

1. Introduction

The Horn of Africa has been an important area of operations for al-Qa'ida and the jihadi movement¹ since the early 1990s. Recent information campaigns by Ayman al-Zawahiri and other jihadis demonstrate al-Qa'ida's desire to make Somalia a new front for jihadis to face off against the West. For example, in early 2007, Zawahiri called for attacks on Ethiopian forces in Somalia using "ambushes, mines, raids and martyrdom-seeking raids to devour them as the lions devour their prey," which strongly suggests that al-Qa'ida desires to use the Horn as a theater of operations.² The degree to which al-Qa'ida has actually established a foothold in the region—and why—is the subject of significant debate among analysts and policy makers. Much of this debate has focused on the potential threat from terrorism in the region, without paying sufficient attention to the operational challenges al-Qa'ida and other groups have faced when operating in the Horn. Taking these challenges into account, we find that in this region al-Qa'ida has been moderately successful when operating in weak states like Kenya but has largely failed to establish itself in failed states like Somalia.

To better understand al-Qa'ida's successes and failures in the Horn of Africa, we analyze and incorporate information from 27 newly declassified internal al-Qa'ida documents related to the region. These documents were captured during operations in support of the Global War on Terror and are maintained in the Department of Defense's Harmony Database. The vast majority of these documents provide detailed accounts of al-Qa'ida's efforts in Somalia between 1992 and 1994. This report builds on the theoretical framework presented in the CTC's study, *Harmony and Disharmony: Exploiting al-Qa'ida's Organizational Vulnerabilities*,³ and provides recommendations for effective counterterrorism policies informed by these new insights into al-Qa'ida's early operations. We begin the report by developing a theoretical lens to assess terrorist operations in this region and in general. Next we present case studies that assess al-Qa'ida's operations in Somalia and Kenya—both of which have experienced significant al-Qa'ida activities, and whose unique local conditions each presented the terrorist network with a different set of underlying challenges and opportunities. Al-Qa'ida's successes and failures in the context of these African states have significant implications for developing more effective methods to reduce the threat of transnational terrorism in both weakly governed states and failed states; in this region or wherever similar governance conditions exist.

Our approach to understanding the threat of terrorism in the Horn of Africa is to carefully analyze the tasks that terrorists must accomplish and ask how the situation in the Horn makes these tasks easier or harder. Our starting point is that terrorist

¹ We use the term as it is widely used in both the Western counterterrorism community and the Arab media. See William McCants, *Militant Ideology Atlas* (West Point, NY: U.S. Military Academy, 2006), 5.

² Ayman al-Zawahiri audio tape, January 5, 2007. See translation at "Al Zawahiri Audio Urges Somalis, Muslims to Fight Ethiopian Forces," *What Extremists Say*, U.S. Central Command. Available at <http://www.centcom.mil/sites/uscentcom1/What%20Extremists%20Say/Al-ZawahiriAudioUrgesSomalis,MuslimsToFightEthiopianForces2.aspx> [accessed 25 February 2007].

³ *Harmony and Disharmony: Exploiting al-Qa'ida's Organizational Vulnerabilities* (West Point, NY: U.S. Military Academy, 2006). Available at <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/aq.asp>.

organizations may seek to use the Horn of Africa in two ways. First, they may use it as a place from which to operate, as a base of support. Here we can think of how al-Qa'ida used Khartoum as a place to maintain training camps and to conduct fundraising enterprises from 1992 to 1996, or of the al-Qa'ida militants who sought refuge in Somalia after the fall of the Taliban regime.⁴ Second, they may use the Horn as a theater of operations. Al-Qa'ida did this in 1998 when it attacked American embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam and again in 2002 when it attacked the Paradise Hotel and a jet leaving the Moi International Airport in Kenya.

