

# **THE IMPACT OF FOREIGN ELEMENTS OVER SOMALIA'S AL SHABAAB**

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This thesis is presented for the Honours Degree of Security, Terrorism and Counterterrorism in Murdoch University in the year 2011.

I declare that this is an account of my own research and that the work presented has not, to my knowledge, been previously submitted except where otherwise acknowledged.

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## **Abstract**

Al Shabaab is currently one of the most powerful groups operating in contemporary Somalia. In control of much of southern Somalia, al Shabaab has sustained an insurgency against the internationally supported transitional government and its allies throughout the country and beyond since early 2007. In contrast to previous Somali Islamist groups, al Shabaab also actively seeks to participate in the wider Islamist movement currently sweeping the Muslim world. As such the organisation has engaged a number of foreign elements to assist with its struggle. This thesis explores the double-sided impact that these various foreign elements have had and argues that they have been a crucial factor in al Shabaab's relative success. Ranging from al Qaeda and other militant Islamist movements to the foreign contingent that has travelled to Somalia to fight for al Shabaab to the multitude of minor actors the organisation engages for mutual benefit, these foreign elements have noticeably enhanced al Shabaab's tactical and strategic capabilities. There have been some serious negative repercussions stemming from this heavy foreign influence, alienating sections of Somali society and attracting the hostile attention of the West. However, this thesis concludes that the benefits provided by al Shabaab's engagement with foreign elements has notably outweighed the negatives and that the organisation, despite its recent setbacks, will continue to pose a threat at least within the region.

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## **Abbreviations and Acronyms**

AIAI: al Itihaad al Islamiya

AMISOM: African Union Mission in Somalia

AQAP: al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula

AQEA: al Qaeda in East Africa

ARPC: Alliance for the Restoration of Peace and Counterterrorism

ARS: Alliance for the Re-liberation of Somalia

ASWJ: Ahlu Sunna wal Jama

EU: European Union

ICU: Islamic Courts Union

IED: improvised explosive devise

MGSE: Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea

MYC: Muslim Youth Centre

TFG: Transitional Federal Government

USA: United States of America

## Introduction

The current drought in Somalia, which is the worst in approximately half a century and has caused famine in parts of the country, is simply the latest in the long list of troubles that have plagued the country (Chothia 2011; Gentleman 2011). Since the fall of Somalia's last authoritative government in 1991, the country has become the textbook example of a failed state with society effectively disintegrating into a Hobbesian state of nature. Numerous problems, ranging from the droughts and famines through to the many pockets of lawlessness where criminals thrive, combine to make the lives of many Somalis 'nasty, brutish and short'. A major contributor to this state of affairs is the two decade old political vacuum in which a fluid struggle for power is fought between the various regionally based governments, clan warlords and Islamic inspired militias. In recent years, the conflict in Somalia has become largely dominated by the conflict in southern and central Somalia between Islamist insurgents and the forces allied to the internationally supported Transitional Federal Government (TFG).

Currently, the primary Islamist group operating in Somalia is al Shabaab<sup>1</sup> which controls much of southern Somalia, although it is able to make its presence felt throughout the remainder of the country and beyond. In essence, al Shabaab is an armed Islamist movement motivated by the militant application of Salafi thought that has swept the Muslim world in the past few decades. As such, the organisation's primary objectives are to establish an Islamic government over Somalia and contribute to the international Islamist movement (Curran 2011, para 6). It is this latter aspect that primarily distinguishes al Shabaab from the previous Somali Islamist groups from which it evolved. Whereas al Shabaab's predecessors had a primarily Somali-centric vision with only vague notions of contributing to the wider fundamentalist movement, al Shabaab has actively affiliated itself with the global jihad led by al Qaeda (Gartenstein-Ross 2009, 25). One notable consequence of this active association with the wider Islamist movement has been the greater presence of foreign elements within al Shabaab.

In this dissertation, I primarily explore the double-sided impact of foreign elements on al Shabaab. As such, I pay specific attention to the impact that foreign elements have had on al Shabaab's performance and how at the same time it has affected al Shabaab's popularity within Somalia. Although the engagement with various ideological affiliates accounts for the majority of the foreign involvement with al Shabaab, there have also been significant interactions with more basely motivated actors. The general impact of these foreign elements has been largely beneficial for the organisation, responsible for making al Shabaab a notably more dangerous

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<sup>1</sup> Also written as al Shabab or al Shebab, all variations of the Arabic phrase meaning 'the Youth'. The organisation's full official name is Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahidin (the Mujahidin Youth Movement).



organisation than its predecessors. While foreign involvement has had some notable negative repercussions, such as defections and the alienation of aspects of Somali society, foreign elements have been largely responsible for the transfer of tactical and technical expertise that are not readily available inside of Somalia. The various foreign elements also known to provide many of the resources and new quality recruits necessary for al Shabaab to continue its struggle.

There is currently a growing body of literature devoted to examining al Shabaab and the security situation in Somalia in general. These writings have generally provided several good overviews on the group's organisation, capacities, ideology and so forth. However, the majority of these texts mainly focus on how the world, or more specifically the United States of America (USA), should approach Somalia and combat al Shabaab. For example, Ken Menkhaus (2009) argues that the USA should avoid overtly intervening for risk of de-legitimising their allies but instead should promote greater human rights and accountability to reduce the bad governance that is rife within the TFG administration. Bronwyn Bruton (2010) similarly argues for a strategy that she calls 'constructive disengagement' in which the USA would engage with regional powers and 'moderates' whilst withdrawing from direct involvement. In contrast, this dissertation does not seek to propose any solution to Somalia's ills or critique the merits of solutions that have been previously suggested. Rather, this work contributes to the smaller body of literature that analyses al Shabaab in itself; seeking to build on writings such as the comprehensive reports written by Christopher Harnisch (2010) and the analyses of David Shinn (2009; 2011).

To approach al Shabaab in this way, my dissertation is broken into three main parts. The first chapter is devoted to providing the contextual information necessary to gain an understanding of al Shabaab. As such, the chapter will be divided into two main parts; a background to the conflict that gave birth to al Shabaab and an exploration of the organisation's composition. The first part encompasses the relevant areas of contemporary Somali history as well as the actions of al Shabaab to demonstrate how the organisation has come into the position it finds itself in today. The second section explores the many sections of al Shabaab's anatomy from the basic administration and composition of its forces to its leadership and ideology.

Chapter two identifies the main foreign elements and how they have been engaging with al Shabaab. Effectively, I shall make three distinctions in which to categorise the foreign elements: other Islamist groups, the foreign contingent that fights for al Shabaab, and the host of minor parties who shall all come under the blanket term 'others'. As the main Islamist group that al Shabaab interacts publicly with is al Qaeda, the majority of the first section explores the relationship between these two organisations. In the analysis of the foreign contingent, I make

the important distinction between those fighters from non-ethnic Somali background and those who are from the diaspora as they both contribute in notably different ways. The section on ‘others’ covers several actors from patrons of al Shabaab to the various criminal organisations that assist with weapons and people smuggling.

The third chapter explores many of the ways in which those foreign elements indentified in chapter two have impacted upon al Shabaab behaviour. Again, I break down the impacts into three main areas: tactical, strategic and negative. Tactical influences are identified as one of the most noticeable manifestations of the foreign influence, encompassing the increased sophistication of combat operations and weaponry to the inclusion of foreign methods such as roadside bombs and suicide attacks. Strategically, the foreign influence has been largely responsible for providing al Shabaab with a coherent direction to plan towards as well as assisting in the cementing of the organisation’s hold on its territories. Of the negative impacts from the foreign influences the most notable have been attracting the hostile attention of international powers and the alienation of ordinary Somalis, particularly in central Somalia, which has led to some notable defections and local uprisings.

## **Chapter 1: On Al Shabaab.**

Despite suffering some recent setbacks from the current drought and pressure from various armed forces, al Shabaab remains one of the most powerful organisations within Somalia, known to operate a more sophisticated and comprehensive administration than any other Somali authority (MSGGE 2011, 27). As such, before the foreign elements' pivotal role upon al Shabaab can be properly understood, the organisation in itself needs to be examined in some detail. This chapter covers the relevant history of Somalia, tracing al Shabaab's history from its origins as a breakaway faction of a previous Islamist group through to its establishment of dominance over much of Southern Somalia. Also explored is the composition of the organisation, ranging from its administrations to its leadership to its radical ideology that shapes much of its actions.

