



REPORT

THE DECLINE AND FALL OF AL-SHABAAB? THINK AGAIN

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INTRODUCTION

*Mas abur buu dhalaa, aburkuna mas buu dhalaa.
(A snake produces spawn, and the spawn produces more snakes.)*

In the early hours of 2 April 2015, Al-Shabaab militants raided the Garissa campus of Moi University College in northeastern Kenya, killing at least 148 and wounding 79 more, mainly students. It was the worst terrorist attack in Kenya since the bombing of the U.S. embassy by Al-Qaida in 1998, surpassing even the Westgate Shopping Mall carnage of September 2013.

Some commentators have been quick to portray the Garissa operation as an act of ‘desperation’ by an organisation in decline.¹ Others have suggested that Al-Shabaab has changed tactics in order to emulate foreign jihadist groups (“deliberately evoking Boko Haram”)² or is positioning itself to join the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

Such impromptu analysis is not entirely without foundation: Al-Shabaab is undeniably on the military defensive in Somalia and there are very real pressures on the organisation to consider an affiliation with ISIS. But the Garissa operation was neither a sign of Al-Shabaab’s desperation, nor a new departure in terms of strategy or tactics: on the contrary, it was a manifestation of the group’s resilience, adaptability and strategic continuity.³

In recent years Al-Shabaab has been steadily ceding ground to African Union forces (AMISOM) and its Somali allies, while the ranks of its senior leadership have been depleted by deaths and defections – including the loss of ‘Amir’ Ahmed Abdi ‘Godane’ in an American airstrike in September 2014. Al-Shabaab’s new leader, Ahmed Omar Diriiye ‘Abu Ubeydah’, has taken the reigns of a movement that remains overmatched on the battlefield and deeply divided over strategy and tactics. Yet Al-Shabaab’s operational tempo inside Somalia, and its ability to strike beyond Somalia’s borders appears to remain intact.

Al-Shabaab’s resilience during this difficult period testifies to the group’s internal cohesion and discipline, as well as the new leadership’s commitment to organisational stability and strategic continuity – at least in the near term. Moreover, after roughly a decade of continuous operations, Al-Shabaab has developed sufficient leadership at all levels to be able to continue functioning under adverse conditions and to regenerate even after losses among its senior ranks. And Al-Shabaab’s decentralised command structure, together with its expanding regional presence, means that a successful strike against one branch of the movement does not necessarily impact its operations elsewhere.

Perhaps most importantly, Al-Shabaab is now well on its way to becoming a truly transnational organisation, merging with its Kenyan affiliate, Al-Hijra and attracting a growing number of followers and recruits from across East Africa. Although Somalia still remains Al-Shabaab’s geographic centre of gravity, its identity and its aspirations have transcended the movement’s Somali origins, transforming both the theatre and the nature of its ‘jihad’. Governments determined to counter Al-Shabaab’s expansion should resist the temptation to look for answers in Iraq, Syria and Nigeria, and focus instead on the stresses and fissures in their own societies – precisely the vulnerabilities that Al-Shabaab will seek to exploit as it propagates its toxic ideology throughout the region.

AL-SHABAAB AFTER GODANE

On 1 September 2014, Al-Shabaab ‘Amir’ Ahmed Abdi aw Mohamud ‘Godane (a.k.a. Sheikh Mukhtar Abdirahman ‘Abu Zubeyr’) was killed in a U.S. drone strike near the port town of Baraawe. His death was widely hailed as a serious blow to the group, with some observers even predicting that it spelled “the beginning of the end” of Al-Shabaab.⁴ But more than six months since Godane’s death, little seems to have changed. Al-Shabaab continues to operate freely across much of southern Somalia, harassing AMISOM forces and maintaining a steady rhythm of assassinations, bombings and complex attacks against Somali authorities. Beyond Somalia’s borders, the group has been as active as ever, keeping the entire region in a state of high alert.

Al-Shabaab’s fortitude in the face of such adversity represents a kind of coming of age for the movement. Nearly ten years since it emerged from the shadows to announce itself as a potent new party to Somalia’s complex civil conflict, Al-Shabaab has successfully weathered the might of far superior military forces, the loss of its primary sources of revenue, the steady attrition of its senior ranks through drone strikes and special operations, and persistent internal leadership and succession struggles. In the process it has matured as an organisation, cultivating a new generation of young jihadist leaders and fighters, all steeped in Al-Shabaab’s ideological creed and military doctrine and capable of replenishing the steady trickle of losses from the movement’s upper echelons.

