

Al Shabaab's Foreign Threat to Somalia

by David Shinn

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***Abstract:** This article focuses on the threat to Somalia by al Shabaab (The Youth), an extremist organization that controls most of southern and central Somalia. It learned its strategy and tactics from al Qaeda and the Taliban and relies heavily on a relatively small number of foreign fighters, most of whom are Somalis with foreign passports from the large Somali diaspora. The non-Somali contingent probably numbers only about 200 to 300, although it brings battlefield experience from Afghanistan and Iraq and provides al Shabaab with expertise in bomb making, remote-controlled explosions, suicide bombing and assassinations. Some of the foreigners occupy key positions in al Shabaab. The connection between al Shabaab and al Qaeda is growing stronger but has not yet reached the level of operational control by al Qaeda. Al Shabaab's draconian tactics, which are imported from outside and are anathema to most Somalis, and its foreign component may be its undoing.*

Al Shabaab now controls nearly all of central and southern Somalia and much of the capital of Mogadishu. It opposes Somalia's Transitional Federal Government (TFG), which has the backing of the United Nations, African Union and Arab League but which controls very little territory. Thousands of troops from neighboring Ethiopia supported the TFG inside Somalia from late 2006 until they departed at the beginning of 2009. A peacekeeping force established by the African Union began arriving early in 2007 to assist the TFG.¹ That force now numbers about 8,000 troops from Uganda and Burundi, all located in Mogadishu to protect TFG officials and keep open the port and airport. The goal of al Shabaab is to topple the TFG,

¹ See Paul D. Williams, "Into the Mogadishu Maelstrom: The African Union Mission in Somalia," *International Peacekeeping*, August 2009, pp. 514–530.

seize power throughout Somalia, reincorporate Somali-inhabited areas of Kenya and Ethiopia, and create an Islamic caliphate.

Early Foreign Influence on Somali Islamist Movements

Militant Islamic influence has existed in Somalia for decades but did not have a meaningful impact on the political situation during the dictatorial rule of President Siad Barre. With his overthrow in 1991, followed by the total collapse of the central government, a number of different Somali forces quickly took advantage of the political vacuum and expanded their influence. For the first fifteen years or so, Somali warlords held most of the power, although various Islamic groups also became more assertive. Some of the Islamist organizations were benign and had a strictly Somali agenda. Others, including al Shabaab, developed a program based on Islamic power and increasingly became subject to foreign influence.

Small numbers of Somalis studied the Salafi views of the Muslim Brothers in Egypt and Wahhabi teachings in Saudi Arabia beginning even before Somali independence in 1960. As they returned to Somalia, the followers of these schools of Islamic thought had little initial success in propagating their views among Somalis who overwhelmingly followed Sufi Islamic beliefs. In the 1970s, some of the Wahhabi believers created The Unity of Islamic Youth (Wahdat al Shabaab al Islamiyya) and The Islamic Group (al Jama'a al Islamiyya). These two organizations merged in 1982 and changed their names to The Islamic Union (al Ittihad al Islamiyya or AIAI). All of the adherents were Somali, although they imported Islamic fundamentalist concepts from Salafism and Wahhabism. AIAI conducted terrorist attacks in the Somali-inhabited parts of Ethiopia and against an Ethiopian minister of Somali origin in Addis Ababa. AIAI reached the peak of its activity in the mid-1990s. Ethiopian security forces responded forcefully, and AIAI effectively disappeared early in the twenty-first century.²

The failure of the Somali state offered an opening to both indigenous and foreign Islamist groups. Osama bin Laden moved to Sudan in 1992 accompanied by one of his most trusted and talented al Qaeda lieutenants, Abu Hafs al Masri. Based on declassified al Qaeda documents, it is clear that Abu Hafs, an Egyptian by birth, made multiple trips to Somalia beginning in 1992. He met with Somali Islamists, assessed capabilities and made arrangements to provide training and arms for fighters. Abu Hafs apparently took orders from al Qaeda's headquarters in Khartoum. In January 1993, he

² Matt Bryden, "No Quick Fixes: Coming to Terms with Terrorism, Islam, and Statelessness in Somalia," *Journal of Conflict Studies* (Fall 2003), pp. 28–33; "Somalia's al-Ittihad al-Islami (AIAI; Islamic Union)," (www.ctc.usma.edu/aq/pdf/AIAI.pdf).

created a team of al Qaeda veterans to conduct operations in Somalia. Al Qaeda believed that Somalia offered a safe haven for its operations in the region and encouraged it to target the United States in Somalia and the Arabian Peninsula. The first al Qaeda operatives left Peshawar, Pakistan, transited Kenya, and arrived in Somalia in February 1993. The group worked closely with AIAI and established three training camps in Somalia.³

