

## Somalia's New Government and the Challenge of Al-Shabab

By David H. Shinn

AFTER THE SEPTEMBER 11 attacks, the Bush administration's foreign policy toward Somalia focused primarily on counterterrorism.<sup>1</sup> This focus was a result of Somalia's proximity to the Middle East, U.S. concern that al-Qa`ida might relocate to the country, a history of terrorist bombings targeting Western interests in nearby Kenya and Tanzania and early contact between al-Qa`ida and individuals in Somalia. Although ties exist between al-Qa`ida and Somalia's al-Shabab militant group, the overwhelming objective of U.S. policy in Somalia should not be confronting international terrorist activity. Instead, the United States should contribute to creating a moderate government of national unity in Somalia, which offers the best hope of minimizing Somali links to international terrorism. Long-term U.S. interests in the Horn of Africa will not be served by a policy that is consumed with military action to the detriment of supporting economic development and a broad based Somali government.

This article outlines al-Qa`ida's early activity in Somalia, provides background and current information on al-Shabab including its recruitment of Americans and Europeans, and finally offers some policy suggestions on how best to stabilize Somalia.

### Early Al-Qa`ida Activity in Somalia

Al-Qa`ida links to Somalia date back to 1992. At that time, the United States prepared to send troops to the country to open humanitarian corridors to feed starving Somalis in an operation known as the Unified Task Force. Declassified documents made available through the Harmony Project at West Point's Combating Terrorism Center show that the Africa regional al-Qa`ida leader, Abu Hafs, made multiple trips to Somalia from the al-Qa`ida base in Khartoum in

1992.<sup>2</sup> The first al-Qa`ida operatives arrived in Somalia in February 1993 and, working closely with an extremist Somali group known as al-Ittihad al-Islami (AIAI), established three training camps. The evidence concerning al-Qa`ida's role in attacks against U.S. and subsequent UN forces in Somalia during 1993 is conflicting. It appears, however, that al-Qa`ida claimed more involvement than it deserved. Al-Qa`ida underestimated the cost of its Somalia operation and overestimated the degree to which Somalis would become jihadists. It especially failed to appreciate the strength of traditional Sufi doctrine in Somali Islam.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, al-Qa`ida did manage to recruit a number of young Somalis who probably formed the core structure of subsequent radical Islamist groups that adopted terrorist tactics.<sup>4</sup>

The United States believed that three al-Qa`ida operatives—Fazul Abdullah Muhammad of the Comoro Islands, Abu Taha al-Sudani of Sudan and Salah Ali Salah Nabhan of Kenya—who took part in the 1998 U.S. Embassy bombings in Nairobi, Kenya and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania benefited from AIAI protection in Somalia.<sup>5</sup> Although AIAI eventually disappeared as an identifiable organization in Somalia, a number of Somali groups professed to carry on its radical agenda, the most important of which is now known as al-Shabab (The Youth). In the meantime, al-Qa`ida continued to call on Somalis to wage a jihad against Ethiopian forces in Somalia and their U.S. allies. The United States pursued a policy focused primarily on capturing the three persons linked to the embassy bombings and Somali support for international terrorism.<sup>6</sup> In 2007, an Ethiopian air attack against fleeing Islamists near the

Somali-Kenyan border resulted in the death of one of the three, Abu Taha al-Sudani.

### The Rise of Shabab

Aden Hashi "Ayro," a former military chief of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) who had previously received training with al-Qa`ida and the Taliban in Afghanistan, established al-Shabab as early as 2004.<sup>7</sup> Ayro attracted disaffected young Somalis by combining Somali nationalism, reverence for Islam and after 2006 a clarion call to expel Ethiopian military forces that had moved deep into Somalia at the request of the Somali Transitional Federal Government (TFG). Al-Shabab became a highly disciplined force.<sup>8</sup> Many of its followers were probably driven more by Somali nationalism than religious fanaticism. A subset of the organization, however, committed itself to creating an Islamic caliphate in Somalia. This select group reportedly received training in Eritrea for making roadside bombs, car bombs and suicide vests.<sup>9</sup> From the beginning, al-Shabab has been a decentralized organization and increasingly subject to clan and regional fissures. There are persistent reports that Sudanese, Saudis, Egyptians, Pakistanis and Yemenis have joined al-Shabab and that most of its funding comes from the Somali diaspora and foreign Islamist supporters.<sup>10</sup> Together with other organized groups in Somalia, al-Shabab likely obtains a residual cut from some of the piracy ransom funds.