### **The Background of the Organisation**

#### *Al Shabaab's origins:*

Militant Islam in its modern form first appeared in Somalia in response to the authoritarian socialist rule of General Mohamed Siad Barre who came to power in 1969 via a coup. Although the earliest example of an indigenous Somali Islamist group appears in the 1970s, the most prominent movement was al Itihaad al Islamiya (AIAI)<sup>2</sup> which was founded sometime in the early 1980s (Harnisch 2010a, 10; Shinn 2011, 204). AIAI's ideology combined Islamist and nationalist ideologies, seeking to establish an Islamic state and to unify Somalia with the neighbouring ethnically Somali territories, most notably Ethiopia's Ogaden region (Gartenstein-Ross 2009, 26; Stevenson 2007, 43). Although AIAI was not involved when warlords overthrew Siad Barre in 1991 and never became a major actor within Somalia, the organisation is believed to have been at its most active in the aftermath of the state's collapse. Notable AIAI activities included governing the Somali town Luuq from 1991 to 1996 and conducting several terrorist attacks within Ethiopia in the mid 1990s (Menkhaus 2005, 35; Shinn 2011, 204). After Ethiopia attacked Luuq in 1996, forcing AIAI from its only stronghold, the organisation adopted a new strategy. Abandoning attempts to hold territory and spreading its ideology via military means, AIAI focused on integrating into communities to provide social services, such as education, in order to establish an Islamist constituency (Dagne 2010, 23; Menkhaus 2005, 35-36).

Foreign Islamist activity first became evident in Somalia when al Qaeda initiated contact with AIAI in 1992 and dispatched a team of operatives to assist in February 1993 (Shinn 2009,

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<sup>2</sup> Arabic for 'the Islamic Union'

2). Although these operatives managed to establish a few training camps and assisted in battles against the international peacekeeping force, it is widely believed that al Qaeda has since over exaggerated its role in Somalia (Gartenstein-Ross 2009, 26; Harnisch 2010a, 10-11). Experience with clan extortion, bandit attacks and a general apathy towards its cause led al Qaeda to realise it had overestimated the costs of operating in Somalia and that the country would prove infertile ground for further engagement (Shinn 2011, 205; Stevenson 2007, 42). However, al Qaeda did manage to establish some local support, most notably managing to radicalise a number of youths (Shinn 2011, 205). Many of these youths went on to train in al Qaeda camps in Afghanistan during the late 1990s and participate in several militant Islamist organisations (Shinn 2009, 2).

Al Shabaab directly descends from both AIAI and these radicalised youths. By the early 2000s, AIAI had effectively disintegrated into a network of alumni, most of whom were not politically active (Menkhaus 2005, 36). In 2003, during an AIAI conference in the Somaliland town of Laascaanood to decide upon a new political front, a group of young radicals left the meeting in disagreement with the elder leadership's direction. Within days these youths had launched a parallel conference and in which they founded al Shabaab as a rival Islamist movement (Dagne 2010, 5; Shinn 2011, 206). The principal founding members were the late Aden Hashi Ayro, Ahmed Abdi Godane<sup>3</sup>, Mukhtar Ali Robow<sup>4</sup>, Faud Mohamed Khalaf Shangole and Ibrahim Haji Jama al-Afghani; all of whom are believed to have fought in Afghanistan under al Qaeda (Dagne 2010, 5; Harnisch 2010a, 20). Although implicated in a number of assassinations (Menkhaus 2005, 42; McGregor 2008, 254), it appears that initially al Shabaab played no major role until it joined the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) as an elite militia some time during 2005.

#### *The Islamic Courts Union era*

The ICU was formed around mid 2004 when eleven minor Islamic administrations ranging from moderate to radical that held jurisdictions in and around Mogadishu joined forces to establish a new single administration (Menkhaus 2005, 37; Stevenson 2007, 42). Although Somalis generally had a moderate and casual approach to Islam, since 1991 various independent *sharia* courts throughout the country had been established to provide order within the local community. These courts gradually became networked and by 2004 there was broad support in Mogadishu from the public, clan leaders and business community for their merger into a coalition (Bruton 2010, 7; Harnisch 2010a, 11). Alarmed by the potential of radicals gaining control of Somalia through the ICU, USA intelligence agents facilitated the formation of a loose

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<sup>3</sup> Also known as Abu Zubayr

<sup>4</sup> Also known as Abu Mansuur

coalition grandiosely named the Alliance for the Restoration of Peace and Counterterrorism (ARPC) despite mainly consisting of local warlords (Bruton 2010, 7; Stevenson 2007, 42).

The formation of the ARPC and its overt US support immediately caused a public backlash ensuring that many of those that had previously been reluctant joined the ICU. By June 2006, the expanded ICU had soundly defeated the ARPC, established order over Mogadishu and began to provide basic government services (Gartenstein-Ross 2009, 29; Stevenson 2007, 42). This success attracted considerable national enthusiasm, which subsequently led to many other groups allying themselves with the ICU<sup>5</sup>, allowing for its governance model to spread throughout southern Somalia (Bruton 2010, 7; Menkhaus 2008, 2). Ironically, the militant wing of the ICU, as a major contributor to the ARPC's defeat, began to amass greater influence over the organisation's policy. As such, the ICU started to implement a stricter interpretation of *sharia* and introduce radical laws such as bans on music and the popular local stimulant *qat* (Bruton 2010, 8; Dagne 2010, 18-19). Radical Islamists also gained several key positions in the ICU, most notable being Hassan Dahir Aweys. Aweys, formerly a senior AIAI leader who remained affiliated with al Shabaab after its split from AIAI, was appointed chairman of the ICU's Executive Committee, replacing the moderate Sharif Sheikh Ahmed although the latter retained the overall leadership of ICU (Harnisch 2010a, 11; Stevenson 2007, 43).

#### *The Ethiopian invasion and al Shabaab's evolution*

By late 2006, the feeble but internationally recognised Transitional Federal Government (TFG) was effectively besieged in Baidoa as the ICU expanded across central and southern Somalia. After the United Nations (UN) resolution 1725 calling for troops to protect the TFG produced a lacklustre response, ICU forces, encouraged by their local success and popularity, advanced on Baidoa in December 2006 (Stevenson 2007, 43). However Ethiopia, concerned by radicals within the ICU calling for a *jihad* against it, intervened militarily with US support to protect the TFG and oust the ICU (Gartenstein-Ross 2009, 28; Menkhaus 2008, 2). The ICU's irregular militias proved no match for Ethiopia's professional army, backed by its air force, and with many ICU fighters quickly killed or routed outside of Baidoa (Bruton 2010, 8; McGregor 2008, 256). Ethiopian and TFG forces then proceeded to reverse all of ICU's recent gains and captured Mogadishu on the 28<sup>th</sup> of December, 2006 (Stevenson 2007, 43; Gartenstein-Ross 2009, 28). Despite initially calling for an insurgency, the ICU effectively was forced to disband. Much of ICU's leadership fled the country while its weapons and militia largely reverted to the various clans that had supplied them (McGregor 2008, 253; Menkhaus 2008, 2).

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<sup>5</sup> The ICU renamed itself the Supreme Council of Islamic Courts after its victory over the ARPC. However, for clarity, I shall continue to refer to it as the ICU.

By early 2007, the remnants of the ICU had effectively fractured into three major groups: the moderates, the extremists in exile and those who remained in Somalia to fight the insurgency. The moderates entered into peace negotiations and eventually joined the TFG after the signing of the Djibouti agreement in August 2008, with Sheikh Ahmed actually becoming President in early 2009 (Menkhaus 2009, 2; Shinn 2011, 206). The exiled radicals regrouped in Eritrea, launching the Alliance for the Re-liberation of Somalia (ARS) with other aspects of Somali society opposed to the Ethiopian invasion (Harnisch, 2010a, 11). The ARS split in 2008, with many entering into the peace process alongside the moderates and Aweys leading the Islamists to join with three other militant groups to form Hizbul Islam<sup>6</sup> in early 2009 (Dagne 2010, 21-22; Le Sage 2010, 2). Those Islamists that remained behind regrouped in southern Somalia and within weeks were fighting in the wider guerrilla insurgency against the Ethiopian and TFG forces.

It appears that al Shabaab was one of the few ICU militia to remain largely intact and, having developed a reputation for being disciplined and ruthless fighters in action against the APRC and TFG, quickly assumed a leading role in the insurgency (Harnisch 2010a, 11-12; McGregor 2008, 258). Initially al Shabaab attracted much support due to its effective combination of Somali nationalism and reverence for Islam under the leadership of Ayro, who had become a key military commander in the ICU before its fall (Curran 2011, para 4; Shinn 2009, 2). Although effectively operating independently by early 2007, al Shabaab only officially broke with the remnants of the ICU in September 2007, publicly denouncing them for failing to adopt a 'global jihadist ideology' and making deals with 'apostates' in attempts to return to power (Gartenstein-Ross 2009, 28; Menkhaus 2008, 3). By early 2008, al Shabaab was strong enough to actively engage Ethiopian troops beyond guerrilla style hit-and-run attacks, instead beginning to take over locations throughout southern Somalia and intensify its attacks on Ethiopian and TFG forces within Mogadishu (Curran 2011, para 7; Harnisch 2010a, 12).