Abu Hafs expected Somalia would become a low-cost recruiting ground where disaffected Somalis in a failed state would readily accept al Qaeda and enthusiastically join the fight to expel the international peace-keeping force, briefly led by the United States, which began arriving in Mogadishu in 1992. Somalia appeared to be, in the eyes of al Qaeda, another Afghanistan. The reality of the situation was quite different. Al Qaeda underestimated the cost of operating in Somalia. Getting in and out of the country was costly while expenses resulting from corruption in neighboring states were high. Al Qaeda experienced regular extortion from Somali clans and unanticipated losses when bandits attacked their convoys. It overestimated the degree to which Somalis would become jihadis, especially if there were no financial incentive, and failed to understand the importance of traditional Sufi Islam. Unlike the tribal areas of Pakistan, it found a lawless land of shifting alliances that lacked Sunni unity. The primacy of clan ultimately frustrated al Qaeda's efforts to recruit and develop a strong, unified coalition. The jihadi foreigners from al Qaeda concluded during this early initiative in Somalia that the costs outweighed the benefits.⁴

Al Qaeda did manage, however, to recruit a number of young Somalis to the jihadi cause and found wider acceptance at a few Somali locations such as Ras Kamboni, a small Indian Ocean port town near Somalia's southern border with Kenya. The longer that the central government was unable to establish authority throughout Somalia and the warlords fought among themselves for power, the greater the opportunity for the Islamic groups to increase their following, in part by imposing stability. In the meantime, three al Qaeda operatives involved in the 1998 bombings of the U.S. embassies in Nairobi, Kenya, and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, took refuge in Somalia with the help of AIAI. Two of them have since been killed. Abu Talha al-Sudani of Sudan died in a 2007 battle with Ethiopian troops while American special forces killed Saleh Ali Saleh Nabhan, born in Kenya of Yemeni heritage, on a

³ "Al-Qaida's (Mis)Adventures in the Horn of Africa," Harmony Project, Combating Terrorism Center, West Point (<http://ctc.usma.edu/aq/pdf/Al-Qa%27ida%27s%20MisAdventures%20in%20the%20Horn%20of%20Africa.pdf>); "Abu Hafs al-Masri," (www.ctc.usma.edu/aq/pdf/Abu_Hafs.pdf); David H. Shinn, "Al-Qaeda in East Africa and the Horn," *Journal of Conflict Studies* (Summer 2007), p. 56.

⁴ "Al-Qaida's (Mis)Adventures in the Horn of Africa," pp. 14, 19–23 and 42–43; "Al-Qaeda in East Africa and the Horn," pp. 57–58. Abu Hafs died in an airstrike on an al-Qaeda safe house in Kabul, Afghanistan, in 2001.

road south of Mogadishu in 2009. The third, Fazul Abdullah Mohamed of the Comoro Islands, remains at large.

By early 2006, the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC) had gained ascendancy in Mogadishu and much of southern Somalia. This alarmed the TFG, Ethiopia and the United States, which ill-advisedly financed a group of warlords in Mogadishu known as the Alliance for Restoration of Peace and Counterterrorism opposed to the courts. By mid-2006, the UIC, which consisted of both moderates and radicals, soundly defeated the U.S.-sponsored warlords. By the end of the year, the UIC had taken control of most of southern and central Somalia and threatened a jihad against Ethiopia. The intervention of Ethiopian troops forced the UIC from Mogadishu early in 2007. The Islamist leaders and their militia went into hiding, migrated to southern Somalia or took refuge in Eritrea, which has supported and funded extremist Islamic organizations in Somalia. Some of the foreign fighters linked to the UIC fled across the border into Kenya where they were captured by Kenyan forces and sent back to then TFG-controlled Mogadishu. They reportedly included nationals from Yemen, Jordan, United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Sweden, Comoro Islands and Morocco.⁵ The foreign fighters were never an important component of the UIC, but they tended to support that wing of the UIC that later became known as al Shabaab.

In the following months, the UIC formally fractured into moderate and extremist wings. The moderates led by Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed eventually joined the TFG, and Ahmed actually became president of the TFG early in 2009. The extremists divided into two main factions: al Shabaab and the Islamic Party (Hizbul Islam) led by Hassan Dahir Aweys. The intervention of Ethiopian forces in Somalia served as a rallying cry for both of these groups, allowing them to attract new followers to force out the “foreign invaders.” In the case of al Shabaab, it also resulted in renewed interest in the organization by al Qaeda and foreign fighters.