In May 2008, a U.S. cruise missile attack killed al-Shabab's founder in the town of Dusa Mareb in the Galguduud region of central Somalia. The primary al-Shabab spokesperson since Ayro's death has been Muktar Robow, his former deputy. Although factions continue to hamper the organization, al-Shabab became

2 *Al-Qa`ida's (Mis)Adventures in the Horn of Africa* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2006).

3 Salafist movements arose in Africa and other regions to counter the "innovative" customs and traditions of Muslims who adhered to Sufi Islam. Al-Qa`ida largely pursues a Salafist ideology.

4 David H. Shinn, "Al-Qaeda in East Africa and the Horn," *The Journal of Conflict Studies* 27:1 (2007): pp. 56-58.

5 "Target of U.S. Strike Wanted for Multiple Attacks," Associated Press, January 9, 2007; "Senior U.S. Official Calls on Islamic Militia in Somalia to Turn Over al-Qaeda Suspects," Associated Press, June 21, 2006.

6 Shinn, pp. 59-64.

7 For an excellent analysis of al-Shabab as of early 2008, see Anonymous, "Somalia's al-Shabab Reconstitutes Fighting Force," *CTC Sentinel* 1:3 (2008). In addition, see Stig Jarle Hansen, "Misspent Youth - Somalia's Shabab Insurgents," *Jane's Intelligence Review*, September 1, 2008.

8 Al-Shabab does not take instruction from one hierarchical structure. Each splinter group or fighting unit, however, is disciplined and effective militarily.

9 Ibid.

10 This information is based on the author's own confidential interviews.

1 The United States provided modest amounts of humanitarian assistance to Somalia each year since U.S. troops left the country in 1994. Moreover, in 2008 the United States began to actively support the political reconciliation process.

even stronger after Ayro's death.<sup>11</sup> His killing underscored outside involvement in Somalia and bolstered the resolve of al-Shabab's supporters to oppose all foreign elements.<sup>12</sup> After his death, al-Shabab stepped up its attacks on the TFG and Ethiopians and demonstrated increasing military success.

#### Shabab's Leadership and Ties to Al-Qa`ida

Al-Shabab's leadership is decentralized, and some sub-clan militia units may just be calling themselves al-Shabab as a matter of convenience.<sup>13</sup> Ibrahim Haji Jama "al-Afghani" operates in the area where Somaliland, Puntland and Ethiopia converge.<sup>14</sup> His group consists mainly of Isaaq and Harti clan members and reportedly carried out attacks against foreigners in Somaliland during 2003 and 2004.<sup>15</sup> Shaykh Fuad Mohamed "Shongole" heads a group of fighters in the ports of Marka and Brava south of Mogadishu.<sup>16</sup> Muktar Robow of the Rahanwayn clan runs the al-Shabab unit in Bay and Bakool regions of central Somalia and is affiliated with the mainly Hawiye/Habir Gidir/Ayr sub-sub-clan unit in southern Mogadishu. He received support in late 2008 from Shaykh Hassan "Turki," who has long been in charge of a militant training camp in Ras Kamboni along the coast at the southern tip of Somalia. Ayro controlled an al-Shabab unit around Dusa Mareb, but this group may now be under the direction of Muktar Robow if it still exists at all.<sup>17</sup>