Because a core constraint facing all terrorist organizations is maintaining an acceptable level of security, the different types of environmental conditions and government capacity within the Horn means the threat from terrorism varies dramatically across the region. For example, areas such as Nairobi may be safe-albeit-expensive places for terrorists to engage in logistical tasks, but mounting terror attacks there may be relatively challenging to the extent that the Kenyan government decides to crack down.⁵ In contrast, areas like Lu'uq in Somalia may be weakly governed, and hence a good place to locate military training camps, but the infrastructure is so poor that logistical challenges essentially eliminate the area's military utility.⁶ Moreover, the lack of a strong central Somali government means that regional enemies have free rein to engage in cross-border military operations.⁷

To date, the details of terrorist operations in the Horn of Africa have been largely misunderstood. The Harmony documents in this study outline al-Qa'ida's operational environment in the early 1990s and suggest that common assumptions about the Horn as an operational environment and base of support are largely mistaken. In particular, the anarchic conditions in Somalia that many believe serve al-Qa'ida's purposes turned out to be as challenging for al-Qa'ida as for the Western organizations seeking to help Somalia. Al-Qa'ida's experiences in Somalia and Kenya illustrate the underlying conditions that have made the Horn of Africa more or less suitable for al-Qa'ida. In these two Horn countries, we find significant al-Qa'ida activity over the past fifteen years, as illustrated in the documents from the Harmony database. However, each exhibits a different mix of al-Qa'ida activity, government capacity and counterterrorism response. While al-Qa'ida has operated elsewhere in the Horn, our case studies of these two countries—supported by new evidence from the Harmony database—yield strikingly different conclusions from conventional thinking on the region.

⁴ The Sudanese government laid out the welcome mat for a wide variety of Islamic militants in the first half of the 1990s, leading the U.S. State Department to designate Sudan a state sponsor of terrorism in August 1993. However, as soon as Sudan began to face real costs for its support of militancy—following the failed June 1995 assassination attempt against Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak—its leaders became very careful about which groups they would support, avoiding links with transnational groups. In recent years Sudan has been applauded by the State Department for its cooperative stance against transnational terrorists despite once being the global headquarters for al-Qa'ida.

⁵ On surveillance of Arabs in Nairobi making operations difficult see Harmony, AFGP-2002-800597, 7.

⁶ Harmony, AFGP-2002-600104, 5.

⁷ Ethiopia effectively crushed the Islamic Union of Western Somalia (*al-Ittihad al-Islami*, or AIAI) in a series of raids from August 1996 through January 1997 against bases in Lu'uq and Buulo Haawa; see International Crisis Group, *Somalia's Islamists*, Africa Report No. 100 (Nairobi and Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2005), 9. Available at <http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=3830&l=1>.

For example, a number of analysts have argued that al-Qa'ida has deep, long-standing ties to Islamic militants in Somalia and could draw on these ties to use Somalia as a staging ground for further attacks.⁸ Chapter 3 of this report disputes that conclusion. Both the Harmony documents and recent journalistic and academic research suggest that the links are actually quite tenuous. Within Somalia, a failed state allegedly ideal for terrorist organizations, al-Qa'ida struggled to build a coalition in 1993-1994. Moreover, al-Qa'ida had little success forging alliances with local militias in Somalia⁹ and its involvement in attacks against Western forces in Somalia was tangential at best.¹⁰ Finally, foreign militants operating in Somalia are exposed to constant risk of detention and arrest by Western counterterrorism efforts.¹¹ Our analysis, informed by the documents from the Harmony database, reveals that while Somalia provided occasional passage and temporary refuge to al-Qa'ida, the country's lawlessness and isolation—which many cite as ideal for al-Qa'ida's efforts—were seen by the group as constraining their ability to create a secure base for operations.