Godane’s successor also deserves credit for Al-Shabaab’s perseverance. The new ‘Amir’, Ahmed Omar Diriye ‘Abu Ubeydah’, appears to have chosen a path of continuity, adopting and elaborating upon the vision and strategies put in motion by Godane, rather than trying to chart a new course. Under his stewardship, Al-Shabaab has continued to engage in asymmetrical warfare, relying on a combination of guerrilla tactics in rural areas and complex operations in major towns, including the Somali capital, Mogadishu. It has further decentralised command and control of its forces, empowering local leaders and commanders to plan and conduct operations, raise revenues and – where Al-Shabaab still controls territory – to administer populations under their control. And it has intensified its activities beyond Somalia’s borders to such an extent that Al-Shabaab is on the cusp of becoming a truly transnational organisation.

Leadership

Within a week of Godane’s death, Al-Shabaab had announced Diriye’s appointment as his successor.⁵ An enigmatic figure who has yet to make a single public statement, Diriye’s main credentials for the position appear to have been his family ties to Godane and his loyalty during the bitter and protracted power struggles that convulsed the top ranks of Al-Shabaab’s leadership between 2010 and 2013. In recognition of his dependability, Godane is rumoured to have penned a letter anointing Diriye as his successor in the event of his death. But Godane may also have had other, shrewder reasons for tapping Diriye as his successor: the belief that Diriye shared his vision of the future for Al-Shabaab and would therefore keep his legacy secure.

With the notable exception of Mukhtar Roobow, whose clan-based splinter group in Bay and Bakool regions remains steadfastly independent, Diriye has managed to keep Al-Shabaab united. But Diriye inherited a house divided, and his leadership has not gone entirely unchallenged: many senior Al-Shabaab figures had chafed at Godane’s ruthless and autocratic rule, and a number had consequently been imprisoned or banished to a form of ‘internal exile’. Others were killed or expelled during a violent purge by Godane loyalists in June 2013. Although Diriye reportedly pardoned many dissidents and has adopted a more consultative leadership style than his predecessor, his reforms seem to have revived some of the internal disputes that Godane believed to have been closed.

Diriye’s conciliatory leadership style and his adoption of a more devolved system of command and control has helped to prevent Al-Shabaab from splintering after Godane’s death. But his approach is not devoid of risk. With its lines of communication under pressure and its leadership hounded by unarmed aerial vehicles (UAVs), Al-Shabaab’s further decentralisation is likely to produce an increasingly multi-polar organisation, characterised by a larger number of autonomous sub-groups. Diriye’s continued leadership and the effectiveness of his forces are thus more than ever in the hands of Al-Shabaab’s junior leaders and rank and file, rather than its ‘Amir’ and putative leadership council, or ‘Shura’.

Affiliation

One of the first serious challenges confronting the new Amir has been the issue of Al-Shabaab's international affiliation. Even before Godane's death, tensions had surfaced within Al-Shabaab over whether to retain the movement's Al-Qaeda affiliation or to pivot into an alliance with the self-proclaimed Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). In the same public statement that named Diriye as Godane's successor, the group renewed its Bay'ah (pledge of allegiance) to Al-Qaeda and its leader, Ayman Al-Zawahiri⁶ -- an oath subsequently reaffirmed in video messages released by its media wing, *Al-Kata'ib*. While senior Al-Shabaab leaders, including 'Deputy Amir' Mahad Mohamed Ali 'Karatey' agitated in favour of an alliance with ISIS, Godane had steadfastly maintained his loyalty to Zawahiri. Since Diriye's accession, the debate has been re-opened.

In late February 2015, ISIS made its first public overture to Al-Shabaab in the form of an online "Message to Our Brothers in Somalia".⁷ The communiqué urged Al-Shabaab to pledge allegiance to ISIS, arguing that the movement's previous Bay'ah to Al-Qaeda was in fact a pledge to the cause of jihad and the Caliphate -- not to a single organisation. The message was signed by Hamil al-Bushra -- an "official semi-official" mouthpiece for ISIS, and even included instructions to Al-Shabaab as to how to announce its allegiance to ISIS.⁸

In early March 2015, clashes erupted near the village of Tooratorow in Lower Shabelle region, where militia loyal to dissident leaders Karatey and Omar Mataan confronted fighters aligned with Diriye.⁹ Accounts differ as to the precise nature of the dispute: while some observers maintain that Karatey continued to advocate a shift in favour of ISIS,¹⁰ others claim that it was Diriye who sought to change Al-Shabaab's affiliation -- chiefly to gain access to greater resources.¹¹

The clashes quickly subsided, but just weeks later the pro-ISIS lobby received a further boost when the vociferous, Kenya-based Al-Shabaab ideologue, Hassan Mahad Omar (better known by his online monikers 'Xasaan Xuseen' and 'Abu Salmaan'), urged Al-Shabaab to join the Islamic State.¹² Although his appeal had little immediate impact, Hassan seems determined to keep the debate alive while boosting his own reputation as a standard bearer of jihadism in Somalia and Kenya.