The Origins of al Shabaab and Impact of the Taliban and al Qaeda

The name al Shabaab was not widely used until 2007, although the group formally incorporated in 2003 at an AIAI alumni conference in Las Anod, Somaliland. About a dozen young battle-hardened, Afghan-trained Somali men stormed out of the AIAI conference in opposition to a proposed agenda that stressed creation of a Salafi political organization that seemed too willing to accommodate the status quo. Days later, the radical dissidents organized a parallel conference in Las Anod and launched al Shabaab as a Salafi-jihadist movement. The principal leaders of the breakaway faction were Aden Hashi Ayro, killed in 2008 during an American missile strike on his home in Dusamareb, Somalia, and Ahmed Abdi Aw-Mohamed “Godane,” until recently

⁵ “Kenyan Police ‘Hack Al Qaeda Laptop,’” *UPI*, Jan. 31, 2007.

the head or “emir” of al Shabaab. Ayro trained in Afghanistan with al Qaeda during the late 1990s. Godane fought with al Qaeda in Afghanistan until the end of 2001 and has put in place a chain of command patterned after the one used by al Qaeda.⁶

Al Shabaab subsequently moved steadily closer to al Qaeda and adopted a modus operandi that increasingly resembles that of the Taliban in Afghanistan, especially since Ethiopian forces defeated the UIC early in 2007. The foreign impact on al Shabaab takes two forms—the transfer of strategy, tactics and ideology learned by Somali al Shabaab leaders during their association with the Taliban and al Qaeda and the recruitment of foreign fighters. The former may be more important than the latter to the overall success of al Shabaab in Somalia. Unlike the TFG, al Shabaab has a well-defined vision and is prepared to use just about any tactic, however repressive and vicious, to achieve its goals. The TFG argues that al Shabaab’s extremist ideology, which it describes as “new and dangerous,” has profound negative consequences for the region.⁷

Public statements by both al Shabaab and al Qaeda, usually on their respective websites, have inexorably moved the two organizations closer to each other. In 2008, the U.S. State Department designated al Shabaab a terrorist organization. In June 2008, Godane praised Osama bin Laden and his deputy, Ayman al Zawahiri, and the larger global jihad movement. He also explicitly declared al Shabaab’s intention to attack the United States and implied that al Shabaab had become part of the al Qaeda movement. Four months later, al Shabaab released a video that pledged loyalty to al Qaeda and urged young Muslims to join its cause. At the end of 2008, al Shabaab sent warm greetings to several violent Islamist groups, most of which are affiliated with al Qaeda. In July 2009, Godane made a speech that referred to senior figures in al Qaeda as the leaders of global jihad and linked the war in Somalia to those in Afghanistan and Iraq. In September 2009, al Shabaab released a video titled “At Your Service, Oh Osama,” which pledged allegiance to bin Laden. Al Shabaab’s overtures to al Qaeda continued into 2010 when it issued a statement that linked jihad in the Horn of Africa to the one led by al Qaeda and bin Laden.⁸

⁶ Abdirahman “Aynte” Ali, “The Anatomy of al Shabaab,” June 2010, unpublished paper, pp. 11–16; “Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia,” UN Security Council document S/2010/91, March 10, 2010, p. 14 (<http://reliefweb.int/rw/rwb.nsf/db900SID/MUMA-83N2WN>); Jacob A. Zenn, “Al Shabaab’s Unavoidable Clash with Somaliland Democracy,” *Terrorism Monitor*, Aug. 19, 2010, p. 5; Christopher Harnisch, “The Terror Threat from Somalia: The Internationalization of al Shabaab,” American Enterprise Institute Report, Feb. 12, 2010, p. 20; “A Diagnosis of Somalia’s Failing Transitional Government,” *CTC Sentinel*, July 2009, p. 10.

⁷ Comments made by then TFG Foreign Minister, Ahmed Jama Jangali, on June 4, 2010, at a conference attended by the author in Lund, Sweden.

⁸ Harnisch, “Terror Threat from Somalia,” nicely summarizes these al Shabaab messages on pp. 24–27. See also Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, “The Strategic Challenge of Somalia’s Al Shabaab: Dimensions of Jihad,” *Middle East Quarterly* (Fall 2009), pp. 25–36; Sarah Childress, “Somalia’s Al Shabaab to Ally with Al Qaeda,” *Wall Street Journal*, Feb. 2, 2010.