Ayro was killed in May 2008 in a US missile strike on his home in central Somalia and was succeeded by his deputy Godane, a hardliner who proceeded to adopt subtle strategic changes that brought al Shabaab closer to the international Islamist movement (Harnisch 2010a, 12; Shinn 2009, 2). Whilst under Ayro, al Shabaab had previously engaged with global jihadi and adhered to their ideology, under Godane this process intensified. During June 2008, al Shabaab's new leader published his first statement to establish contact with the wider Islamist movement. In it, Godane delivered greetings and near sycophantic praise to al Qaeda, whom al Shabaab later swore allegiance to, as well as other major Islamist groups such as the Afghanistan

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<sup>6</sup> Arabic for 'the Islamic Party'

Taliban and the Islamic State in Iraq (Gartenstein-Ross 2009, 29-30, Harnisch 2010a, 24-25). Al Shabaab has since demonstrated its ability to successfully carry out sophisticated terrorist attacks in the name of the global movement throughout Somalia and beyond; the most notable example being the twin suicide bombings in the Ugandan capital Kampala that killed 76 and injured 85 on the 11<sup>th</sup> of July, 2010 (Harnisch 2010b, para 1).

### *Post-Ethiopian Somalia*

Ethiopia withdrew its troops in January 2009, in accordance with the Djibouti peace agreement, initially led to hopes that al Shabaab would fade into irrelevance after losing their main adversary and rallying point (Menkhaus 2009, 2). However, al Shabaab proved resilient, shifting its rhetoric to a primarily Islamist focus coupled with calls to expel 'Western puppets', namely the TFG and the small African Union peacekeeping force (AMISOM) protecting them (Curran 2011, para 5-6). A greater challenge for al Shabaab came from the presence of other Islamist groups who resisted al Shabaab's authority. The most prominent of these was Aweys' organisation Hizbul Islam which occasionally cooperated with al Shabaab but also fought battles over territory and provided a rival Islamist organisation potentially dividing loyalties (Le Sage 2010, 2; Roggio 2010). Another notable group is Ahlu-Sunna wal Jama (ASWJ), a formally apolitical Sufi religious network that became militarised during 2008, seizing some territory in central Somalia and allying itself to the TFG (Hassan 2009, 5). However, al Shabaab has not yet been seriously troubled by ASWJ efforts as the latter's loosely associated factions have a limited ability to project any power and a heavy reliance on support from Ethiopia has caused many to view them as proxies, diminishing local support (Bruton 2009, 87).

Hizbul Islam eventually was absorbed into al Shabaab after suffering several defeats and defections, the most notable being the entire Ras Komboni Brigade, approximately one quarter of Hizbul Islam, which defected to al Shabaab in February, 2010 (Dagne 2010, 6; Roggio 2010). Though Aweys had been offering to negotiate a merger since 2009, Godane rebuffed him arguing that Hizbul Islam was too weak to contribute to al Shabaab's struggle (Weinstein 2011, para 6). However, dissatisfaction with Godane's leadership, stemming from his refusal to accept Aweys' offers, claims of his resorting to clan politics and the failed August 2010 offensive culminated in his removal as 'Emir' of al Shabaab in December 2010 (Weinstein 2011). Godane was replaced by al Afghani, who allowed Hizbul Islam to merge with al Shabaab on the 24 of December 2010 (Roggio 2010; Weinstein 2011). As the situation stands today, al Shabaab remains the only significant insurgent group operating in Somalia, effectively operating a credible shadow government over much of southern Somalia and, unlike most organisations in Somalia, is able to inspire loyalty beyond its immediate area of control (MGSE 2011, 17).

## The Anatomy of Al Shabaab

### *Basic Governance Style*

Although the exact composition of al Shabaab is not known widely outside of the group, a general structure of the organisation is ascertainable. Basically, al Shabaab operates as a network of Islamic administrations answerable to a central council which govern the territories that comprise of its self declared 'Islamic Emirate of Somalia', also known as the 'Islamic Provinces' (Harnisch 2010a, 15; Weinstein 2008, para 5). As such, these administrations are primarily responsible for implementing al Shabaab's ultraconservative interpretation of the *sharia*, although the specific implementation appears to vary slightly depending on the specific administration (Gartenstein-Ross 2009, 31-32; Harnisch 2010a, 17). In general though, laws implemented by al Shabaab's administrations include requiring women to wear the veil, making mandatory the five daily prayers, amputations for theft, banning adultery and prohibiting 'un-Islamic' practices such as listening to music, watching Western movies, playing soccer and using narcotics (Gartenstein-Ross 2009, 31-32; Harnisch 2010a, 17). These administrations also provide other governance services usual of a State, namely collecting taxes and overseeing the construction or repair of public facilities such as roads, bridges and canals (Gartenstein-Ross 2009, 32; Harnisch 2010a, 15-17).

Al Shabaab establishes and maintains control of the Islamic Provinces via a mixture of public relations and intimidation (Bruton 2009, 87; Harnisch 2010a, 14-15). When assuming control of territory, al Shabaab conducts choreographed town visits which involve public rallies, radio announcements, distributing *zakat*<sup>7</sup> to the poor and having a ceremony to voluntarily absorb the local clan leaders into the new administration (Bruton 2010, 11; Harnisch 2010a, 14-15). This use of propaganda, especially via the radio, tends to continue after the administration is established, regularly justifying the organisation's actions and vilifying their enemies (Curran 2011). To ensure that al Shabaab's radical version of *sharia* is followed and any opposition crushed, laws are rigorously enforced by al Shabaab's religious police, the Army of Hisbul, with punishments regularly carried out in public. Punishments include whippings and amputations for minor crimes such as petty theft, drug use of incorrect Islamic dress, with several methods of execution used on those more serious crimes in the Islamic Territories such as murder, adultery, banditry and espionage (Harnisch 2010a, 17-18).

### *Al Shabaab's Leadership*

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<sup>7</sup> Islamic alms or charitable donations



The executive of al Shabaab, known as the Shura Council, reportedly consists of 85 members headed by an ‘Emir’, although it is not clear as to how much power resides in this position (Shinn 2011, 209; Weinstein 2011). This council has the authority to overrule decisions made by individual administrations and is responsible for directing al Shabaab’s policies via ‘offices’ established to coordinate those policies that concern the entire organisation (Harnisch 2010a, 15-16). For example, one of the most externally visible of these offices, the Office for Supervising Foreign Agencies, recently reversed the decision by a few administrations to expand the number of aid agencies allowed into the Islamic Provinces to assist with the drought (Chothia 2011). Although individual militia forces are controlled by local al Shabaab commanders, the council appears to be in command of the overall strategy, organising offensives and managing al Shabaab’s growing networks (MGSE 2011, 18-19).

While al Shabaab’s opaque nature makes it difficult to determine who comprises the leadership, several key commanders and their basic duties are generally known. Ahmed Godane, as the Emir for two and a half years until his recent downfall, remains one of the most prominent and influential figures within the movement, although it is uncertain exactly what position he currently holds (Chothia 2011; Shinn 2011, 206-207). Before becoming the current Emir at the end of 2010, Ibrahim al Afghani controlled the northern branch of al Shabaab that operated within Puntland and Somaliland (Harnisch 2010, 4; Shinn 2009, 2). It is not yet publicly known who has replaced him in this post. Muktar Robow was initially al Shabaab’s chief spokesman, a position now held by Ali Mohamed Rage, but now appears to have become one of the organisation’s key commanders and is known to control operations in both the Bay and Bakool regions (Dagne 2010, 5-6; Shinn 2009, 2). Another prominent leader, Faud Shongole, is known to command militia in and around the key port of Marka (Shinn 2009, 2; Weinstein 2011). Although there has been no confirmation of their roles, it appears that Hassan Aweys and Hassan al Turki, the commander of the Ras Komboni Brigade, have maintained command of their militia after being absorbed into al Shabaab and are viewed as ‘elder statesmen’ within the movement (Dagne 2010, 6-7; Chothia 2011). Several foreigners are also known to hold positions of influence within the executive, though their roles will be discussed later.

Though the leadership of al Shabaab is undoubtedly dedicated to the Islamist cause, it has nonetheless become deeply divided into two opposing factions that differ in the direction al Shabaab should take. The first faction comprises of the ‘transnationalists’ who emphasize doctrinal purity and contributing to spreading the ideology. As alluded to above, Godane is a key figure in this faction, actively expanding al Shabaab’s engagement with the global fundamentalist movement during his time as Emir (Weinstein 2011). The second faction

comprises of the ‘nationalists’ who, though no less dedicated to the global movement, wish to adapt the doctrine to the local circumstances and focus on creating an Islamic state in Somalia first. A key figure in this faction is Robow who has publicly argued against al Shabaab imposing a strict version of *sharia* out of line with Somali custom that alienates locals (Bruton 2010, 12-13; Weinstein 2011). During 2010, these factions engaged in a barely hidden disagreement that came to a head in September when Robow withdrew his militia from Mogadishu and returned to his base in the Bay region in protest over Godane’s policies (Dagne 2010, 7; Weinstein 2011). Factional disagreements appear to have continued in 2011, with heated words exchanged over the barring of aid agencies from famine stricken areas, governed mainly by nationalist faction commanders, and the death of Fazul Abdullah Mohammed, a key ally of Godane who he believes was tricked into going through a government checkpoint (Chothia 2011).