The advantages of switching allegiance are, in reality, moot. ISIS's relative proximity to Somalia, its access to arms and financial resources, and its global appeal all compare favourably with Al-Qaeda's remote, hermit-like leadership in the Afghan-Pakistan border areas. But the descent of Yemen into chaos portends a resurgence of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and -- from a geographic perspective -- an even more convenient partnership for Al-Shabaab. As if to drive this point home, in April 2015 AQAP seized the southern port of Mukalla, through which arms and other contraband flow freely between Yemen and Somalia. Moreover, if Al-Shabaab were to suffer further serious setbacks in southern Somalia, Yemen could provide the movement with strategic depth as well as a far more plausible refuge and training ground for its fighters than either Iraq or Syria.

Perhaps the most compelling argument for Al-Shabaab to align itself with ISIS is that young, radicalised Somalis from Europe and North America -- once a vital pool of potential Al-Shabaab recruits -- are now far more likely to travel to Iraq and Syria than to Somalia. An alliance with ISIS might revive Al-Shabaab's appeal for these young fighters, or at least persuade some of them to offer their skills and experience to Al-Shabaab once they've earned their jihadist stripes in the Middle East.

Whatever the pros and cons of a potential alliance with ISIS, the ongoing debate within Al-Shabaab is symptomatic of pre-existing tensions within the movement, rather than a new cause of division. Before ISIS's ascendance, disgruntled members of Al-Shabaab had few attractive choices: dissidence within Al-Shabaab was not tolerated and could lead to imprisonment or death. Defectors to Somalia's weak Federal Government faced either indefinite detention, humiliating public recantations, or execution by Al-Shabaab if caught. And breakaway commanders like Mukhtar Roobow were doomed to irrelevance, unable to attract either allies or sponsors. ISIS, however, has thrown disaffected elements of Al-Shabaab a potential lifeline, allowing them to cast parochial challenges to Diriye's leadership in ideological or even existential terms.

Strategy and Tactics

Long before his death, Godane had begun to adapt Al-Shabaab's strategy, tactics and organisational structure to the exigencies of asymmetrical warfare on the ground in Somalia. As AMISOM and its Somali allies pressed their sporadic offensive, Al-Shabaab avoided large-scale confrontations with a larger, better-equipped enemy and withdrew from the battlefield in good order, preserving its forces to fight another day. At the same time, Godane began to decentralise authority within Al-Shabaab, compensating for the growing challenges to command and control by empowering regional 'governors' and field commanders, while augmenting the role of the Amniyaad – the branch of Al-Shabaab responsible for intelligence, counter-intelligence and special operations.¹³

This reorganisation allowed Al-Shabaab to shift easily into the role of the rural guerrilla. In 2013-14, as Somali authorities and AMISOM extended their control over a growing number of major towns, the jihadists surrounded them and interdicted their access routes, placing some – like Buulobarde and Eel Buur – under a virtual state of siege. While its adversaries remain static in their bases, Al-Shabaab continues to operate freely in the countryside, fearful only of the occasional air- or drone-strike; in most urban centres extensive 'stay behind' networks conduct assassinations and suicide attacks under Amniyaad direction.

Diriye has adhered to his predecessor's strategy. Soon after Godane's death, in October 2014, Somali and African Union forces moved on the Al-Shabaab stronghold of Baraawe – the jihadists' most important remaining base in southern Somalia. Al-Shabaab ceded the town, largely without a fight, reorganising their operations around secondary hubs like Jilib, Diinsoor and Bardheere. But residents in Baraawe still live in a state of fear, as Al-Shabaab fighters routinely infiltrate the town by night and have conducted several IED attacks against government and AMISOM troops. Similarly, in garrison towns like Baidoa, Buulobarde and Qoriooley, which have been under joint government and AMISOM control for longer periods of time, residents report that the authorities control the day but that Al-Shabaab still rules the night.