For its part, al Qaeda reciprocated by regularly voicing support for jihad in Somalia beginning in 2006. In June 2008, one of al Qaeda's most senior commanders, Abu Yahya al-Libi, recognized al Shabaab for the first time and said Somalis should accept nothing less than an independent Islamic state. The three top leaders of al Qaeda made statements in 2009 supporting al Shabaab's campaign in Somalia and even put it on the same level as Afghanistan and Iraq. Osama bin Laden released only five statements in 2009, but devoted one of them to Somalia, calling the conflict a war between Islam and the international Crusade. By recognizing Somalia's significant role in global jihad, al Qaeda gave credibility to al Shabaab.⁹

In spite of their common cause and the mutual statements of support voiced by al Shabaab and al Qaeda, most observers do not believe that al Shabaab is a branch of nor is it under the operational control of al Qaeda. The 2009 State Department annual report on terrorism stated explicitly that al Qaeda and al Shabaab are not formally merged, but acknowledged there are many links between the two organizations. The United Nations Monitoring Group on Somalia concluded that extremists within al Shabaab are seeking, with limited success, to align the organization more closely with al Qaeda. To the extent there are policy differences within al Shabaab's leadership, they seem to center on those who seek a closer alignment with foreign jihadi organizations such as al Qaeda and those who want to pursue a narrower Somali agenda. Recent al Shabaab actions suggest the extremists are prevailing. In 2009, al Shabaab formally renamed itself Harakat al Shabaab al Mujahidin (Mujahideen Youth Movement) to underscore its jihadist identity and the global nature of its agenda.¹⁰

From a tactical point of view, al Shabaab has borrowed heavily from the Taliban and al Qaeda playbooks. Suicide bombings, which were unknown in Somalia prior to 2006, and are even alien to Somali culture, have become commonplace under al Shabaab. In fact, this tactic, which has killed many innocent Somalis, is undermining support for the organization. There is an acceptance of death worshipping among its leaders. Al Shabaab's rhetoric increasingly resembles that of al Qaeda. It avoids Somali nationalist slogans and refuses to use the traditional Somali flag, which it replaced with a black flag emblazoned with the Shahaada (declaration of the faith) in white text. It often holds press conferences in Arabic rather than the more common Somali language. Al Shabaab militia members are known as the "masked men" because they obscure their faces with red scarves. The organization forces

⁹ Harnisch, "Terror Threat from Somalia," pp. 27–28.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 19; U.S. State Department, "Country Reports on Terrorism 2009," (www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/crt/2009/140883.htm); "Report of the Monitoring Group Report on Somalia," 15; Alisha Ryu, "Al-Shabab Militants Divided over Tactics, Foreign Control," VOA, Dec. 22, 2009; "Somalia's Divided Islamists," International Crisis Group Africa Briefing no. 74, May 18, 2010, p. 7. See testimony on March 11, 2009, by Ken Menkhaus before the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs.

Somali women to marry foreign fighters. As in the case of al Qaeda, it has developed an effective communications and media effort to get its message out and for recruitment purposes. In short, al Shabaab is looking more and more like the Taliban of the 1990s.¹¹

Foreign Leaders and Fighters

Al Shabaab is organized in three layers: the top leadership (qiyadah), the foreign fighters (muhajirin) and local Somali fighters (ansar). The top leaders include Ibrahim Jama “al-Afghani”, who recently replaced Godane, and Fuad Mohamed Khalaf “Shongole.” All three are Somali but Shongole lived in Sweden for a number of years. They preside over a leadership structure that is strongly influenced by those with foreign ties. The key individual is Fazul Abdullah Mohamed from the Comoro Islands, referred to variously as al Shabaab’s “chairman of the board” and commander in chief and who became al Qaeda’s leader in the Horn of Africa in 2009. Others include financier Sheikh Mohamed Abu Faid from Saudi Arabia; Godane’s adviser Abu Suleiman al-Banadiri, a Somali of Yemeni descent; director of training Abu Musa Mombasa from Pakistan; Omar Hammami, aka Abu Mansur al-Amriki, in charge of financing foreign fighters, from the United States of Syrian and American parents; and Mohamoud Mujajir, in charge of recruitment of suicide bombers, from Sudan. The 85 member executive council of al Shabaab includes 42 Somalis and 43 foreigners. The International Crisis Group has concluded that “the hardliners, led by the foreign jihadis, wield enormous influence and have access to resources and the means to dictate their wishes to the less powerful factions.”¹²