### *Al Shabaab’s Capacity*

Estimates of al Shabaab’s armed strength ranges between 3000 and 7000 fighters, including the approximately 1000 strong foreign contingent, although it is believed that the group can mobilise further troops and call on its regional affiliates should it need assistance (Shinn 2011, 209-210). A typical al Shabaab fighter is frequently described as a poorly educated local youth in his late teens or early twenties uniformed in plain, often dark, clothing and the red scarf which is drawn across their face when in action that has given them the local nickname of ‘the masked men’ (McGregor 2008, 259; Shinn 2011, 208). It remains uncertain as to how many of these rank and file members actively believe in the organisation’s radical ideology. Some writers have claimed that al Shabaab has attracted more thugs and opportunists than actual fanatics, with most militiamen are reportedly being forcibly conscripted (Bruton 2009, 87-88; Le Sage 2010, 2). Others consider that at least the majority hold an inflexible view of Islam that, if not already possessed, is indoctrinated into them upon recruitment (Gartenstein-Ross 2009, 31; McGregor 2008, 259).

There is growing evidence of al Shabaab extending its networks beyond the Islamic Provinces to act as a mentor and platform for affiliate groups in northern Somalia and elsewhere in the region. In a recent report, the United Nation’s Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea (MGSE) found that al Shabaab had established a network of agents to contact and assist Islamist militias in the north of Somalia (2011, 19). The most prominent of these is the Islamist militia of Mohamed Saaid Atom, though the MGSE considers it effectively became absorbed as a division of al Shabaab by late 2010 (2011, 23). Al Shabaab’s regional networks will be discussed in detail in the next chapter. Al Shabaab also appears to have attracted many businesses, which prefer to operate under the relative stability that the organisation provides in their Islamic

Provinces. From most of these businesses al Shabaab simply collects taxes, raising approximately \$70 to \$100 million annually to help fund their administration and war efforts (Harnisch 2010a, 15; MGSE 27). However, the organisation has apparently become actively involved with coordinating a lucrative trade cycle, estimated worth at least \$15 million exporting charcoal and importing sugar and contraband destined for neighbouring countries (Chothia 2011; MGSE 27-31).

### *Al Shabaab's Ideology*

In a 2009 interview with al Jazeera, Robow declared that al Shabaab stood for the “implementation of *sharia* completely, every single element of it” and was fighting to prevent ‘misguidance’, to see a return of the Caliphate and ensure that there would be justice in Somalia and beyond (al Jazeera 2009). In doing so, Robow declared that al Shabaab adhered to the Jihadi-Salafi strain of Salafi thought, or in other words the militant interpretation of Sunni Islamic fundamentalism (Weinstein 2008). Although some 98 percent of Somalis are Sunni Muslims (Stevenson 2007, 42), the vast majority of these follow Sufi beliefs such as reverence for shrines and relics as well as the belief that Imams and various saints intercede with God for common people. In contrast, Salafism rejects these objects of Sufi veneration as a form of polytheism that leads people astray and calls for a return to the basics of Islam (al Jazeera 2009; Meijer 2009, 4). This interpretation of Islam is relatively new in Somalia, first appearing in the 1960s when a number of students who returned from Egypt and Saudi Arabia attempted, with limited success, to propagate the Salafi thought they had learned abroad (Shinn 2011, 204).

In essence, Salafism<sup>8</sup> revolves around the strict adherence to *tawhid*<sup>9</sup>. This concept encapsulates the belief that God, as the Supreme Being, does not share characteristics with humans and alone should be worshiped (Meijer 2009, 4; Wiktorowicz 2006, 208). For Salafis, this means that humans are obligated to strictly follow the *sharia* outlined in the Quran and Sunna<sup>10</sup> and use the guidance of the Prophets companions<sup>11</sup> if assistance is needed (Wiktorowicz 2006, 209), a trait that Robow demonstrated with his frequent references from verses in the Quran (al Jazeera 2009). To use any other forms of guidance, including human reasoning, will lead away from ‘pure Islam’ and cause a slow return to the brutality and injustice that existed before Islam (Meijer 2009, 4-5; Wiktorowicz 2006, 209-210). Though all Salafis seek to rectify what they consider centuries of corrupting influences and misinterpretations, there are divisions over the methods best used to accomplish this (Menkhaus 2005, 34-35). The majority of Salafis

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<sup>8</sup> Also referred to as Wahhabism

<sup>9</sup> Arabic term meaning ‘the uniqueness of God’

<sup>10</sup> The ‘example of the Prophet Mohammed’

<sup>11</sup> In Arabic ‘salaf’: Salafi literally means followers of the Prophetic model

are non-violent advocating either missionary/educational work or incorporating *sharia* into the laws of the state to bring Muslims back to the right path. Jihadi-Salafis differ, believing that a *jihad*<sup>12</sup>, usually in the form of radical political activism or an actual revolution, is necessary to overturn the current secular regimes and establish Islamic states that would ensure *tawhid* is adhered to (Meijer 2009, 24; Wiktorowicz 2006, 225).

As most Jihadi-Salafis movements conduct their struggle within predominantly Muslim lands, they tend to draw heavily on the concept of *takfir*, the act of declaring a Muslim an apostate (Hegghammer 2009, 246-247; Wiktorowicz 2006, 227). Traditionally *takfir* was considered an extremely serious measure to be declared only in specific circumstances but today radicals interpret it much more liberally, applying the term to entire regimes by declaring that the persistence in ‘sinful acts’ amounts to apostasy and warrants the use of violence to depose them (Hegghammer 2009, 247; Wiktorowicz 2006, 233). In the case of al Shabaab, the sinful acts that the TFG and other opposing forces are guilty of that strips them of their claim to be Muslim include both their governing style and acceptance of assistance from infidel governments such as the USA and Ethiopian. As Robow articulated in his interview, the TFG “brought the enemy of God into the county...and are part and parcel of its forces, wearing their uniforms and carrying their weapons. They have rejected God’s commandments and are misguided” (al Jazeera 2009).

### **Al Shabaab’s Transnational Focus**

One of the most prominent versions of Jihadi-Salafi thought contemporarily is that espoused by al Qaeda. Al Qaeda expands the concept of *takfir* to include the requirement for Muslims to unite and combat the source of this apostasy, identified as Western ‘Crusaders’ (Burke 2004, para 3; Farrall 2011, 132). Though al Qaeda’s priority is to reverse what they perceive to be nearly a century of aggressive Western efforts to humiliate Islam, the ultimate goal is to re-establish the Caliphate that would spread just Islamic governance throughout the *umma*<sup>13</sup> (Burke 2004, para 7). In effect al Qaeda is, if not leading, then certainly inspiring what Mark N Katz (1999) calls a transnational revolutionary wave. This is a phenomenon that occurs when an ideology inspires movements in at least two countries that become linked via their common explanation for and solution to their society’s ills (Katz 1999, 11-13). Al Shabaab actively adheres to al Qaeda’s transnational ideology and frequently attempts to place its struggle in context of the global Islamist movement. One direct result of this international outlook has been al Shabaab’s extensive engagement with a number of foreign elements, the

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<sup>12</sup> Arabic term meaning ‘struggle’

<sup>13</sup> The entire Muslim community

majority of whom share the same Jihadi-Salafi ideology, and it is these foreign elements that I shall turn my attention to in the next chapter.

## Chapter 2: The Foreign Elements of Al Shabaab

One common explanation as to why al Shabaab has been so relatively successful in Somalia has been the inability of the TFG to govern, encumbered as it is with corrupt and incompetent institutions headed by a bloated parliament of 550 members that spends most of its time infighting (Bruton 2009, 86; Le Sage 2010, 1-2). Although the TFG's ineffectiveness is certainly a prominent factor in Shabaab's success, it is by no means the only one. Just as important in understanding the organisation's accomplishments is the impact of the various foreign actors that al Shabaab has engaged. Whilst the TFG's weakness has given al Shabaab the opportunity, the impact that the foreign elements have had has enhanced the organisation's ability to wage its insurgency and control the territory it governs. From here on, I explore the role that these foreign elements have had on al Shabaab, introducing in this chapter the key foreign actors and how al Shabaab is engaging with them before examining in the next chapter how these actors' influence has manifested itself.