Al-Shabaab's successful adaptation to more challenging circumstances is also manifest in the group's operational tempo. Since Godane's death in September 2014, Al-Shabaab has carried out more than 10 major operations involving PBIEDs, VBIEDs or complex attacks against targets that include Mogadishu's heavily fortified international airport, a United Nations convoy, two major hotels, and the presidential compound of the Interim Southwest Administration in Baidoa. Meanwhile, AMISOM offensive operations have once again ground to a halt, allowing Al-Shabaab respite to regroup, plan further attacks, and potentially even retrieve the strategic initiative.

Since becoming 'Amir', Diriye's actions suggest that he is inclined to decentralise Al-Shabaab even further – possibly because he anticipates even greater strain on command and control when AMISOM resumes offensive operations against remaining jihadist strongholds. While this may further enhance Al-Shabaab's resilience in the face of conventional military operations, the diffusion of leadership is also likely to yield an increasingly multi-polar organisation, putting Al-Shabaab's internal unity and cohesion to the test.

Al-Shabaab North East (ASNE)

There is perhaps no better example of Al-Shabaab's ability to practice jihadist 'subsidiarity' than its tangential struggle in the highlands of northeastern Somalia. Since its inception in 2006 as a community-based revolt against the Puntland administration's plans for mineral exploitation in the Majiyahan area of eastern Sanaag, Al-Shabaab's chapter in Puntland has steadily evolved into a hybrid force of clan militias and committed jihadists headed by a hoary 'Amir' from the U.K., Abdulqadir Mumin.

In contrast with its relentless campaign in southern Somalia, Al-Shabaab's northeastern operations consist of fitful skirmishes with Puntland's security forces in the remote fastness of the 'Al Madow' highlands, supplemented by targeted killings and occasional explosions in Bosaaso and other major towns. In late 2014, Puntland renewed its offensive in the Galgala area, apparently with some external assistance and new equipment, engaging in a series of inconclusive battles against Al-Shabaab forces.

In March 2015, Al-Shabaab released a video featuring Mumin and appearing to show its fighters moving freely in northern Somalia's mountainous terrain and examining the aftermath of a successful raid on a Puntland military outpost. Although Al-Shabaab indubitably suffered some losses during recent engagements, its operational capacity does not appear to have been seriously degraded. And if Al-Qaeda's resurgence in Yemen does indeed lead to stronger ties with Al-Shabaab, Mumin's marginal jihadist posse could acquire new importance as guardians of the gateway between the two groups.

Al-Shabaab East Africa

The Mujahideen who are coming to undertake this operation are not of Somali origin, unlike what you think. We are your citizens! We are neither Somalis nor do we have any Somali lineage and we are coming to undertake this operation in a country we know inside out [...] yesterday the war was in Mogadishu. Tomorrow it is going to be in Nairobi, Kampala and Bujumbura. Insh'allah let's see who will really persevere in this war."

From the 'Final Message of the Kampala Attack Warrior', an undated video message from 'Salman Al-Muhajir', one of two suicide bombers responsible for Al-Shabaab's 2010 Kampala attacks.

In January 2012, for the first time, Godane formally appointed an 'Amir' for Al-Shabaab's operations in Kenya: Ahmed Iman Ali, head of the Muslim Youth Centre (MYC) affiliated with Nairobi's Pumwani Riyadhha Mosque. Ali's nomination marked a critical milestone in Al-Shabaab's evolution as a jihadist movement, signalling the full acceptance of non-Somalis as members of the organisation.

Ali had first arrived in Somalia in 2009, where he was joined the following year by Aboud Rogo – MYC's ideological leader from Mombasa (Rogo, however, allegedly received shoddy treatment at the hands of Al-Shabaab's leadership and returned to Kenya within a matter of months).¹⁴ 2010 also witnessed the first major Al-Shabaab attack beyond Somalia's borders: multiple bombings in Uganda, whose forces constituted the backbone of the African Union force in Somalia, in an operation conducted almost exclusively by Ugandan militants. Later the same year, Al-Shabaab made its first public overture to its East African brethren, releasing a propaganda video entitled "Message to the Umma: And Inspire the Believers." The film featured nine foreign fighters with Al-Shabaab in Somalia – six of them from East Africa.¹⁵

If Rogo was disappointed by his reception by Al-Shabaab, he made no sign of it: he returned to Kenya even more determined than before to cross the threshold to violence, privately exhorting his supporters to make MYC the 'gateway for jihad' into Kenya.¹⁶ His public pronouncements were almost as inflammatory and inspired Muslim youth from across Kenya and Tanzania to take up the standard of jihad. Between 2009 and 2014, well over a thousand individuals from these countries are estimated to have made the journey to Somalia for combat training and battlefield experience.