The strength of al-Shabab's ties to al-Qa`ida are open to debate. Muktar Robow stated in August 2008, "We will take our orders from Shaykh Usama bin Ladin because we are his students."<sup>18</sup> He added, "Most of our leaders were trained

in al-Qa`ida camps. We get our tactics and guidelines from them. Many have spent time with Usama bin Ladin."<sup>19</sup> Radical Somali groups, including al-Shabab, have a history of exaggerating their terrorist credentials. Muktar Robow's statement that al-Shabab takes orders from Bin Ladin may well demonstrate more anger at the United States for killing Ayro than a command and control association with al-Qa`ida.<sup>20</sup> For al-Qa`ida's part, leaders Ayman al-Zawahiri and Abu Yahya al-Libi make frequent references to Somalia in their internet pronouncements. In September 2008, al-Qa`ida operative Salah Ali Salah Nabhan appeared in a propaganda video with Muktar Robow.<sup>21</sup> Nabhan reportedly knows Bin Ladin personally and declared an oath of loyalty on behalf of al-Shabab to Bin Ladin and al-Qa`ida. He has encouraged training in al-Shabab camps and urged fighters to oppose the TFG, Ethiopian forces and African Union peacekeepers.<sup>22</sup> In a mid-February 2009 video, Abu Yahya called on Somalis to oppose the new Somali government and attack African Union peacekeepers.<sup>23</sup> At a March 10 hearing held by the Senate Armed Services Committee, military intelligence chief Lt. Gen. Michael D. Maples suggested that a "formal merger announcement" between al-Qa`ida and al-Shabab is forthcoming.<sup>24</sup> While there are clearly ties between the two organizations, it is important not to overstate their

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Somali expert Ken Menkhaus argues that al-Shabab's attacks against aid workers are a direct response to the U.S. designation of al-Shabab as a terrorist organization in March 2008 and the missile attack that killed Ayro. For more, see Menkhaus, pp. 5, 12, 15-16. Peter Cole of Exclusive Analysis believes that U.S. military intervention in Somalia has actually strengthened al-Shabab. For more, see Royal United Services Institute, "Crisis in the Horn of Africa," conference proceedings, October 23, 2008, p. 17.

<sup>21</sup> Nick Grace, "Shabaab Reaches Out to al Qaeda Senior Leaders, Announces Death of al Sudani," *The Long War Journal*, September 2, 2008.

<sup>22</sup> Nick Grace, "Shabaab Leader Sanctioned as Zawahiri Responds to Group's Oath of Loyalty," *The Long War Journal*, November 21, 2008.

<sup>23</sup> "Al-Qa`ida's Al-Libi Urges Mujahidin in Somalia to Remain Steadfast, Defend Muslim Land," compiled from jihadist websites by NTIS, U.S. Department of Commerce, February 13, 2009.

<sup>24</sup> Maples did not provide the source for this conclusion. See "Haunted by Somalia," *Los Angeles Times*, March 13, 2009.

significance. Indeed, if the merger does occur, it will only further alienate al-Shabab from the vast majority of moderate Somalis.

#### Shabab Recruiting Americans and Europeans

A particularly disturbing turn of events occurred when the FBI reported that during the past 18 months as many as 20 young Somali-Americans may have left their homes in Minneapolis and St. Paul in Minnesota, the largest Somali diaspora in the United States, under suspicious circumstances.<sup>25</sup> A few young Somalis were also recruited in Boston; San Diego; Seattle; Columbus, Ohio; and Portland, Maine.<sup>26</sup> It has been confirmed that several of them found their way to al-Shabab in Somalia. Shirwa Ahmed, a naturalized U.S. citizen, blew himself up in Somalia in October 2008, killing dozens of al-Shabab's opponents.<sup>27</sup> Hassan Burhan and two Somali-American colleagues left Minneapolis in November and made their way to Kismayo, a fundamentalist stronghold.<sup>28</sup> FBI Associate Director Philip Mudd recently stated that the internet encouraged these recruits to go to Somalia, but individuals inside the United States had to help them purchase the airline tickets.<sup>29</sup>

There is also at least one reported case of a Somali who was studying in the United Kingdom returning to Somalia and becoming a suicide bomber.<sup>30</sup> British security officials reported that dozens of extremists have returned to the United Kingdom from terrorist

<sup>25</sup> Dan Ephron and Mark Hosenball, "Recruited for Jihad?" *Newsweek*, February 2, 2009; Kevin Diaz, "FBI Tracks Somali Terror Links in Minneapolis, Elsewhere," *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, March 12, 2009; Spencer S. Hsu and Carrie Johnson, "Somali Americans Recruited by Extremists," *Washington Post*, March 11, 2009.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> "One of Five Suspected Somali Suicide Bomber Laid to Rest," Fox News Minneapolis, December 3, 2008.