### Al Qaeda and the Wider Islamist Movement

#### *Relations between al Qaeda and al Shabaab*

Al Qaeda is undoubtedly the most important entity in the global militant Salafi movement and as such is one of the primary foreign elements influencing al Shabaab. Its interaction with al Shabaab has primarily been via indirect dialogue, conducted via a series of written and filmed statements released by each organisation. Throughout these statements, al Shabaab has constantly sought to align itself with al Qaeda mission and place its activities in context of the global jihad (Harnisch 2010a, 24-25; Gartenstein-Ross 2009, 28). The first statement was released in January 2008 entitled "A Message to the Mujahedeen in Particular and Muslims in General" articulating al Shabaab's position and affinity for al Qaeda's *manhaj*<sup>14</sup> (Harnisch 2010a, 24; Gartenstein-Ross 2009, 29). Interestingly, this statement was composed by one of al Shabaab's foreign contingents, Abu Monsoor al Amriki<sup>15</sup>; a Syrian-American radical who has since played a significant role in the organisation's external publications (Gartenstein-Ross 2009, 29).

There have since been several other statements of note released by al Shabaab that demonstrate the organisation's desire to receive recognition from al Qaeda. One example is the previously mentioned June 2008 video statement by Godane in which he greeted al Qaeda and a

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<sup>14</sup> Religious methodology

<sup>15</sup> Also known by his original name Omar Hammami

number of its affiliates. Godane released another statement in July 2009 that acknowledged Mullah Omar and Osama bin Laden as the leaders of the global jihad and portrayed Somalia as one of the three fronts on which the jihad is fought against ‘Crusaders’ (Harnisch 2010a, 26; Shinn 2011, 207). One other notable example was a video released in September 2009 entitled “At Your Service, Oh Osama” in which al Shabaab pledged allegiance to bin Laden and requested his guidance (Harnisch 2010a, 26-27; Shinn 2011, 207). Al Qaeda’s leadership for its part has largely reciprocated these approaches, notably acknowledging Somalia as a struggle on par with Iraq and Afghanistan, sending condolences for Ayro’s death in mid 2008 and urging that nothing short of an Islamic state be established (Harnisch 2010a, 28; Gartenstein-Ross 2009, 30). Bin Laden himself dedicated one of his five statements in 2009 to the situation in Somalia, openly declaring it to be a key front in the war between Islam and the Crusaders (Harnisch 2010b; Shinn 2011, 208).

One school of thought claims that al Qaeda currently operates as a network of semi-autonomous branches, or ‘franchises’, that are established when a local organisation surrenders a degree of autonomy to al Qaeda’s leadership in exchange for the resources and legitimacy it can bestow (Byman 2010, Farrell 133-134). As al Shabaab clearly adheres to al Qaeda’s worldview, is willing to engage with the network and has publicly declared its allegiance to the central leadership, there has been much speculation that it is attempting to become the next franchise organisation (Byman 2010, para 6; Harnisch 2010b para 7-9). However, although there is no doubt that al Shabaab is internationalising its agenda, the organisation is unlikely to become an al Qaeda franchise in the immediate future, reportedly already turning down such an offer made in early 2011 (Bennett 2011). Despite the obvious closeness between the two, al Qaeda has made no serious attempts to exercise any form of control over al Shabaab and it appears that the two consider each other to be partners rather than the latter being a branch of the former (Harnisch 2010a, 28). In essence, as strong ideological ally retaining its own identity, al Shabaab’s relationship with al Qaeda is more akin to the Taliban of Afghanistan rather than any of the franchise organisations.

#### *Al Shabaab’s interactions with other Islamist movements*

Aside from engaging in dialogue with the al Qaeda leadership, al Shabaab has established connections with several al Qaeda affiliate organisations within the region and has hosted several of their operatives. One prominent example is al Qaeda in East Africa (AQEA), which has described as becoming so closely linked with al Shabaab it is “difficult to tell where one ends and the other begins” (Vidino 2010, 223). Al Shabaab was known to have provided sanctuary for AQEA’s three leading operatives, all now deceased, who were wanted in

connection with the 1998 USA embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania (al Jazeera 2011; Harnisch 2010a, 21). Abu Talha al Sudani appears to have been associated with al Shabaab from its beginning, known to have been provided with a safe house by Ayro during 2004, eventually being killed in 2007 whilst battling Ethiopian troops (al Jazeera 2011; Harnisch 2010a, 21). Saleh Ali Nabhan was provided with shelter by al Shabaab sometime around 2008, assisting with training and appearing in a promotional video for the organisation in late 2008 before being killed in September 2009 by US Special Forces in southern Somalia (al Jazeera 2011; Harnisch 2010a, 22). Fazul Abdullah Mohommed, the elusive mastermind of AQEA, often worked closely with al Shabaab and was eventually killed at a Mogadishu checkpoint in June 2011 (al Jazeera 2011; Kahan 2011, para 3). Al Shabaab has reportedly sheltered many other mid to low level operatives of AQEA that have effectively been absorbed into the organisation's foreign contingent (Harnisch 2010a, 23).

Al Shabaab has also established connections with the prominent al Qaeda affiliate al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), some sources describing the two organisations as having an 'active working partnership' (Bennett 2011; Kahan 2011, para 4). Al Shabaab and AQAP have a history of mutual praise for each others' efforts and it is believed that the two organisations have recently been attempting to develop a deeper alliance (Anzalone 2011). Although the exact details are largely unknown publicly, it appears as though the two organisations have been seeking to establish a degree of operational cooperation by shearing resources and personal (Anzalone 2011; Bennett 2011). In April 2011 the USA captured an al Shabaab operative, Ahmed Abdulkadir Warsame, who was acting as a liaison between the two organisations and has been charged, along with other terrorism related offences, with brokering weapons deals with AQAP on behalf of al Shabaab (Bennett 2011; Kahan 2011, para 4). AQAP is also believed to have acted as a middle man in al Shabaab's unofficial contacts with the al Qaeda leadership and has also reportedly urged al Shabaab to attack targets outside of Africa (Bennett 2011; Kahan 2011, para 4).

Al Shabaab's relationships with other militant Islamist groups beyond al Qaeda affiliates are difficult to determine. For example, it is known al Shabaab established the *al Qads*<sup>16</sup> brigade in 2009 to "join with other Muslims to target the Zionist entity" (Harnisch 2010a, 34; Heintz 2010, 5), although there is little evidence suggesting that it has deployed these fighters beyond Somalia. Most evidence of interaction with other militant Islamists comes from Africa where al Shabaab is suspected of having "functional linkages with other jihadist groups" (MGSE 2011, 140). For example, the 2011 Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea (MGSE) report detailed

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<sup>16</sup> Arabic for Jerusalem



the extensive network that has developed between al Shabaab and a Kenyan group called the Muslim Youth Centre (MYC). According to the report, the MYC mostly assists al Shabaab by recruiting indigenous Kenyans and providing them with the basic training and ideological indoctrination for al Shabaab's foreign contingent, although has recently considered launching a jihad of its own within Kenya (MGSE 2011, 141-145). There is evidence of ties with other radical groups beyond its immediate region with a Nigerian terrorist group, Boko Haram, recently claiming to have members receiving training in Somalia and has since developed tactics that are strikingly similar to al Shabaab's (Kahan 2011, para 5).

### **Al Shabaab's Foreign Contingent**

#### *The composition of the foreign contingent*

As alluded to above, the foreign contingent plays a prominent role within al Shabaab and several foreigners are known to wield considerable influence within the organisation. Generally speaking, the foreigners in al Shabaab are more resourceful, better educated and more highly motivated than the local recruits, ensuring that many become some of al Shabaab's most valuable assets. With some notable exceptions, foreigners were initially not considered to play a major role in the organisation with spokesmen lamenting the lack of foreigners within the organisation's ranks in late 2008 (Harnisch 2010a, 29; McGregor 2008, 261). Since then, al Shabaab has drawn hundreds of foreign fighters into their ranks that have proven crucial to al Shabaab's operational success and strengthened their claim to contribute to the global jihad. As such an important aspect of the organisation, many foreigners rise to positions of power and influence, with reportedly half of the Shura Council comprising of foreigners (Shinn 2011, 209). Some notable figures include prominent recruiter al Amriki of the USA, Godane's Yemen-Somali advisor Abu Suleiman al Banadiri, the financier Sheikh Mohamed Abu Faïd of Saudi Arabia and the director of training Abu Musa Mombasa of Pakistan (Dagne 2010, 6; Shinn 2011, 209).

In essence there are two main social groups that al Shabaab draws foreign recruits from: young ethnic Somalis from the diaspora who hold Islamist or nationalist sentiments and those non ethnic Somalis that wish to participate in the global jihad (Harnisch 2010a, 29). Recruitment within the diaspora has been particularly successful with one recent estimate claiming that al Shabaab's foreign contingent comprises of approximately 1000 ethnic Somalis and 200 to 300 others (Shinn 2011, 210). The majority of these recruits come from the Somali communities in Kenya and Yemen, but it is estimated that more than 150 have come from the Somali diaspora in Western countries (Gartenstein-Ross et al 2009, 8; Shinn 2011, 212). As it is nearly impossible

to receive accurate information on diaspora recruitment in Africa and the Middle East, the majority of reporting has focused on al Shabaab's efforts to recruit in the Western based Somali communities (Shinn 2011, 213). The largest number of al Shabaab's diaspora recruits have come from Britain, where approximately 100 are suspected to have left, with the USA, Canadian and Swedish diasporas each having about 20 suspected recruits as well as lower numbers also coming from communities in Australia and Denmark (Gartenstein-Ross et al 2009, 8; Vidino et al 2010, 225-227).