Current estimates of al Shabaab’s armed strength range from a low of 3,000 to a high of 7,000, although it can mobilize larger numbers on short notice. Most of these fighters are Somalis who never left Somalia. Counting or even defining foreign fighters is an inexact science, although there is general agreement on the nature and magnitude of the foreign involvement. There are three kinds of “foreign” fighters: Somalis who were born across the borders in neighboring countries, primarily Kenya, and have the nationality of those

¹¹ Stig Jarle Hansen, “Revenge or Reward? The Case of Somalia’s Suicide Bombers,” *Journal of Terrorism Research*, issue 1, 2010, pp. 21–24; Abdirahman “Aynte” Ali, pp. 22–23; Jason Straziuso and Mohamed Olad Hassan, “Somali Rebels Looking Increasingly Like Taliban,” *AP*, Aug. 22, 2010; Markus Virgil Hoehne, “Counter-terrorism in Somalia: How External Interference Helped to Produce Militant Islamism,” unpublished paper, Dec. 17, 2009, p. 25 (<http://hornofafrica.ssrc.org/Somalia/>); Tim Pippard, “Al Shabaab’s Agenda in the Wake of the Kampala Suicide Attacks,” *CTC Sentinel*, July 2010, p. 5.

¹² “Somalia’s Divided Islamists,” pp. 7–9; Abdirahman “Aynte” Ali, pp. 17–18; Bill Roggio, “Al-Qaeda Names Fazul Mohammed East African Commander,” *Long War Journal*, Nov. 11, 2009; “Somalia: Al-Qaeda Foreign Operatives Dominate Al Shabaab Executive Council,” Sept. 8, 2010 (<http://sunatimes.com/view.php?id=392>).

countries; Somalis who were born in Somalia or whose parents were born in Somalia but have grown up in the diaspora and now carry a foreign passport; and foreigners who have no Somali ethnic connection. It is important to distinguish among these groups as some estimates of foreigners apply only to the last and smallest category. Most of the “foreigners” who have joined al Shabaab are Somalis from neighboring Kenya or from the diaspora. The large Somali community at Eastleigh in Nairobi is a breeding ground for al Shabaab where radical preachers play a key role in recruiting and fundraising. Kenya’s anti-terrorism police chief, Nicholas Kamwende, commented that “Eastleigh provides the best grounds for recruitment.”¹³

When asked in September 2009, at a public session organized by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington, about the number of foreign fighters in al Shabaab, TFG President Ahmed acknowledged that he did not know exactly. He estimated, however, that Somalis with foreign passports and non-Somalis totaled between 800 and 1,100. An al Shabaab defector, commenting in November 2009, said there were about 400 jihadi fighters, most of them from Sub-Saharan Africa, but he seemed to exclude Somalis from the diaspora in this figure. In June 2010, anonymous sources in the U.S. military and intelligence community put the number of foreigners in Somalia affiliated with al Qaeda at up to 200. In September 2010, Terrance Ford, AFRICOM’s Director of Intelligence and Knowledge Development, said there are 200 foreign fighters and another 1,000 ethnic Somalis from outside Somalia. There are probably between 200 and 300 non-Somali foreign jihadis fighting alongside al Shabaab. The non-Somalis come primarily from Kenya’s Swahili coast, Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, Afghanistan, Yemen, Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda and Saudi Arabia.¹⁴

The Afghan-trained Somalis and the foreign veterans from Afghanistan and Iraq play an important role as al Shabaab field commanders because of their military experience. They also brought specialized skills with them to Somalia and often lead the training and indoctrination of al Shabaab recruits. They teach the techniques of suicide attacks, remote-controlled roadside bombings, kidnappings and assassinations of TFG officials, journalists, and humanitarian and civil society workers that constitute a threat to al Shabaab’s

¹³ Quoted in Sudarsan Raghavan, “In Kenya’s Capital, Somali Immigrant Neighborhood Is Incubator for Jihad,” *Washington Post*, Aug. 22, 2010; “Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia,” pp. 25–27.