<sup>28</sup> Ephron et al.; James Brandon, "Islamist Movements Recruiting in the West for the Somali Jihad," *Terrorism Monitor* 17:1 (2009); Abdi Hassan, "US-Somali Youth Join Jihad in Somalia," *Jerusalem Post*, February 17, 2009.

<sup>29</sup> Dina Temple-Raston, "FBI Believes Missing Men Joined Somali Terrorists," National Public Radio, March 12, 2009. Also see Laura Yuen and Sasha Aslanian, "Online Tools May Have Been Used to Recruit Young Somalis," Minnesota Public Radio, March 6, 2009.

<sup>30</sup> Jonathan Rugman, "Somali Radicals 'Importing Terror to UK' say Intelligence Analysts," *The Times*, February 16, 2009.

<sup>11</sup> Anonymous; Hansen.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ken Menkhaus, "Somalia: A Country in Peril, a Policy Nightmare," *Enough Strategy Paper*, September 2008, p. 6; Personal interview, expatriate NGO representative who has spent considerable time in Somalia, November 9, 2008.

<sup>14</sup> "Two Brutal Stalemates," *Africa Confidential* 49:22 (2008): pp. 6-7.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. This unit may no longer exist, as al-Shabab's forces were largely defeated around Dusa Mareb by rival forces from Ahlu-Sunna wal-Jama.

<sup>18</sup> Edmund Sanders, "Conditions May Be Ripe for Al Qaeda in Somalia," *Los Angeles Times*, August 25, 2008.

training camps in Somalia.<sup>31</sup> There are also numerous reports that Somalis from the large diasporas in Canada and the Scandinavian countries have joined al-Shabab in Somalia.<sup>32</sup>

Most of these cases occurred in 2008. It remains to be seen if al-Shabab can continue to attract young Somalis in the West now that Ethiopian forces have left and the political situation has changed in the country. Although it is not clear why these young Somalis joined al-Shabab, it may have been out of a sense of pursuing Somali nationalism or simply seeking adventure. At this point, there is no evidence to suggest that they went to express anti-American or anti-Western feelings. The deputy director for intelligence at the National Counterterrorism Center, Andrew Liepman, told the Senate that these recruits "are going to Somalia to fight for their homeland, not to join al-Qaeda's jihad against the United States, so far."<sup>33</sup>

#### Shabab Confronts Challenging Situation

Al-Shabab received much of its support inside Somalia because it vigorously opposed the Ethiopian military presence. Somalis rallied to this nationalist cause. At the same time, al-Shabab's tactics of political assassinations, roadside bombings and suicide bombings have alienated many Somalis. For example, al-Shabab took responsibility for the suicide bomb attack on February 22, 2009 that killed 11 African Union peacekeepers from Burundi.<sup>34</sup> Now that Ethiopian forces have left Mogadishu and are confining their military activity to the part of Somalia immediately across the Ethiopian border, al-Shabab's strongest argument has dissolved and it is left with a tactical record that should worry many Somalis. The recent resignation of TFG President Abdullahi Yusuf and his replacement with Shaykh Sharif Shaykh Ahmad further undercut al-Shabab.

31 Ibid.

32 Brandon.

33 Randall Mikkelsen, "Somali-Americans Recruited as 'Cannon Fodder,'" Reuters, March 11, 2009.

34 "Somali Insurgents Kill 11 African Peacekeepers," *Sudan Tribune*, February 22, 2009; "Bombs Kill Somalia Peacekeepers," BBC, February 22, 2009. A Somali-language web site, [www.kataaib.info](http://www.kataaib.info), subsequently posted photos of two young men it said were the suicide bombers responsible for the attack. Many Somalis see the African Union troops as a neutral force.

