali jihadi, Aden Hashi Ayro, who was killed in a **U.S. missile strike** in May 2008.

Ahmed Abdi Godane (aka Abu Zubayr), one of al-Shabab's founders, served as the group's top commander after Ayro's death. He was designated a global terrorist by the United States in November 2008.

In June 2013, Godane loyalists reportedly **killed two senior al-Shabab leaders**, Ibrahim al-Afghani and Moalim Burhan, in a shootout that analysts attribute to internal dissension. Prior to his death, al-Afghani reportedly penned a letter to al-Qaeda chief Ayman al-Zawahiri condemning Godane's harsh leadership style. That same month, Aweys, al-Shabab's elder statesman, surrendered to federal authorities in Mogadishu after **souring relations with Godane**. Sheikh Mukhtar Robow (aka Abu Mansur), who served as the group's second-in-command, also fell out of favor with the group, reportedly fleeing to southwestern Somalia where his clan is based.

In September 2014, the U.S. military confirmed it killed Godane in a targeted airstrike on an al-Shabab encampment in Somalia. The **White House stated** that the successful counterterrorism operation marked "a major symbolic and operational loss to the largest al-Qaida affiliate in Africa." Some terrorism experts believe the removal of al-Shabab's powerful, charismatic leader will prompt a power struggle in the militant group.

How is al-Shabab funded?

Counterterrorism experts say al-Shabab has benefited from several different sources of income over the years, including revenue from other terrorist groups, state sponsors, the Somali diaspora, charities, piracy, kidnapping, and the extortion of local businesses. Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Syria, Iran, Qatar, and

Eritrea have been cited as prominent state backers—although most of these governments officially deny these claims.

Domestically, the group built up an extensive racketeering operation in Kismayo after seizing control of the southern port city and its vibrant economy in 2008. The trade of charcoal, in particular, is essential to the city's commerce. However, a Kenyan-led assault on Kismayo liberated the port of al-Shabab forces in October 2012—a victory that many experts say strategically crippled the jihadi group.

However, a **July 2013 UN Security Council report** [PDF] says since late 2012 al-Shabab's illicit charcoal trading has continued in Kismayo and a number of southern ports where it operates, like Barawe, which the insurgent group controls. The UN estimates charcoal exports from Barawe alone likely net the group millions of dollars each month.

A 2012 report from the UN says that charcoal exports are a **component of a trade** that includes al-Shabab's importation of sugar, much of which then makes its way into Kenya illegally. Roughly 10,000 bags of **contraband sugar** worth hundreds of thousands of dollars may be smuggled into Kenya every day, according to the UN. In April 2013, Kenyan officials complained that al-Shabab operatives were attempting to infiltrate the country's **sugar trade**.

What areas does al-Shabab control?

Despite strategic setbacks inflicted by AMISOM forces over the past several years, al-Shabab remains in control of most of southern and central Somalia. The group's military strength is approximately 5,000 fighters, as it has "preserved the core of its fighting force," according to the July UN report. Analysts say the group's resilience is likely the result of significant support from local clans and the perception among elders that it remains a plausible alternative to corrupt institutions in Mogadishu.

Is al-Shabab recruiting Americans?

Al-Shabab has recruited members of the Somali-American diaspora in recent years, a trend the FBI has described as a top domestic terrorist threat. In particular, the group has attracted several radical volunteers from Minneapolis, Minnesota, which is home to the largest Somali population in the country. Young Minnesotans, such as **Shirwa Ahmed** and Farah Mohamad Beledi, the first two confirmed U.S. suicide bombers, traveled to Somalia to receive al-Shabab training and wage jihad.

Another prominent leader for al-Shabab was Omar Hammami (aka Abu Mansoor Al-Amriki), a native of Alabama, authorities say. However, Hammami reportedly fell out with the group and was **killed in a firefight** with al-Shabab militants in September 2013. Other Somali-American recruits have come from Ohio, California, Virginia, New Jersey, and New York, according to a list compiled by the **Anti-Defamation League**.

What is U.S. policy in Somalia?

Washington's primary interest in Somalia has been preventing it from becoming a refuge for terrorist groups like al-Shabab to plot attacks on the U.S. homeland and potentially destabilize the strategically significant Horn of Africa, where longstanding disputes among Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Somalia still fester. In recent years, U.S. officials have also been wary of collaboration amongst the militant Islamist organizations in the region, including al-Shabab, **Boko Haram**, **al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb**, and **al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula**.

The United States, stung by the loss of eighteen U.S. servicemen in the Battle of Mogadishu in 1993 (aka the "Black Hawk Down" incident), has largely relied on the use of proxy forces in Somalia in

recent years. Since 2007, analysts say Washington has provided more than half a billion dollars to **train and equip** African Union forces battling al-Shabab. Much of this indirect logistical support has been supplied on the ground by State Department-funded contractors, such as **Bancroft Global Development** and **DynCorp**.

Drone strikes and special operations raids on al-Shabab and al-Qaeda targets have rounded out the U.S. strategy. Military analysts have characterized the Pentagon's approach in Somalia as "**offshore balancing**," which emphasizes the use of U.S. air and sea assets in conjunction with support for local counterinsurgency proxies, such as AMISOM.

The Defense Department explains that it conducts lethal strikes against some al-Shabab militants, like Godane in September 2014, because these fighters are also determined to be members of al-Qaeda. As such, the Pentagon can target these individuals under the 2001 Authorization of the Use of Military Force, which Congress passed in the days after 9/11 to give the military broad authority to **pursue those responsible for the terrorist attacks**. However, legal analysts note that the Obama administration likely does not consider al-Shabab, as group, an al-Qaeda 'associated force' that it can broadly target.

In January 2013, the United States formally recognized the Somali government after a hiatus of more than twenty years. And while the U.S. has no embassy in Mogadishu, officials say Washington is likely to **expand its diplomatic presence** in 2014.

Additional Resources

The United Nations reports on **political and security developments in Somalia** [PDF] as of March 2014.

The Countering Terrorism Center at the U.S. Military Academy takes a deep dive into **al-Shabab's internal divisions**.

The American Enterprise Institute's Critical Threats initiative profiles **al-Shabab's leadership**.

The BBC looks at what motivates **Somalia Islamist militants**.

Writing in *Foreign* Affairs, Paul Hidalgo explains how **al-Shabab destabilizes Kenya**.

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