In contrast to Somalia, analysts assessing the threat of terrorism in Kenya often portray it as being smaller than it truly is. Kenyan counterterrorism efforts, supported by generous Western assistance, have been at best ineffective and at worst counter-productive. In Kenya, a democratic nation with relatively weak counterterrorism capacity, al-Qa'ida operatives moved freely into Somalia during the early 1990s, conducted attacks against the U.S. Embassy in 1998 and continued to launch attacks against Western targets as late as 2002. Despite extensive U.S. support for countering al-Qa'ida within the country, Kenyan efforts have likely increased the alienation of the country's minority Muslim community, while Western aid has done little to increase popular confidence in the Kenyan authorities—especially given the economic and political conditions in their country. Taken together, these circumstances suggest that Kenyans are more likely to ignore foreign terrorists operating in their midst. Moreover, we find a pernicious pattern in Kenya. For the population, the threat of terrorism is a low priority relative to other security concerns. For the government, having some alleged terrorist activity in Kenya brings substantial Western military assistance that may outweigh the costs in terms of lost tourist revenue. In Chapter 4, we examine how this unique situation makes crafting effective counterterrorism policy extremely problematic for the U.S. government.

Our theoretical framework and case studies support a number of conclusions and policy recommendations for fighting terrorism in the Horn of Africa as well as globally.

⁸ A typical example is James Phillips, "Somalia and al-Qaeda: Implications for the War on Terrorism," *Backgrounder* no. 1526 (Washington, D.C.: The Heritage Foundation, 2002). Available at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/HomelandDefense/BG1526.cfm>.

⁹ Chapter 3, below, discusses this problem at length.

¹⁰ Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 188-9.

¹¹ *Counter-Terrorism in Somalia: Losing Hearts and Minds?*, Africa Report No. 95 (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2005), 9-13. This otherwise excellent report includes some odd conclusions about the potential for Somalia as a staging ground for terrorism elsewhere. The report argues that "Somalia's lack of a functioning central government, unpatrolled borders, and unregulated arms markets make it a useful platform for actions aimed at foreign interests elsewhere in the region." (*Counter-Terrorism in Somalia*, 6) This conclusion does not follow from the facts presented in the report, which details the myriad problems jihadi terrorist have faced in Somalia.

In Chapter 5, we discuss several different approaches that Western nations might use in dealing with failed and weak states. Our analysis suggests that weak states, not failed ones, provide the greatest potential terrorism threat. In weak states, groups like al-Qa'ida find a target-rich environment where they are protected from Western counterterrorism efforts and yet not significantly interdicted by the state's law enforcement and intelligence apparatus. Meanwhile, in failed states like Somalia, al-Qa'ida suffers from logistical constraints, a hostile set of clans and other local powers and relatively unrestricted Western counterterrorism efforts. Our analysis thus reveals the peculiarities of the weak-versus-failed state dynamic and suggests a host of political, economic and military techniques that might be used in the Horn of Africa and globally to deny al-Qa'ida safe haven.

The appendices of the report provide valuable additional details on specific terrorists and terrorist groups active in the Horn. Throughout the study, we make use of newly declassified documents from the Harmony database. These documents support and deepen the observations provided in our theoretical and case study sections. Part II of this report contains summaries and English translations of these newly declassified documents, which can inform future research and provide more insight into al-Qa'ida's weaknesses as well as methods for exploiting these shortcomings.

The Africa Corps: al-Qa'ida's Operations in the Horn of Africa

The Horn of Africa presents the U.S. and its coalition partners with a diverse set of regional and country-specific challenges. Understanding the threat from terrorists operating in the Horn requires an appreciation of how terrorists' core organizational challenges play out in light of the peculiar history of the region. For more than 40 years, the Horn has been plagued by strife and conflict. Civil wars in Ethiopia, Somalia and Sudan have been compounded by several interstate wars between Ethiopia and Somalia (the 1977-1978 Ogaden War) and between Ethiopia and Eritrea (the 1998-2000 border war). Additionally, understanding the terrorist threat to this region is made more challenging by the numerous insurgent organizations that have been created to fight as proxy armies or have arisen to represent the interests of various populations.¹² Many of these organizations have shifted ideologically over the years, moving from nationalism to Marxism-Leninism to Islamism. In the Horn, by and large, groups like the Eritrean People's Liberation Forces (EPLF) choose their ideology to maximize the flow of outside resources—thereby maximizing their chances for military success in the name of larger political goals. Thus, what appears to be a Salafi-jihadi organization committed to supporting attacks against the West may in fact be a localized insurgent group seeking to wrap themselves in an ideological mantle to secure funds from wealthy foreign militants.