Where Rogo differed from Ahmed Iman Ali was in his desire to establish an East African jihadist movement distinct from Al-Shabaab. But in October 2012 Rogo was killed by unidentified assailants in his hometown of Mombasa – a fate he had predicted he would meet at the hands of Kenya's security services – and the question of a merger between Al-Shabaab and Al-Hijra (as MYC had come to be known) was definitively decided.

Dismissing allegations that Rogo had been mistreated by Al-Shabaab, Al-Hijra's remaining leaders publicly assured Godane of their enduring loyalty.¹⁷ At a time when other foreign jihadists in Somalia were falling out of favour with their hosts, Al-Hijra and Al-Shabaab continued moving ever closer. Distinctive East African units trained and paraded under the Al-Shabaab banner, proclaiming '*Sisi ni Al-Shabaab!*' ("We are Al-Shabaab!") in Swahili, while their rallying cry, '*Nairobi Tutafika*' ("We will reach Nairobi") announced their determination to carry the battle back to their homeland.

Despite their growing affinity, from an operational perspective Al-Hijra remained very much a junior sibling to the larger, more experienced and capable Al-Shabaab. Its operations in Kenya were crude and amateurish, involving the lobbing of grenades into bars and churches and the placing of rudimentary IEDs in public buses. Despite the desire of their leadership to launch more destructive, spectacular operations, Al-Hijra's rank and file seemed to possess neither the technical ability to plan complex attacks, nor the stomach for suicide missions. In Al-Shabaab's first signature attack on Kenya, the September 2013 assault on the Westgate Shopping Mall, Al-Hijra played only a supporting role.

Reclaiming ‘Muslim Lands’

In the months prior to Godane’s death there were signs of an evolution in Al-Hijra’s status and role vis-à-vis Al-Shabaab. In June 2014, Al-Shabaab fighters raided the villages Kenyan towns of Mpeketoni and Poromoko in Lamu County near the Somali border, torching a police station and killing 65 people – many of them executed at point blank range. Numerous aspects of the attack, including the choice of targets and the obvious familiarity of the fighters with the terrain, point to it being the first truly joint operation of the two groups.

In March 2015, Al-Shabaab released a propaganda video that appeared to document the attack, entitled “Mpeketoni: Reclaiming back Muslim Lands under Kenyan occupation”. The film, which was released in English, Swahili and Arabic versions, includes an excerpt from an Aboud Rogo sermon in which he singled out Mpeketoni as Muslim land that had been occupied and taken away by ‘disbelievers’, before exhorting his followers to take up ‘jihad’. The video also portrays Al-Shabaab fighters addressing Muslim villagers in Swahili at a local mosque at the nearby village of Pandanguo, denouncing the “oppression” of Muslims by the Kenyan government and calling for its overthrow.

In November 2014, a second wave of Al-Shabaab attacks struck the county of Mandheera: the ambush of a bus full of Kenyan civil servants was followed ten days later by the massacre of labourers at a quarry near Mandheera town. As at Mpeketoni, targets were Christian Kenyans, and most of the victims were shot at close range, while others were beheaded. Al-Shabaab claimed responsibility for the attacks, which it attributed to the Saleh Ali Saleh Nabhan Brigade – a force named after one of the first Kenyan members of Al-Qaeda to rise to the senior ranks of Al-Shabaab. The statement, signed by Al-Shabaab spokesman Ali Dheere, justified the attacks as retribution for alleged Kenyan abuses against Muslims in Somalia and Kenya.

In the aftermath of the Garissa University attack, Al-Shabaab issued a further statement accusing the Kenyan government of having perpetrated “a countless number of atrocities against the Muslim population” and affirmed its determination to ‘liberate’ the “Muslim Lands” of Northeastern Province and the Coast from “Kenyan occupation.”¹⁸ One of the chosen instruments to achieve this goal is an obscure force known as *Jaysh Ayman* (‘Ayman’s Army’) that operates in the Kenyan-Somali border area and along the Kenyan coast. Reportedly a combination of Somali and East African fighters, *Jaysh Ayman* has been linked by some close observers to the Mpeketoni operation, and has subsequently been accused of planning terrorist attacks further south in the tourist destinations of Malindi and Mombasa.