¹⁴ “Ex-Somali Fighters Tell Why They Abandoned Jihad,” *AFP*, Nov. 28, 2009; Barbara Starr, “Up to 200 Foreign Fighters in Somalia, U.S. Officials Say,” *CNN*, June 4, 2010; Francis Njubi Nesbitt, “Al Shabaab’s Wakeup Call,” *Foreign Policy in Focus*, July 26, 2010; “Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia,” p. 15. In mid-2009, Ethiopia’s Prime Minister Meles put the number of foreign fighters in Somalia between 1,000 and 2,500, well above most other estimates. See Andrew Cawthorne, “Ethiopia’s Meles Eyes ‘Long Rest’ Post Retirement,” *Reuters*, July 8, 2009. Comment by Ford on Sept. 27, 2010, at a conference in Washington sponsored by the Reserve Officers Association.

goal of establishing a strict Islamic state completely under its control. The foreigners are the principal link to al Qaeda and by most accounts are exerting growing influence on the organization.¹⁵

The foreign element of al Shabaab plans the suicide bombings and has even provided several of the suicide bombers. In October 2007, a Somali from the United Kingdom carried out a suicide bombing against an Ethiopian military position in Baidoa in central Somalia. In October 2008, Shirwa Ahmed from Minneapolis became America's first known suicide bomber when he drove a vehicle laden with explosives in an attack that killed as many as thirty people in Puntland in northern Somalia. In September 2009, a Somali-American from Seattle was one of two suicide bombers who drove vehicles bearing UN logos into the African Union force headquarters in Mogadishu, killing 21 peacekeepers. In December of 2009, a Dane of Somali descent blew himself up at a hotel in Mogadishu during a college graduation ceremony, killing 24 people including three government ministers.¹⁶

Foreigners have assisted and died in other attempts to increase the lethality of al Shabaab attacks. Four Ugandans admitted involvement in the three bomb blasts that killed seventy-nine persons, mostly fellow Ugandans, in Kampala in July 2010. Two of the four had previous ties to al Shabaab while the other two were apparently recruited in Kampala. One of the four confessed that he escorted a Kenyan suicide bomber to the location of one of the attacks.¹⁷ In an apparent premature car bomb explosion, the TFG reported that at least ten insurgents died in August 2010 at a house in Mogadishu used by al Shabaab. The TFG said the dead included three Pakistanis, two Indians, one Afghan and an Algerian. In September 2010, a Somali-American, Dahir Gurey Sheikh Ali Guled, died on the streets of Mogadishu following a battle with pro-government forces. An estimated twelve U.S. citizens have been killed fighting alongside al Shabaab in Somalia.¹⁸

Recruitment from the Diaspora and Its Friends

Al Shabaab has developed an effective media recruitment program that has been particularly successful in the large Somali diaspora in Europe, North

¹⁵ "Country Reports on Terrorism 2009"; Sudarsan Raghavan, "Foreign Fighters Gain Influence in Somalia's Islamist Al Shabaab Militia," *Washington Post*, June 8, 2010.

¹⁶ Stig Jarle Hansen, pp. 30–32; "FBI Chief: Suicide Bomber Indoctrinated in Minnesota," *Star Tribune*, Feb. 24, 2009; "Foreign Fighters Gain Influence"; "Somalia's Foreign Fighters," *Jane's Terrorism and Security Monitor*, June 2009, p. 7.

¹⁷ "We Are Sorry, Say 7/11 Suicide Bombers," *New Vision* (Kampala), Aug. 12, 2010; "Suspect Says Rage at US Led Him to Plot Ugandan Bombs," *Reuters*, Aug. 12, 2010.

¹⁸ Mohamed Olad Hassan, "Indians among Foreign Fighters Killed in Somalia," *AP*, Aug. 21, 2010; Dana Hughes, Kirit Radia and Jason Ryan, "American Jihadi Killed in Somalia Shootout," *ABC News*, Sept. 10, 2010.

America, the Middle East, Africa and Australia. There are at least two million Somalis living in the diaspora. While the number of Somali recruits is tiny compared to the number living in the diaspora, the relative success of the recruitment program has focused unprecedented international attention on al Shabaab, particularly in the United States. The Union of Islamic Courts, of which al Shabaab was once a part, began the recruitment process as early as 2006 when a group of young British Somalis came to fight in Mogadishu. The earliest American recruits had a mixture of backgrounds. Amir Mohamed Meshal, Omar Hammami, as well as Daniel Joseph Maldonado and Ruben Shumpert, both American converts to Islam, arrived in Somalia late in 2006. Meshal and Maldonado fled to Kenya in 2007 where Meshal was freed without charge. Maldonado pleaded guilty in a U.S. court and received a ten-year sentence. Shumpert died in a 2008 air strike in Somalia. Hammami still holds a senior position in al Shabaab. By early 2007, recruitment had begun in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area, the location of the largest Somali community in the United States. Small numbers of young Somalis also began leaving for Somalia from Seattle, Boston, Portland, Maine, and Columbus, Ohio.¹⁹