This backdrop—as well as the varying levels of government control and government corruption that exists throughout the region—creates unique challenges for both Western governments and al-Qa'ida in the Horn of Africa. The Harmony documents provided in Part II of this report describe al-Qa'ida in its infancy and in its first

¹² For a useful summary of competing local interests see International Crisis Group, *Somalia: The Tough Part is Ahead*, Africa Briefing No. 45(Nairobi and Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2007), 4-6. Available at <http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=4630&l=1>.

operational theater. In 1992, Osama bin Laden moved his operations to Sudan and immediately initiated a series of business developments in and around Khartoum.¹³ Within months, bin Laden had deployed cadres of operatives into the Horn of Africa in an effort to spread Salafism and the doctrine of jihad, but al-Qa'ida's Africa Corps ultimately failed to create a lasting front on the continent. The challenges of logistics, distance and culture that have undermined many foreign endeavors into rural Africa plagued al-Qa'ida's operations as well. By 1996, bin Laden and his Africa Corps had been run out of Sudan and were headed back to Afghanistan.¹⁴

The Harmony documents made available for this project provide a glimpse into the operational planning of the Africa Corps and specifically their efforts in Somalia. Although bin Laden's initial activities in Sudan were focused on military training and business ventures in the Horn, he was infuriated with the continuing presence of U.S. military forces in the "holy land" of Saudi Arabia and could not remain a mere Khartoum businessman. By the end of 1992, he began openly discussing the issue of U.S. troops in Somalia. Together with his religious advisor, Mamdouh Salim (aka Abu Hajer al-Iraqi), bin Laden began a campaign to recast the "far enemy" of Islam as the United States. With the fall of the communist regime of the Soviet Union, he and Salim turned their sights on the United States as the main international thief of Muslim oil wealth, occupier of the holy land and embodiment of corrupt Western values.¹⁵ Unable to operate in Saudi Arabia, al-Qa'ida turned to Somalia as a possible base from which to strike the Americans and drive them out of the Middle East.¹⁶ From Khartoum, al-Qa'ida deployed teams of operatives led by senior members with experience in military operations, logistics, religion, propaganda and negotiation. The Africa Corps, led by Mohammed Atef (aka Abu Hafs), ventured into Somalia with high hopes for jihad and redemption.¹⁷

The mission of what we will call al-Qa'ida-Somalia began in late-January 1993 when Abu Hafs designated a team of veterans to conduct operation "MSK" (an Arabic word meaning 'holding' or 'grabbing'). These veterans immediately began preparing for deployment to Africa. Beginning on 4 February 1993, al-Qa'ida members departed for Nairobi, Kenya. Abu Hafs tasked them to: "1- Find a location for military operations that would replace Afghanistan.... 2- [T]he location must be near the Arab region.... 3- [A]ttempt to help the brothers in Somalia and Ogaden."¹⁸ Al-Qa'ida believed that Somalia would provide another safe haven for their operations, allow them to target the U.S. in both Somalia and the Arabian Peninsula and provide a steady flow of recruits. None of these hopes came to fruition.

As described in the Harmony documents, the first elements of al-Qa'ida-Somalia departed from Peshawar, Pakistan through Kenya en route to Somalia on 4 February 1993. The group behaved much like a traditional special-forces operation. The initial group of twelve senior al-Qa'ida operatives was broken into two- and three-man teams

¹³ See Wright, *The Looming Tower*, 165.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 219-222.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 170-175.

¹⁶ The first al-Qa'ida attack was in December 1992 against U.S. troops in Yemen who were traveling to Somalia.

¹⁷ See Appendix B-II.