East African Horizons

Al-Shabaab’s East African influence is not limited to Kenya. In 2010, the group perpetrated multiple, simultaneous bombings in the Ugandan capital, Kampala, which left 74 dead and over 70 injured. Several subsequent attempts by Al-Shabaab to stage attacks in Kampala have been disrupted, including a September 2014 plot that a joint Ugandan-American operation reportedly foiled with 19 arrests and the seizure of explosive materials.¹⁹ In March 2015, the trial of 13 suspects in the 2010 bombings finally got underway at Uganda’s High Court, almost five years after the events. But justice was further delayed by the fatal shooting later the same month of Joan Kagezi, the lead prosecutor in the case, by suspected Islamist extremists.

Ethiopia has also been targeted by Al-Shabaab on numerous occasions, but has succeeded in disrupting all but one such attempt: a failed 2013 plot to explode two bombs at a qualifying match for football’s World Cup, in which the would-be suicide bombers were deterred by tight security and, upon returning to their safe house, accidentally blew themselves up anyway. The growing number of Ethiopians (mainly ethnic Somalis and Oromos) in Al-Shabaab’s ranks have reportedly begun to form discrete units, just as Al-Hijra as done, with the aim of targeting their homeland, as well as Ethiopian interests in Somalia.

In May 2014, Djibouti was also targeted by Al-Shabaab suicide bombers who blew themselves up at a popular restaurant. Djibouti’s support for the Somali Federal Government, its participation in AMISOM and its largely pro-Western orientation all make it a potential target for Al-Shabaab. But most importantly, Djibouti hosts thousands of foreign troops, including Camp Lemonier: the only American military base on the African continent and one of the bases from which the Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) that Al-Shabaab dreads are operated. An attack against Camp Lemonier is one of Al-Shabaab’s most prized objectives, although it has so far proved too hard a target for them to strike. As a result, softer targets throughout Djibouti remain at risk.

Perhaps most fertile new ground in Al-Shabaab's regional jihad, however, is Tanzania: a country the group has so far employed principally as a place of refuge and recruitment, as well as a staging ground for attacks elsewhere in the region. Al-Shabaab's principal Tanzanian affiliate, the Ansar Muslim Youth Centre (AMYC), led by Sheikh Salim Abdulrahim Barahiyan, has been directly linked to the AQEA network that conducted the 1998 U.S. Embassy bombings, as well as to Al-Hijra.²⁰ But AMYC is less a coherent organisation than a "loose network that includes hardline Islamist preachers, their radical mosques, Islamic social centers, and schools, likeminded businessmen who finance militant activities, and multiple, small cells of armed youth that cooperate with each other despite being scattered around the country."²¹

In recent years, violence orchestrated by members of Tanzania's militant Islamists has been on the rise, with more than 30 incidents reported since 2011, including a February 2015 attack on a police station in northern Tanga region – a longstanding hub of Al-Shabaab activity. In April 2015, police in Morogoro arrested 10 suspected members of Al-Shabaab alleged to have been found in possession of explosives, detonator cords, military uniforms and masks.²²

Kenyan security officials report a growing number of Tanzanian nationals being intercepted en route to Somalia to join Al-Shabaab, and Tanzanians are estimated to constitute the second largest contingent of foreign fighters in Al-Shabaab, after the Kenyans. At least two members of the group responsible for the attack on Garissa University College are believed to have been Tanzanian.²³ This risk of trained and experienced combat veterans returning to Tanzania to raise the black standard of jihad in their home country, just as Al-Hijra has done, is almost certainly on the rise.

The gradual melding of Al-Shabaab and its regional affiliates, initiated on Godane's watch, has been bloodily consummated since Dirriye assumed leadership of the organisation. Al-Shabaab appears to have embraced its non-Somali elements, beginning with Al-Hijra, adopting their aims and objectives as its own. In other words, Al-Shabaab is no longer a Somali jihadist group with some rag-tag foreign affiliates: it is on the threshold of becoming become a genuinely transnational organisation with membership from across the region and horizons to match.

CONCLUSION

In the months since Godane's death, Al-Shabaab has continued to lose territory, revenues and members of its leadership cadres. Its networks and operations in several countries have been detected and disrupted before they could cause harm. But while Al-Shabaab's enemies doggedly measure their successes in terms of desertions, defections and decapitation strikes, it is becoming increasingly clear that these crude metrics provide a distorted, if not misleading picture of developments on the ground.