By mid-2009, more than twenty young Somalis, most of them from Minnesota, joined al Shabaab in Somalia. This constituted a miniscule number of the more than 100,000 Somalis who had moved to the United States. The question arises as to why so few have joined al Shabaab. One partial explanation concerns the Somali remittance system, which is the backbone of the Somali economy. The diaspora does not want to risk the destruction of this system, which an al Shabaab victory would do.²⁰ The recruits represent a wide variety of backgrounds. Some have criminal and gang backgrounds; others are good students and were thought to be upstanding citizens. They seem to have been motivated by a complex mix of politics and faith. The arrival of Ethiopian troops in Somalia late in 2006 and a surge of nationalism among young Somalis in the diaspora to expel the Ethiopians motivated many. Al Shabaab recruiters came to Minnesota and paid cash for their air fare to the region. By the time some of them finished training, the Ethiopian troops had departed Somalia and increasingly they questioned who they were fighting. Several of them returned to the United States and al Shabaab reportedly killed a couple of others who tried to leave Somalia. In August 2010, the United States filed charges against fourteen persons, all but two of them from Minnesota. Some of them travelled to Somalia and some did not.²¹

¹⁹ Harnisch, "Terror Threat from Somalia," pp. 29–31; "Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia," p. 31; "Somalia's Foreign Fighters," p. 7. For an excellent study of Omar Hammami, see Andrea Elliott, "The Jihadist Next Door," *New York Times Magazine*, Jan. 31, 2010.

²⁰ Remarks by Ken Menkhaus, professor at Davidson College, during Sept. 27, 2010 conference in Washington, D.C., hosted by Reserve Officers Association.

²¹ Andrea Elliott, "A Call to Jihad from Somalia, Answered in America," *New York Times*, July 12, 2009; "Joining the Fight in Somalia," *New York Times*, July 12, 2009; "Suspects Free with Conditions in Minn. Terror Case," *AP*, July 17, 2010.

As the FBI intensified its efforts to identify Americans recruited by al Shabaab, it encountered additional cases, not all of whom are Somali. In June 2010, for example, U.S. authorities arrested two New Jersey men, Mohamed Mahmood Alessa and Carlos Eduardo Almonte, at Kennedy International Airport as they prepared to depart for Egypt and then join al Shabaab. Almonte is a naturalized U.S. citizen born in the Dominican Republic and Alessa was born in the United States to Palestinian and Jordanian parents. At least 26 men and women have now been charged in the United States for either joining al Shabaab, planning to do so or for helping others to get there. At least five have pleaded guilty. In an effort to staunch the problem in the Minnesota diaspora, Somali elders and community leaders have begun speaking out against al Shabaab and urging young Somalis to resist the organization's recruitment efforts.²²

Diasporas in other countries have also been subject to successful al Shabaab recruitment. The Somali community in the United Kingdom, estimated at 250,000, is the largest in Europe. Somali community leaders there fear that up to 100 young men and women have joined al Shabaab. The recruits from the United Kingdom also include a few of Pakistani, Bangladeshi and West African origin. Al Shabaab videos have portrayed young Somalis with British accents urging others to come and join the fight. The head of MI5, Jonathan Evans, said it is only a matter of time before there are terrorist attacks in the UK inspired by those fighting with al Shabaab. There are about 25,000 Somalis in Sweden. The Swedish state security police estimate that about twenty have joined al Shabaab or one of the other armed opposition groups in Somalia. The Swedish government believes that five have been killed and at least ten remain at large in Somalia. The Australian government charged several young men linked to al Shabaab with a plot to attack a Sydney military base. The security and intelligence service in Denmark, which has a Somali community of about 10,000, warned that several members of this community have been recruited by al Shabaab. A small number of Somalis in Canada, Germany and Norway have also responded to al Shabaab's call to arms. These are only the cases that we know about. There is almost no capacity to track the movement in and out of the Somali diaspora in Africa and the Middle East.²³

²² William K. Rashbaum, "Two Arrested at Kennedy Airport on Terror Charges," *New York Times*, June 6, 2010; Mike Levine, "After Crawling Onto U.S. Radar, Somalia Extremists Pose Threat—But Will They Go Global?" *Fox News*, Aug. 20, 2010; Amy Forliti, "Minneapolis Somalis Meet with FBI, Denounce al-Shabab," *AP*, Sept. 1, 2010.