Reasons for the diaspora's relatively large contribution of recruits can be found in the situation of the diaspora itself. The Somali diaspora is one of the largest in the world with approximately two million, or 14%, of the Somali population living abroad, with most apparently wanting to return when Somalia stabilises (Gartenstein-Ross et al 2009, 7; Harnisch 2010a, 31). In Western countries particularly this desire to return has reportedly caused trouble with integration which has led to other problems, notably the high unemployment and feelings of lost identity and meaning among youths (Gartenstein-Ross et al 2009, 7-8; Pantucci 2009, 3). This pool of disaffected youths has provided al Shabaab's recruiters with a niche community to recruit from by articulating for them a cause to fight for. Initially most of al Shabaab's recruits were drawn by a nationalist anger at the Ethiopian invasion to fight for the widely viewed legitimate resistance. However, increasing numbers have been attracted by the organisation's Islamist zeal, one captured recruit apparently declaring that he joined "to fight for a legitimate Islamic government" (Gartenstein-Ross et al 2009, 8; Pantucci 2009, 5-6).

Although the non ethnic Somali contingent is notably smaller, it has provided the organisation with some of its most committed and valuable operatives with a significant number also involved in the mid to high leadership roles. Thanks largely to the efforts of the MYC, the largest group represented are Swahili Kenyans, but also present within al Shabaab's ranks are other Africans, Arabs, Pakistanis, Bengalis and even a few Caucasians (Harnisch 2010a, 31; Shinn 2011, 210). These foreign recruits provide al Shabaab with a verity of skills as diverse as their origins. Many have had combat experience, mostly in Afghanistan and Iraq, and so contribute to al Shabaab's insurgency in a number of positions ranging from field command to training to explosive manufacturing (Gartenstein-Ross 2009, 31; Shinn 2011, 211). Others have proven to be dedicated soldiers with several even becoming suicide bombers, notably including a Kenyan and a Ugandan in the 2010 Kampala attack (Shinn 2011, 211). A few have played roles outside of combat, with at least one medical student in Britain working as part of al Shabaab's medical team and previously mentioned al Amriki who has used his fluency in languages to play a prominent role in recruiting and the leadership (Harnisch 2010a, 31-32, Pantucci 2009, 3).

### *Recruiting techniques and networks*

Al Shabaab's recruiting methods are extensive, employing several different means and targeting many different audiences. One of the most obvious to outside observers has been al Shabaab's sophisticated use of recruiting media (Gartenstein-Ross et al 2009, 8; Harnisch 2010a, 29). These largely seek to portray Somalia as exciting and glorious as any other front in the global jihad with nearly all narrated in Arabic but including portions spoken in English and with English subtitles with clear attempt to reach the Somali diaspora (Harnisch 2010a, 29-30; Vidino 2010, 225). Al Amriki's videos in particular demonstrate a high degree of technical proficiency, combining appealing graphics with hip-hop style Islamist music called *nasheed* designed to appeal to a more Westernised audience not accustomed to the more standard Islamic chants (Gartenstein-Ross et al 2009, 8; Pantucci 2009, 3). The other main method al Shabaab uses is to have active networks of recruiters, though few details are known about how these operate (Gartenstein-Ross et al 2009, 9; Harnisch 2010a 2010, 31). One such network is suspected to operate in the Nairobi suburb of Eastleigh (Shinn 2011, 210). Another was known to have previously operated in Minneapolis, where most of the American Somalis were recruited, using mosques and engaging with the community to extol the virtues of the conflict in Somalia and encouraging youths to join al Shabaab (Gartenstein-Ross et al 2009, 9; Harnisch 2010a 2010, 31).

One of the greatest concerns associated with the foreign contingent is their potential to return to their countries of origin and attack in al Shabaab's name or at the organisation's behest. This has already eventuated in Uganda where four Ugandans, two of whom had received training in al Shabaab's camps, played a key role in conducting the attacks for al Shabaab, with a fifth also becoming a suicide bomber (MGSE 2011, 136-137; Shinn 2011, 211). In Australia, a group of mostly Somali men were arrested after they sought endorsement from some al Shabaab leaders for their plot to launch a suicide attack on Halsworthy Barracks, though this group had no prior contact with al Shabaab (Harnisch 2010a, 33; Farrell 2011, 137). However, it appears that al Shabaab remains focused in Africa with most threats directed at Uganda, Burundi and Kenya which al Shabaab perceives to be their immediate enemies now Ethiopian troops have withdrawn (Harnisch 2010a, 33; MGSE 2011, 24). With the precedent of using members of its foreign contingent to attack their homeland established by the Ugandan attacks, there are serious concerns that al Shabaab will follow through on some of its other threats potentially even attacking in the West (Harnisch 2010b; MGSE 2011, 24).

## Other Notable Actors

### *Eritrean involvement*

As a transnational revolutionary group, al Shabaab primarily engages with, and is therefore influenced by, those foreign elements that share the same revolutionary ideology and goals as it does. Nonetheless al Shabaab also engages, on the basis of mutual benefit, with a diverse group of minor actors that have little or no ideological affiliation. Although the individual impact upon al Shabaab's direction or tactics from this host of 'others' is negligible, their various contributions have assisted in its struggle sufficiently enough to warrant a mention. One of the most significant of these minor actors is Eritrea, a small state between Ethiopia and the Red Sea that achieved independence in 1993. There exists a long history of animosity between Eritrea and Ethiopia, stemming mostly from the country's three decade long secessionist struggle and the 1998-2000 border war that ended in an uneasy ceasefire between the two countries (Heintz 2010, 2-3; MGSE 2011, 68). One result of this hostility has been Eritrea's active involvement in Somalia, where it has been accused of supporting various armed groups effectively fighting a proxy war with Ethiopia in order to divide their attention and resources (Heintz 2010, 7; MGSE 2011, 85).

Although officially in a transition period, Eritrea is effectively ruled as a single party dictatorship, with the opaque and clandestine nature of the regime ensuring that it is difficult to determine the exact extent of its relationship with various regional groups, including al Shabaab (MGSE 2011, 69). It is known that Eritrea at least acted as a patron of the ICU (Heintz 2010, 6; Menkhaus 2008, 2), with one report claiming that Eritrea provided up to 2000 troops to assist in ICU operations (Stevenson 2007, 43). Eritrea also provided much of the ICU leadership with asylum after its fall and a base of operations for the ARS (Dagne 2010, 21; Harnisch 2010a, 11). In regards to al Shabaab specifically, Eritrea is suspected of supplying the group with small arms and medical supplies as well as initially providing military training for some fighters (Heintz 2010, 6; McGregor 2008, 259). The recent MGSE report also claims that the Eritrean embassy in Nairobi has been paying substantial sums to known al Shabaab associates (MGSE 2011, 85-87). Both Eritrea and al Shabaab have deigned these accusations, Eritrea only admitting that it has 'political links' to al Shabaab (MGSE 2011, 69). However, Eritrea's previous support of ICU and ARS members ensures that it is highly probable that Eritrea is assisting al Shabaab's efforts in some capacity.

### *Engaging criminal networks*

It also appears that al Shabaab also engages with various criminal elements throughout the region. Although, again, the clandestine nature of these relationships makes the extent of criminal involvement with al Shabaab unclear, it seems the traditionally anti-criminal al Shabaab has established a mutually beneficial 'pax commerciale' with a number of criminal networks (MGSE 2011, 31). There are at least two Kenyan smuggling operations that al Shabaab is chiefly involved with: the people smuggling network of Abdirahman Abdi Salawat and a less clear, unnamed network that assists with moving goods across the Kenyan border. Salawat is suspected to be the 'facilitator of choice' for many Somalis since 2004, known for arranging false passports for Somalis wishing to enter Europe as well as for smuggling people into Somalia to fight for al Shabaab (MSGGE 2011, 25-27). Though an associate of Salawat denies the network deals with al Shabaab, there are allegations that Salawat has a number of hotels in Nairobi that he has used as safe houses to accommodate injured al Shabaab fighters that have been brought into Kenya to recuperate (MSGGE 2011, 26).