Although often successful by their own standards, conventional military and counter terrorist operations have neither diminished Al-Shabaab's operational capacity, nor dimmed its baleful appeal. On the contrary, kinetic security operations and heavy-handed policing practices generally serve to reinforce Al-Shabaab's seductive narrative of victimisation and grievance. While Al-Shabaab's adversaries focus their energies on their intelligence-led war of attrition, the jihadists propagate their toxic ideology through a potent combination of religious populism and slick propaganda. In short, Al-Shabaab and its enemies are waging very different wars.

Somalia is still Al-Shabaab's geographic centre of gravity, but the widely held perception of Al-Shabaab as a Somali organisation is rapidly becoming out-dated. The expanding number of East Africans in Al-Shabaab's ranks, the extent and intensity of its activities beyond Somalia's borders, and the growing importance of its Swahili-language media presence, are all clear indicators that Al-Shabaab is reaching the threshold of becoming a truly transnational organisation. Combating Al-Shabaab is therefore becoming an increasingly complex proposition, requiring concerted international action that incorporates more calibrated engagement at the national and local levels.

Defeating Al-Shabaab on the ground in Somalia should remain the cornerstone of any regional counter terrorism strategy. A joint effort by AMISOM and Somali forces is urgently needed to dislodge Al-Shabaab from its remaining bases, to disrupt its lines of command, control and logistics, and to seize and maintain the initiative – denying Al-Shabaab the time and space that it currently enjoys to plan, prepare and stage attacks both in Somalia and across its borders. But military action needs to be firmly situated within a broader, politically led strategy that acknowledges and addresses the residual sources of support for Al-Shabaab – including monopolistic political practices and predatory governance. Somalia’s anticipated political transition in late 2016 is likely to be a critical milestone in this regard.

One key objective of the campaign against Al-Shabaab should be to turn its decentralised nature, which is currently a source of resilience, to the movement’s disadvantage – exploiting the increasingly multipolar nature of its decision-making and membership to fragment the movement. As Al-Shabaab evolves toward a multi-polar organisation, with inherent challenges to cohesion, command and control, longstanding frictions within the group’s leadership remain unresolved; new pressures, both internal and external, for the movement to abandon its Al-Qaeda affiliation in favour of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), could bring these simmering tensions to a head -- or even give rise to breakaway factions.

While remaining conscious of Somalia’s key role in the genesis of Al-Shabaab, governments elsewhere in the region must learn to resist the temptation to target Somali communities within their borders as a source of insecurity. Jihadism in east Africa has a long pedigree independent of developments in Somalia, and many East African jihadists are neither Somali, nor even Muslim by birth. Much greater effort needs to be dedicated to understanding and countering the appeal of jihadism within in each national context. But in so doing, governments will have to be prepared to confront uncomfortable and sometimes inflammatory questions of governance, representation and citizenship. Programmes and projects aimed at ‘countering violent extremism’ will achieve little if the root causes of alienation and susceptibility to radicalisation remain intact.

Godane’s appointment of a successor suggests that he fully expected and intended that Al-Shabaab should survive his own death. Events so far have proven him right: Al-Shabaab has demonstrated that it can endure the loss of its bases, its revenues and even its supreme leader without missing an operational beat or suffering a drop in recruitment. It is clearly time for Al-Shabaab’s enemies to revisit their basic assumptions, to recalibrate their strategy to defeat the movement, and to ensure that Godane’s legacy is the not the durability of Al-Shabaab but its ultimate destruction.