²³ Mark Townsend, "Britons Join the Jihadist Ranks to Fight in Somalia," *Observer*, May 2, 2010; Harnisch, p. 32; Karl Ritter, "Sweden Rattled by Somali Militants in Its Midst," *Washington Post*, Jan. 24, 2010; Raffaello Pantucci, "Understanding the Al Shabaab Networks," Australian Strategic Policy Institute Policy Analysis, Oct. 13, 2009, pp. 3–4; "Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia," p. 32; "Somali Bomber 'Was from Denmark'," *BBC*, Dec. 10, 2009; "Kenyan Reporter Recounts Somali Americans' Journey to Join Al Shabaab," *Star* (Nairobi), Aug. 25, 2010; "Somalia's Foreign Fighters," p. 8; Richard Norton-Taylor, "MI5 Chief Warns of Terror Threat from Britons Trained in Somalia," *Guardian*, Sept. 17, 2010.

Conclusion

The employment of foreign fighters by al Shabaab is both a strength and a weakness. In some cases, they bring specialized skills such as bomb making, battlefield experience and fluency in English. On the other hand, al Shabaab attracted much of its support by condemning the engagement in Somalia of foreign troops from Ethiopia and the African Union. Somalis generally do not want foreigners involved in their political life. Somalis from the diaspora who are supporting al Shabaab are probably fully accepted by indigenous Somalis. Non-Somalis, on the other hand, are looked upon with disapproval and may become the Achilles' heel of al Shabaab. The skills provided by foreign fighters are likely to diminish over time as al Shabaab develops these same skills within its Somali supporters.²⁴ Even now, al Shabaab makes every effort to minimize the overt role of non-Somalis in the organization. When al Shabaab militia, for example, took control of Afmadow District in the Lower Juba, the visible fighters were all Somalis. Behind the scenes, however, were several non-Somalis who made the key decisions.²⁵

A huge question, for which we do not yet have an answer, is the degree to which al Shabaab's draconian tactics such as suicide bombings, occasional beheadings, forced marriages between Somali women and foreign fighters, etc. will alienate a critical mass of Somalis. In 2010, during the holy month of Ramadan, al Shabaab even stepped up its reign of terror against the TFG and African Union forces in Mogadishu.²⁶ In October 2010, al Shabaab deputy commander in chief, Sheikh Mukhtar Robow, reportedly sent his Rahanweyn clan fighters from Mogadishu to his stronghold in Baidoa in south-central Somalia over disagreements with Godane.²⁷ However, speaking from a mosque in Baidoa, Robow subsequently denied any rift within al Shabaab.²⁸ As of late 2010, there was no clarification of Robow's status. If the initial report is accurate, however, it would be a major blow to al Shabaab. Although Somalis are speaking out increasingly against imported foreign tactics, the situation has not reached a point where it endangers al Shabaab's control over nearly all of southern and central Somalia. Al Shabaab filled a political vacuum and there is not yet any equivalent, opposing force to challenge its control.

²⁴ Comment by Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, Director of the Center for the Study of Terrorist Radicalization at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, at Sept. 27, 2010, conference in Washington hosted by Reserve Officers Association.

²⁵ Conversation in Nairobi, Kenya, on July 26, 2010, between author and a Somali who was in the area at the time of the takeover.

²⁶ Abdulkadir Khalif, "Al Shabaab Continues Its Rule of Terror. . . Even in the Holy Month," *East African*, Sept. 6, 2010.

²⁷ African Union, "Report of the Chairperson of the Commission on the Situation in Somalia," Oct. 15, 2010, p. 7.

²⁸ Oct. 13, 2010, report on Somali website www.somaaljecel.com.

One recent hypothesis suggests that al Shabaab wants to maintain the status quo rather than capture all of Mogadishu and then be saddled with responsibility for governing Somalia. It is true that al Shabaab has sub-contracted governance to local groups in many but not all of the areas that it controls.²⁹ While preferring the status quo is an interesting concept, the evidence does not support this hypothesis. Al Shabaab continues to make every effort to dislodge from Mogadishu African Union troops, the only military force that permits the TFG to maintain its presence in the capital. To underscore its intentions, al Shabaab conducted suicide bombings in Kampala in an effort to force Uganda to remove its troops from the African Union force in Mogadishu. In August and September 2010, al Shabaab initiated major attacks, without success, to seize parts of Mogadishu under the control of African Union forces. These are not the actions of an organization satisfied with the status quo. Rather, they reflect a desire to control as much of Somalia, and probably beyond, as it can seize.

Perhaps a more important question is whether al Shabaab's priority is to take political power in Somalia or transform Somali society into a strict Islamic state. Different al Shabaab leaders probably have different priorities, but for the time being the organization seems committed to achieving both goals.



²⁹ Comments by Menkhaus and Gartenstein-Ross at Sept. 27, 2010, conference in Washington, D.C.