The other smuggling network, perhaps networks, primarily deals with moving commercial goods and weapons over the Kenya-Somali border. Most of the commercial goods come from the previously mentioned trading cycle operated by al Shabaab out of Kismaayo where it exports charcoal and import consumable goods. It appears that these goods are then sold in Kismaayo at below the Kenyan market price to certain businessmen and then smuggled across the border to avoid paying any duties (MGSE 2011, 31). From this arrangement it is believed al Shabaab generates millions of dollars monthly that is used to fund its administration or purchase weapons from arms dealers in Kenya that in turn are smuggled back over the border (MGSE 2011, 31). Apart from these two networks, al Shabaab is known to deal with several minor criminal organisations within Somalia. One example is the organisations extensive dealings with black marketers, including purchasing weapons from corrupt TFG and AMISOM officials (Bruton 2010, 14). Pirate activity appears to be tolerated in certain parts of al Shabaab's territory, notably in the central port town of Xarardheere where the local al Shabaab leader released some captured local pirate chiefs after they agreed to pay a levy on their ransoms (MGSE 2011, 38-39). However, these arrangements seem to be strictly local rather than representing a greater relationship between al Shabaab and pirate gangs.

## **Chapter 3: The Impact of the Foreign Elements**

The threat posed by al Shabaab has changed considerably in the four and a half years of its insurgency. Evolving from a localised Islamist insurgency relying on hit-and-run attacks, al Shabaab is now a widespread movement capable of seizing and holding territory from its rivals as well as effectively acting beyond the areas under its immediate influence. It has been al Shabaab's extensive engagement with the various foreign elements that has been the crucial factor in transforming it into Somalia's most effective radical Islamist group in recent times. Whether by inspiring the leadership, improving the proficiency of al Shabaab's fighters or simply providing the organisation with resources, foreign elements have had an extensive impact upon al Shabaab's strategic and tactical behaviour. Although this foreign inspired change has been mostly beneficial for al Shabaab, there have been some damaging side effects that could potentially undermine the entire organisation. As such in this section I shall examine the influence over strategy and tactics that the various foreign elements have had as well as exploring the negative repercussions that this influence has had on the organisation.

### **The Tactical Impacts**

One of the most heavily influenced aspects of al Shabaab has been its combat tactics, with a clear distinction evident between those indigenous tactics and those that have been foreign inspired. In essence, the foreign interaction over al Shabaab has manifested militarily in two key ways: firstly in the adoption by al Shabaab of several unconventional tactics that were either alien or rare in Somalia previously and secondly by improving the quality of al Shabaab's fighters and general battlefield performance. In a related field, foreign influence has also had a notable impact in improving al Shabaab's recruiting techniques. Initially, the main foreign element to impact upon al Shabaab was the wider militant Islamist movement, with its leadership drawing inspiration from the combat in Afghanistan and Iraq to shape their battlefield methodology (Curran 2011; Vidino et al 2010, 223). Eventually though al Shabaab's foreign contingent grew more influential, with veteran combatants transferring the technical knowhow and techniques utilised by Islamists abroad. This information transfer is what effectively enabled al Shabaab to move from simply emulating the methods of other Islamists to conducting sophisticated attacks of their own (Gartenstein-Ross 2009, 32; Shinn 2011, 210-211).

#### *Changing Military Tactics*

Prior to the extensive foreign influence over al Shabaab's tactics, the two most common insurgent tactics used by the organisation were assassinations and frequent guerrilla assaults

upon its enemy's positions (Curran 2011, para 6-7; McGregor 2008, 253-254). Assassination is one of al Shabaab's oldest methods with the group known to have engaged in the well planned assassinations of foreign aid workers and TFG supporters throughout Somalia as early as 2003 (Menkhaus 2005, 42). The main techniques used to kill the victim were 'drive-by' style shootings or using explosives, most commonly a grenade thrown from a crowd or through a window (McGregor 2008, 254). Assaults on the government, Ethiopian and later AMISOM forces were primarily conducted by an initial barrage of mortar and rocket fire before gunmen engaged with automatic weapons, namely AK-47s (McGregor 2008, 253-254). Al Shabaab has also made extensive use of 'technicals', modified utility trucks that have been armour plated and equipped with an anti-aircraft gun, providing mobile firepower and the closest thing to an armour division available to militants in Somalia today (McGregor 2008, 253; MGSE 2011). These methods are common in asymmetrical warfare and are still widely used by al Shabaab militiamen, albeit with the improved efficiency and the less conventional combat techniques gained from the training provided by the foreign contingent.

The two primary unconventional combat tactics that have been introduced to al Shabaab repertoire are the use of suicide bombings and improvised explosive devices (IEDs). Suicide bombings were unknown within Somalia before late 2006 when al Shabaab first utilised the tactic to attack a government convoy (Harnisch 2010a, 50; Shinn 2011, 208). Although suicide is traditionally considered a disgraceful act and taboo in Somali culture, these 'martyr operations' have become an increasingly common tactic of al Shabaab. Al Shabaab's suicide attacks have also become increasingly sophisticated over the years, with the organisation mastering the technique of simultaneous attacks and infiltrating bombers past security (Gartenstein-Ross 2009, 31; Harnisch 2010a, 35-36). Al Shabaab's foreign contingent plays a large role both in organising and conducting the organisation's suicide bombings. Notable operatives include: Mohamoud Mujajir of Sudan who is in charge of recruiting suicide bombers, a British-Somali bomber whose attack in October 2007 made him the first known foreigner to attack in al Shabaab's name, Shirwa Ahmed who became America's first known suicide bomber in September 2009 and a Danish-Somali who in December 2009 infiltrated a graduation ceremony in Mogadishu and killed 24 people including three government ministers (Shinn 2011; 209-211). Interestingly, Arabic and English have replaced Somali as the language of choice in the martyrdom videos al Shabaab releases, likely demonstrating both the origin and intended audience of most of these martyrs (Vidino et al 2010, 223).

IEDs, also known as roadside bombs, were not unheard of but uncommon in Somalia prior to al Shabaab's insurgency. Initially considered negligible during the early insurgency

against Ethiopia (McGregor 2008, 254), IEDs are now one of the main weapons in al Shabaab's arsenal with the 2011 United Nation's Monitoring Group's report recording 137 IED incidents throughout Somalia between 2010 and 2011 (MGSE 2011, 45). The majority of these IEDs use explosives extracted from high explosive artillery shells, occasionally stuffed with material to act as shrapnel, and commonly utilise the Bodyguard motorcycle alarm activated by mobile phones as a remote control triggering system. (MGSE 2011, 45-46). Although al Shabaab's IEDs have been described as "relatively low-tech in comparison to other combat arenas", they still require greater technical expertise than is commonly found in largely uneducated Somali population (MGSE 2011, 45). As such, al Shabaab's extensive use of explosives, both for IEDs and suicide attacks, are a clear reflection of impact that foreign expertise and training has had upon the organisation (Harnisch 2010a, 35; Shinn 2011, 210).

### *Training Camps*

The heavy involvement of foreigners within al Shabaab, apart from the transfer of their bomb-making methods to al Shabaab operatives, has significantly contributed to the organisation's increased battlefield performance both by providing extensive training and participating in combat themselves. Early in their insurgency, al Shabaab's militiamen were considered willing but largely incompetent, often launching uncoordinated attacks and demonstrating poor marksmanship, most notably with the mortars with several cases reported of insurgent's shell inadvertently landing in civilian areas (McGregor 2008, 256). Since then, al Shabaab's forces have become increasingly competent owing largely to a series of camps operated by veterans of other conflicts that were established throughout southern Somalia to train the influx of foreign as well as the local recruits (Gartenstein-Ross 2009, 30-31; Harnisch 2010a, 20).

Graduates of these camps receive not only indoctrination into al Shabaab's cause but also basic military training. Al Shabaab promotional videos frequently show uniformed militants engaged in the combat courses, military drill and weapons familiarity exercises necessary to instil a combatant with the required discipline and technical knowledge to fight (Gartenstein-Ross 2009, 31; Harnisch 2010a, 29-30). The results of this foreign conducted training have been palpable. Al Shabaab's tactical planning has notably increased in sophistication, with the organisation proving it can now conduct coordinated strikes on high profile targets, including both people and buildings, and engage for extended campaigns (Curran 2011, para 8-9; Harnisch 2010a, 35). Marksmanship has also noticeably improved indicating an increased time spent training combatants, with the MGSE reporting a marked increase of al Shabaab sniper activity deployed to harass AMISOM and TFG forces (MGSE 2011, 19).



### *Improving Recruiting*

As previously mentioned, al Shabaab has long desired to attract foreigners to join it and has pursued several different methods from recorded statements to community networking to recruit them. Several members in al Shabaab's foreign contingent have been willing to help the organisation attract more recruits and have actually been instrumental in shaping al Shabaab's productions to become more appealing to the target youth. Most of al Shabaab's early work took the form of statements, mostly authored by the organisations leadership, often using fiery rhetoric to align the organisation with al Qaeda (Harnisch 2010, 25-26; Shinn 2011, 207). This tactic seemed to appeal more to those already involved in the global jihad than Islamist inspired youths, notably attracting a number of militants from the Afghanistan-Pakistan border (Gartenstein-Ross 2009, 31). These veteran combatants have been particularly useful to al Shabaab, especially in passing on their expertise as mentioned above. However, the involvement of a younger generation of disciplined fighters was still needed to provide the quality manpower for operations.