Endnotes

- ¹ <http://www.breitbart.com/national-security/2015/04/02/al-shabaab-attacks-kenyan-university-christians-taken-hostage-at-least-15-killed/>, <http://www.raxanreeb.com/2015/04/au-special-representative-condemns-todays-terrorist-attack-at-garissa-university-college-in-kenya/> and Greg Jaffe, “White House officials defend Somalia strategy as counterterrorism model” in *The Washington Post*, 3 April 2015, accessed at http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/white-house-officials-defend-somalia-strategy-as-counterterrorism-model/2015/04/03/f996e5c0-da1c-11e4-b3f2-607bd612aeac_story.html
- ² <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/university-attacks-marks-al-shabaab-s-pivot-to-isis>
- ³ Assertions that Al-Shabaab is imitating Boko Haram appear to overlook the fact that Al-Shabaab’s first major attack on a Western-style educational institution took place at Sheikh Secondary School in Somaliland in October 2003. Other major Al-Shabaab attacks against educational institutions included a suicide bombing at Shamo Hotel, during a graduation ceremony for medical students in December 2009, and a suicide bombing outside the Turkish embassy in Mogadishu, where Somali students were queuing for visas to study abroad.
- ⁴ Robert Burns and Lolita C. Baldor, “Al Shabab Leader Ahmed Godane Killed In U.S. Strike: Pentagon”, *Huffington Post*, 11 May 2014, accessed at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/09/05/ahmed-godane-killed_n_5771804.html
- ⁵ Harakat Al-Shabaab Al Mujahideen Statement: What a profitable gain, O’ Abu Zubayr! Dhul Qādah 1435H
- ⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁷ Hamil al-Bushra, “Somalia the Land of Khilafah: Message to Our Brothers in Somalia”, 24 February 2015, accessed at <https://somalianews.files.wordpress.com/2015/03/bushra.pdf>
- ⁸ Hamil al-Bushra is identified as “the nom de guerre used by two media outlets that have been described by Washington Institute for Near East Policy fellow Aaron Zelin as “official semi-official accounts” from ISIL,” according to Caroline Hellyer, “ISIL courts al-Shabab as al-Qaeda ties fade away”, *Al Jazeera*, 23 March 2015, accessed at <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2015/03/isil-eyes-east-africa-foments-division-150322130940108.html>
- ⁹ Khilaaf soo kala dhexgalay Hoggaamiyayaasha Al-shabaab, 6 March 2015, <http://www.codkasoomaalida.com/?p=29458>
- ¹⁰ See, for example, Hassan M. Abukar, Will ISIS woo al-Shabaab into the fold? In *Sahan Journal*, 19 March 2015, accessed at http://sahanjournal.com/isis-al-shabaab-somalia/#.VRv4HUZ2_Is and Hanna Ucko Neill: African insurgent groups look to ISIS as they face increasing pressure, *IISS*, 24 March 2015.
- ¹¹ Sahan interview with Al-Shabaab associate, April 2015.
- ¹² Sheekh Xasan Xuseen “Al Shabaab way ku biiri kartaa Dowladda Khilaafada Islaamka, Reer Galbeedka ayaa been ka sheegay” http://universalsomalitv.net/infusions/media/post_caalamka_6635
- ¹³ See Matt Bryden, *The Reinvention of Al-Shabaab: A Strategy of Choice or Necessity?* Centre for Strategic and International Studies, Washington D.C., February 2014.
- ¹⁴ Hassan M. Abukar, *The Letters: How Al-Qaeda Failed in Mali and Somalia*, 18 April 2013, accessed at <http://www.wardheernews.com/the-letters-how-al-qaeda-failed-in-mali-and-somalia/>
- ¹⁵ Christopher Anzalone, “Kenya’s Muslim Youth Center and Al-Shabab’s East African Recruitment” in *CTC Sentinel*. Westpoint Countering Terrorism Centre, 29 October 2012, accessed at <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/kenyas-muslim-youth-center-and-al-shababs-east-african-recruitment>
- ¹⁶ Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea pursuant to Security Council resolution 2002 (2011), United Nations Security Council, July 2012
- ¹⁷ Muslim Youth Centre, Press Release: Statement on Attributed Letter By Sheikh Al-Afghani To Amir Sheikh Ayman Al-Zawahiri, 17 April 2013, <http://somalisecuritystudies.blogspot.ae/2013/04/press-release-statement-on-attributed.html>
- ¹⁸ Harakat Al-Mujahideen Press Office, Statement on Garissa University College Attack, 4 April 2015.
- ¹⁹ Agence France Presse, “Al-Shabaab militants arrested in Uganda over suspected bomb plot”, in *The Guardian*, 14 September 2014, accessed at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/14/uganda-police-arrest-al-shabaab-suspects>.
- ²⁰ Andre Lesage, “The Rising Terrorist Threat in Tanzania: Domestic Islamist Militancy and Regional Threats”, in *Strategic Forum* (National Defense University: Institute for National Strategic Studies, Washington D.C.), September 2014, p.11
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, p.12
- ²² Fumbuka Ng’wanakilala, “Tanzanians lynch suspected Somali militant, police arrest 10 others”, *Reuters News Agency*, 15 April 2015, accessed at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/04/15/us-tanzania-security-idUSKBN0N61V620150415>
- ²³ Sahan interviews, Nairobi, April 2015.