Shaykh Sharif is a Hawiye/Abgal sub-clan member and was one of the two principal leaders of the ICU that the TFG and Ethiopians deposed late in 2006. Shaykh Sharif recently announced that he will impose Shari`a, neutralizing one of al-Shabab's key demands.<sup>35</sup> Shaykh Sharif has ties to some of the al-Shabab members who once served as part of the ICU militia. Consequently, he is in a position to peel away some of the more moderate or opportunistic members from al-Shabab and convince them to join the new government of national unity. For example, Shaykh Abdirahman Janaqow, a deputy to Shaykh Sharif, publicly attacked al-Shabab during a sermon in Mogadishu in January. He blamed al-Shabab for the collapse of the Islamic Courts and accused it of killing anyone who disagreed with its methods.<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, Shaykh Sharif is driven by a desire to achieve power and must overcome earlier policies that favored shutting down a free press and calling for jihad against Ethiopia.

The other principal ICU leader, Shaykh Hassan Dahir Aweys, remains in exile in Asmara, Eritrea. He opposes Shaykh Sharif and his recent alliance with the TFG. Shaykh Hassan also appears to have close connections with the radical elements of al-Shabab. It is doubtful, however, that Shaykh Hassan has any command and control over al-Shabab. The organization is too decentralized, and the fact that he resides in Eritrea would make any effective control over units in Somalia exceedingly difficult.

Although it remains well financed and is seemingly led by committed jihadists, al-Shabab has become increasingly subject to fissures along sub-clan and regional group lines. Furthermore, by the end of 2008, rival Islamist militia groups began to confront al-Shabab. Ahlu-Sunna wal-Jama, a Sufi brotherhood of moderate Islamists, called in late December for a government of national unity and attacked al-Shabab militias in

35 Shaykh Sharif said he would not institute a strict interpretation of Shari`a. For more, see "Somali Cabinet Votes to Implement Sharia Law," Reuters, March 10, 2009; Mohamed Amiin Adow, "Somali President Bends to Rebel Demand for Sharia Law," CNN, February 28, 2009.

36 "Senior ARS Official Blasts Al-Shabab," Mareeg English News, undated.

Mogadishu.<sup>37</sup> The desecration of grave markers by al-Shabab followers may have contributed to this conflict.<sup>38</sup> Ahlu-Sunna wal-Jama also took control of two towns in central Somalia controlled by al-Shabab, including Ayro's stronghold of Dusa Mareb.<sup>39</sup>

In mid-February 2009, the Somali parliament selected a new prime minister, Omar Abdirashid Ali Sharmarke. From the large Darod/Majerteen sub-clan and the son of an early Somali president, his selection bodes well for building international support for Shaykh Sharif's new government.<sup>40</sup> To its credit, the new government has begun to return to Mogadishu. Shaykh Sharif, Prime Minister Sharmarke and most of his cabinet and nearly 200 members of the enlarged parliament are now back in the capital. Sharmarke has also set as his major priority reconciliation with opposition groups.<sup>41</sup> All of these developments could work to limit al-Shabab's appeal, at least in some areas of Somalia.

#### The Way Forward

The situation on the ground in Somalia is extremely fluid. Al-Shabab remains a significant force but has been undercut by the departure of the Ethiopians and al-Shabab's unpopular tactics and ideology.<sup>42</sup> It is up to the Shaykh Sharif government to prove that it can rally most Somalis to its more moderate agenda. The first priority is the difficult task of reestablishing security. Contrary to popular belief in the West, an enlarged African Union force is not

37 For more on the organization, see Alisha Ryu, "Tensions Mounting between Somali Islamist Groups," *Voice of America*, March 6, 2009; Abdulahi Hassan, "Inside Look at the Fighting Between Al-Shabab and Ahlu-Sunna wal-Jama," *CTC Sentinel* 2:3 (2009).

38 Sufi custom reveres head stones while the absolutist views of al-Shabab oppose the practice. See "Sufi Group Accuses al-Shabaab of Using Foreigners to Destroy Graves," *Garowe Online*, December 26, 2008.

39 Jeffrey Gettleman, "Islamist Militants in Somalia Begin to Fight One Another," *New York Times*, December 29, 2008; Radio Shabelle, January 29-30, 2009.

40 On the other hand, he has no base of political support and may find it difficult to stand up to Shaykh Sharif.

41 "Somali PM Sets Reconciliation, Security Top Priorities," *Xinhua*, February 26, 2009.