¹⁸ Harmony, AFGP-2002-600104, 1.

for the mission. Prior to departing, the teams went through intensive training, learning how to blend into their future environment, reviewing travel and transportation procedures and preparing for reconnaissance operations. Upon arriving in country, al-Qa'ida-Somalia began establishing three training camps with the agreement of the General Islamic Union, the Somali militant group better known as al-Ittihad al-Islami (AIAI).¹⁹ The first two camps were established in Lu'uq and Bussaso, and a third was established later in the Ogaden region. In Nairobi, al-Qa'ida's ominously named "Team Green," led by Saif al-Islam, received new members from bases of operation in Pakistan and Sudan.²⁰ Al-Qa'ida-Somalia used an air infiltration route from Wilson Airport in Nairobi,²¹ a water route from Lamu, Kenya, and at some point an overland route from Djibouti across the Ethiopian Ogaden region.²² Al-Qa'ida's Africa Corps operations appear to have been headquartered in Khartoum from 1993-1994. Cells operating in the region maintained communications with personnel in camps in Afghanistan as well.²³

The Harmony documents reveal that over a roughly 18 month period, al-Qa'ida found more adversity than success in Somalia. In order to project power, al-Qa'ida needed to be able to promote its ideology, gain an operational safe haven, manipulate underlying conditions to secure popular support and have adequate financing for continued operations. It achieved none of these objectives.

In pursuit of its first objective, al-Qa'ida-Somalia tried to promote its ideology through propaganda and by establishing administrative offices in each military training program. However, the Salafi message largely fell on deaf ears. While the military training was of value to members of AIAI, it did not ensure their loyalty to the greater jihadi movement. Al-Qa'ida-Somalia likewise failed to achieve its second objective as it faced constant security headaches in the seemingly anarchic environment of clan-dominated Somalia. Making matters worse, the challenges of long, insecure lines of logistics seriously hampered operations. Gaining local support was no easier. At one point al-Qa'ida operatives were so frustrated that they listed going after clan leaders as the second priority for jihad after expelling Western forces.²⁴ Internal discussions identify the lack of adequate communication equipment as an obstacle to building a coalition among Somalia's diverse Muslim clans.²⁵ Finally, insufficient financing ultimately made operations impossible to sustain on a long-term basis.²⁶

Al-Qa'ida's failures in Somalia and elsewhere in the region are every bit as instructive as its tragic successes in Kenya. Weak states in this region provided terrorists with much greater opportunities than failed states. This pattern suggests that key adjustments to counterterrorism policy are in order at both the strategic and operational

¹⁹ See Appendix A-I for more in-depth background on AIAI.

²⁰ Harmony, AFGP-2002-600104, 2-4.

²¹ This facility is used primarily for small aircraft for local and regional flights, including tourist charters.

²² Harmony, AFGP-2002-600113, 1-3.

²³ See Harmony, AFGP-2002-800081, which shows the routes that al-Qa'ida members took to South Asia.

²⁴ Harmony, AFGP-2002-800600, 2.

²⁵ The next chapter discusses the underlying conditions that worked to the disadvantage of al-Qa'ida throughout their campaign in the Horn.

²⁶ For detailed accounts of Somali training camps, refer specifically to Harmony documents AFGP-2002-600053, AFGP-2002-600104, AFGP-2002-800597 and AFGP-2002-800640.

levels. At the strategic level, security assistance should focus on improving counterterrorism and governance in weak states, not on bringing order to failed states. At the operational level, engaging with local allies, often non-state actors, may very efficiently deny terrorists the use of ungoverned regions. Our careful examination of al-Qa'ida operations in the Horn, informed by internal documents that provide a window into the group's thinking, suggests that the Horn was a very difficult place for al-Qa'ida to operate.

In the following chapter, we explain why the Horn was such a difficult environment for al-Qa'ida, drawing on key insights gained from the group's internal documents and our previous analysis of organizational weaknesses in terrorist groups. We then use case studies of Somalia and Kenya to understand both al-Qa'ida's past experiences in this region and the prospects for future jihadi operation in Somalia, Kenya and the rest of the Horn. Finally, we develop a set of options for policy-makers seeking to ensure that the Horn and similar regions remain inhospitable to transnational terrorists.



Figure 1. The Horn of Africa