

Executive Summary

During the early 1990s, al-Qa'ida was beginning to coalesce as an organization, honing its operational techniques and dealing with its first internal conflicts. Its private deliberations during this period are revealed by a trove of documents captured in the course of operations supporting the Global War on Terror and maintained in the Department of Defense's Harmony Database. *Al-Qa'ida's (Mis)Adventures in the Horn of Africa*, by the Combating Terrorism Center (CTC) at West Point, draws on recently declassified Harmony documents, predominately from the 1992-1994 time period, original field work by CTC personnel and careful country studies to enrich our understanding of the terrorist group's early successes and failures in the Horn of Africa.

The Horn provides the backdrop for an intriguing tale of al-Qa'ida's first efforts to expand beyond Afghanistan and Sudan. As recounted by its leaders and operatives, al-Qa'ida's efforts to establish a presence in this region and use it as a base for attacks against Western targets elsewhere were largely a failure. Conventional wisdom suggests that Somalia, a failed state, would be an ideal safe haven for al-Qa'ida. Our analysis, however, indicates that weakly governed regions such as coastal Kenya, not failed states like Somalia, provide an environment more conducive to al-Qa'ida's activities. In Somalia, al-Qa'ida's members fell victim to many of the same challenges that plague Western interventions in the Horn. They were prone to extortion and betrayal, found themselves trapped in the middle of incomprehensible (to them) clan conflicts, faced suspicion from the indigenous population, had to overcome significant logistical constraints and were subject to the constant risk of Western military interdiction.

In Kenya, by contrast, the state's poor governance combined with relative stability and basic infrastructure created a potential base area from which to support operations in more unstable regions like Somalia and a favorable operational environment to attack lucrative targets within Kenya. More importantly, outside military forces could not conduct operations because of Kenyan sovereignty, yet the state had little ability to interdict the terror group's actions or effectively police its activities. Evidence from Harmony, open sources and recent in-country interviews support these conclusions. Based on this analysis, we believe coastal Kenya is the decisive arena in the fight against al-Qa'ida and associated movements in the Horn. More generally, our analysis shows that weakly governed states—not failed ones—provide the optimal operational environment for al-Qa'ida and similar terrorist organizations.

This report assesses al-Qa'ida's operations in the Horn of Africa using a similar approach to *Harmony and Disharmony: Exploiting al-Qa'ida's Organizational Vulnerabilities*, the CTC's first report based on the Harmony documents. We identify the organizational challenges al-Qa'ida faced in managing the jihad in the Horn. We also examine the individual motivations of the Somali clans and people that largely resisted al-Qa'ida's recruitment efforts in the region. Our most important new finding is that al-Qa'ida failed to gain traction in Somalia in the early 1990s because: (1) its members were perceived as foreigners; (2) it significantly underestimated the costs of operating in a failed state environment; and (3) its African vanguard did not understand the salience of

either local power structures or local Islamic traditions. In a region dominated by clan-based authority structures and moderate Sufi Islam, the benefits of joining a foreign Salafi terrorist organization paled next to the costs of leaving one's clan.

After reviewing al-Qa`ida's Horn operations from a theoretical standpoint, we analyze al-Qa`ida's prospects in two key Horn countries: Somalia and Kenya. The nations composing the Horn of Africa are often aggregated into one overall counterterrorism strategy. However, each Horn country and even sub-regions within these countries present a unique set of socioeconomic, political and religious factors that create specific challenges and opportunities to both al-Qa'ida and to counterterrorism forces. Effective and efficient counterterrorism efforts in the Horn require tailored strategies that exacerbate the endemic challenges that al-Qa'ida encounters in this inhospitable region and minimize friendly government vulnerabilities.

We conclude this study by identifying concepts and techniques that may be applicable in other regions based upon al-Qa'ida's experiences in the Horn. Our primary conclusion is that the U.S. and its coalition partners should prioritize counterterrorism efforts on weak states—not failed ones. Both types of states demand attention but require different policy solutions. Effective and sustainable counterterrorism in failed states requires engaging with sub-state authorities to give them the means and the motivation to resist foreign intrusion. In weak states, successful counterterrorism policies must address core institutional and governance problems that render such states unable or unwilling to fully deal with the threat. Perversely, U.S. support to state and local counterterrorism efforts can create incentives to tolerate low levels of terrorism, a problem best addressed by conditioning aid on counterterrorism effort rather than on the presence of a threat.

To ensure Somalia remains an inhospitable location for foreign terrorists, we suggest four principles that should guide counterterrorism policy: (1) prevent the creation of a Somali state based on jihadi ideology, in part by leveraging the divisions between Somalis and foreign jihadis created by differences in Islamic ideology; (2) selectively empower local authority structures; (3) publicize the elitist nature of al-Qa'ida fighters and their disrespect for Somalis; and (4) maintain the capacity to interdict high value al-Qa'ida targets and provide humanitarian support, but minimize foreign military presence on the ground in the region.

In the past, al-Qa'ida has sought to draw the U.S. into entanglements where it can bleed the U.S.'s military and economic resources. In Somalia, al-Qa'ida encountered an entanglement of its own. Policy makers must understand how places like Somalia—where al-Qa'ida became plagued by clan conflicts and excessive operational costs—provide opportunities to employ an economy-of-force strategy whereby U.S. forces contain and monitor al-Qa'ida. This graduated containment approach to dealing with Somalia and other failed states would build rings of security around the failed state through diplomatic engagement with nation-states and local authority structures, increased military capability within states and economic development.

To reduce the attractiveness of Kenya as a venue for terrorist activity, U.S. policy should seek to implement the following measures: (1) focus on coastal Kenya where al-Qa'ida finds a Muslim populace that is distrustful of the central government and is tolerant of al-Qa'ida's ideology; (2) use targeted aid to raise al-Qa'ida's operating costs in at-risk areas; (3) support non-governmental organizations and inter-governmental organizations promoting democratic values among Muslim political parties and candidates in order to provide an ideological counter-weight to jihadi appeals; (4) subsidize efforts to address non-terrorism concerns, such as property crime and poor health care, in order to bolster government legitimacy and increase citizens' willingness to work with government on security issues; and (5) realign counterterrorism funding such that it increases state capacity without creating incentives for the Kenyan government to tolerate low levels of terrorism.

Given the Horn of Africa's history as a venue for terrorist attacks, and its potential value as a base area for jihadi operations, continued vigilance is required. By focusing efforts on weak states, working through local allies at the lowest possible level and supporting institutional reforms that eliminate incentives to tolerate low levels of terrorism, policy makers can efficiently ensure a greater threat does not develop in this important region.

Part II of the report provides summaries and full English translations of the twenty-seven recently declassified Harmony documents used in the study. The translated documents and the complete, un-translated originals are accessible at <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/aq.asp>. Key authors of these Harmony documents and terrorist groups operating in the Horn are profiled in the Appendices.

Work for this project contributes to the CTC's mission to prepare current and future leaders to better understand and respond to the terrorist threats facing our nation. As part of the Department of Social Sciences at the U.S. Military Academy, research conducted by the CTC faculty and staff is integrated into the Academy's curriculum and supports outreach efforts to inform military and civilian leaders engaged in formulating and executing counterterrorism policies. Please direct specific questions on this report or the CTC's Harmony Project in general to Clint Watts, CTC Executive Officer, or LTC Joe Felter, CTC Director. They can be reached by email at ctcharmony@usma.edu, or phone: 845-938-8495.

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