42 For a good analysis of al-Shabab's position, see Ken Menkhaus, "Somalia after the Ethiopian Occupation: First Steps to End the Conflict and Combat Extremism," *Enough Strategy Paper*, February 9, 2009.

the answer, although it can continue to play a useful role by keeping the port and airport in Mogadishu out of al-Shabab's hands. The African Union does not have the capacity, funding, experience or willingness to implement a task of this complexity. A UN peacekeeping force would be somewhat more effective, but only if there is a peace to keep that all Somali sides endorse.<sup>43</sup> The international community should continue to help Somalia train a professional, community-based police force that draws its recruits from all regions of Somalia.<sup>44</sup> The UN special envoy to Somalia, Ahmedou Ould-Abdallah, recently commented that efforts to create a police force have progressed slowly because donors have attached too many conditions to paying them.<sup>45</sup> Financing the building of this force would be a good project for the Arab countries, which have a stake in a stable Somalia. Initially, security would be messy as the new government uses its own militia to deal with al-Shabab and freelancing militias. If it is possible to neutralize al-Shabab and independent militias, a Somali police force, which has a long tradition of professionalism in the country, should be able to ensure security until Somalia creates a national army.

The United States should continue to support the new government of national

unity in spite of its imperfections, while remaining in the political background. It is important to give the Somali government an opportunity to build a functioning coalition, neutralize support for al-Shabab and co-opt organizations such as the newly-formed Islamic party Hisbul Islamiyya.<sup>46</sup> Prime Minister Sharmarke has already announced that he is prepared to sit down with al-Shabab, although its leaders continue to oppose the Shaykh Sharif government.<sup>47</sup> As much as the United States opposes al-Shabab, it is necessary to let Somalis work through their differences in their own way. This is also the time for the United States to eschew military activity in Somalia. It should continue to provide humanitarian assistance, help to establish a police force and be prepared to step in quickly with development aid as soon as the security situation permits.

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<sup>43</sup> UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon is clearly in no hurry to launch a UN peacekeeping operation in Somalia. He said on February 27, 2009 that the United Nations may start planning in June to set up a peacekeeping operation in Somalia if the security and political conditions are conducive. It would take months to actually send such a mission to Somalia. For more, see Sarah McGregor, "Ban Says UN May Establish Peacekeeping Operation in Somalia," Bloomberg, February 27, 2009.

<sup>44</sup> This is an idea supported by Abdi Ismail Samatar, professor of geography and global studies at the University of Minnesota. At a Voice of America seminar on Somalia on February 18, 2009 in Washington, D.C., he called on the international community to help establish a Somali police force of 15,000. Samatar has been involved in the last three Somali peace processes. The Somali-language website, AllPuntland.com, reported on February 23, 2009 that the French minister of foreign affairs, during a meeting with Shaykh Sharif, is prepared to train 10,000 Somali soldiers. Although the French minister did have a meeting with Shaykh Sharif, there is no confirmation he offered to train 10,000 soldiers.

<sup>45</sup> Ahmedou Ould-Abdallah, comments made at a conference on Somalia at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, D.C., March 10, 2009.

<sup>46</sup> Hisbul Islamiyya is a new Islamic party composed of four factions opposed to Shaykh Sharif's new government: the hard-line Asmara wing of the Alliance for the Re-Liberation of Somalia led by Shaykh Hassan Dahir Aweys; Harakat Ras Kamboni, a southern Somali Islamist group affiliated with Shaykh Hassan "Turki," who has had ties with al-Shabab; the Islamic Front of Jabhatul Islamiyya, an insurgent group formed in 2007 to oppose Ethiopian troops in Somalia; and a little-known, Harti clan group called Anole and based in Kismayo. Increasingly, it seems to be allying itself with al-Shabab.

<sup>47</sup> "Somalia's PM Calls for Talks with al Shabaab as Ethiopia Troops Re-enter," Garowe Online, February 18, 2009; Abdiaziz Hassan, "Somali Opposition Leader Vows to Fight On," Reuters, March 6, 2009.