By 2009, al Shabaab's recruiting videos had become noticeably more advanced, displaying battle scenes and militants training as well as noticeably featuring foreigners fighting or narrating in Arabic and English (Harnisch 2010, 30). The aforementioned al Amriki has been particularly prominent in many of these videos, especially the March 2009 "Ambush at Bardale", although there have been several other foreigners shown throughout the films, occasionally in leadership roles (Harnisch 2010, 30). Another example of foreign assistance to recruiting occurred when a group of previous recruits appeared on social networks exhorting their 'homies' to join them in the fight, a move that apparently saw a distinguishable wave of recruits (Pantucci 2009, 3). Apart from the creative use of recruiting media, the impact of these foreigners in al Shabaab's recruitment effort has manifested in two other significant ways. Firstly, multilingual foreigners provide al Shabaab with an effective way to reach otherwise hard to recruit populations. Secondly, the prominence of non-Somali foreigners like al Amriki demonstrate that al Shabaab's claim to be part of a global movement is not just rhetoric and that non-local recruits can be assured that they could gain status within the organisation through their ability and dedication (Harnisch 2010 30; Vidino 2010, 228-229).

### **The Strategic Impacts**

Strategically, the foreign element's influence over al Shabaab has manifested itself in two main ways. Firstly, foreign elements are primarily responsible for the establishing of al Shabaab's ideological orientation as al Shabaab's dedication to the transnational militant

movement is a new phenomenon in Somalia (Gartenstein-Ross 2009, 25; Vidino et al 2010, 221). Secondly, the significant interaction with various foreign elements, whether this has been through the provision or sharing of resources or by providing al Shabaab with the experience necessary to establish its own networks, has undoubtedly strengthened al Shabaab's position in Somalia and has greatly assisted in the organisation's military and economic dominance within the country (MGSE 2011, 17). The wider militant Islamist movement has been the most influential of all the foreign elements strategically speaking, with the global jihad providing the ideology and the majority of the organisations that al Shabaab is networked with. Nonetheless, the foreign contingent and the verity of other actors have also had notable impacts upon al Shabaab's strategy.

### *Ideological Orientation*

One of the most significant impacts foreign elements have had upon al Shabaab stems from al Qaeda's radicalisation of al Shabaab's core leadership during the 1990s which is directly responsible for instilling the movement's transnational Islamist ideology (Shinn 2009, 2). Whereas the previous Islamist groups AIAI, the ICU and Hizbul Islam were primarily nationalist in focus, seeking to establish an Islamic state in ethnic Somali lands, al Shabaab has explicitly committed itself to the global jihadist ideology of al Qaeda (Gartenstein-Ross 2009, 25; Vidino et al 2010, 221). As such, al Shabaab frequently characterises itself as a major actor in the larger struggle between Islam and infidelity, linking its local struggle against Ethiopian and AMISOM forces with the global war against the 'far enemy' of America (Gartenstein-Ross 2009, 25; Vidino et al 2010, 221). In al Shabaab's own words, the current combat within Somalia originated when "the world's Crusader forces were mobilised and America unleashed their hunting dogs" to counter the success of Islamists within the country (Pantucci 2010, 2).

The influence of Islamist foreign elements over al Shabaab's ideological orientation has continued beyond their original radicalisation of key members. Of particular note have been the actions of the foreign contingent, whose significant influence within the Shura Council and their natural affiliation with the more radical transnational faction has ensured that al Shabaab has maintained a strong adherence to the international Jihadi-Salafi movement (Shinn 2011, 209; Weinstein 2011). This influence most visually manifested itself in December 2010 when the foreign contingent effectively assumed the role kingmakers, supporting moves to unseat Godane and using their influence to ensure his replacement was al Afghani, who is also a dedicated transnationalist, albeit more tactful (Weinstein 2011, para 10-12). In a less direct manner, other Islamist groups frequently praise al Shabaab's ideological commitment and encourage the organisation to continue its efforts to support the transnational Islamist movement (Anzalone

2011; Harnisch 2010a, 27-28). Al Shabaab appears eager to earn this praise and it is suspected that al Shabaab's terrorist attack on the Ugandan capital was at least partly an attempt to impress the wider Islamist movement (Harnisch, 2010b).

The most notable strategic benefit al Shabaab derives from this heavily foreign influenced ideology is the focus necessary for its high degree of organisation. By having the clear vision of Somalia as Islamic Emirate within a wider Caliphate, al Shabaab's leadership is able to effectively identify those steps to be taken in order to achieve its goal and devise the means to pursue them. Amongst the notable stratagems inspired by al Shabaab's ideology are its authoritarian but universally applied governing style as well as its establishing mixed clan militia and administrations in an effort to transcend clan politics and prove the organisation is truly basing its regime on Islam (Bruton 2010 12; Weinstein 2008, para 9-10). This degree of organisation stands al Shabaab in stark contrast with the majority of other local organisations, especially the TFG, who only have a vague idea of their objectives at best (Bruton 2009, 86; Shinn 2011, 207). Though ideology has played a prominent role in al Shabaab's strategic thinking, its role should not be overemphasised. Al Shabaab has long displayed the ability to mix pragmatism with ideology in its decision making as recently evidenced by al Shabaab resisting calls from the wider movement for it to directly attack Western countries and adopt the al Qaeda name (Bennett 2011, Kahan 2011, para 4).

#### *Cementing al Shabaab's position within Somalia*

In a more direct manner, several foreign elements have had an instrumental role in consolidating al Shabaab's strategic position that has allowed it to expand throughout Somalia and beyond. The two primary methods in which foreign elements have assisted in this regard have been to provide military assistance and the economic means to raise its necessary revenue. Although it is unclear exactly the extent and even when this support began, al Shabaab's control over much of the key infrastructure such as ports and airstrips throughout the south since 2009 has ensured that the organisation at least has the potential to receive large amounts of cargo for several years (MGSE 2011, 47). While virtually all of the foreign elements that al Shabaab engages have been involved in deepening its hold upon its territories, the key contributors to this state of affairs have been the host of minor parties that have been clandestinely engaging with al Shabaab for mutual benefit.

The primary method of military assistance has been the supply of weapons and other combat essential supplies, such as medicine and fuel, used by al Shabaab for training and furthering its war efforts. Arms trafficked to al Shabaab appear to come from numerous sources

with Eritrea suspected to be a prime supplier, though more ideologically motivated contacts throughout Arabia are also believed to be contributing weapons (Heintz 2010, 6; MGSE 2011, 41). Though it is impossible to assess the quantity it appears the majority of weapons are brought into al Shabaab's territories via the sea, with other notable methods of delivery include having the supplies directly flown in from Eritrea and Arabian countries or smuggled over the Kenyan border (Heintz 2010, 6; MGSE 2011, 41, 48-49). In terms of economy, al Shabaab's control over several key southern ports such as Kismaayo and Marka ensures that the organisation resides over lucrative trade routes operated by a mixture of foreign traders who are either ideological affiliates of al Shabaab or purely opportunistic criminal entities (MGSE 2011, 29-30). The revenue that al Shabaab gains from these trade routes appears to contribute a significant part to the organisation's budget which is then used to acquire the necessary weapons as well as pay for the various local administration costs and its combatant's salaries (MGSE 2011, 27).

These foreign supplies of weapons and finances, by augmenting those already available to al Shabaab within Somalia, have provided the organisation with the physical and fiscal resources required to ensure the organisation's dominance over southern Somalia. Being able to arm all of its militiamen and purchase the loyalty of those more pragmatically minded Somalis, al Shabaab has, until very recently, been relatively untroubled by internal challenges, enabling the organisation to expand its operations. This strength has notably manifested itself in al Shabaab's military prowess, evidenced by its ability to fend off many incursions into its territory, containing the TFG and AMISOM forces within Mogadishu and actively remaining on the offensive against its other opponents throughout the rest of the country (Harnisch 2010a, 18). Another key sign of al Shabaab's strong strategic position has been its ability to actively network with affiliate organisations. Some notable examples include assisting Mohammad Said Atom's Islamist militia in Puntland by providing them with combat supplies as well as logistical support (MGSE 2011, 19-23) and the relationship al Shabaab has fostered with AQAP, having sent at least one operative to liaise with it and reportedly sharing resources (Anzalone 2011; Bennett 2011).

### **The Negative Repercussions of Foreign Influence**

In effect, there have been two primary negative side effects from al Shabaab's extensive engagement with foreign elements: the alienation of several groups within Somali society and the attraction of hostile attention from foreign powers. Although al Shabaab initially enjoyed reasonably high popular support owing to its leading role in the anti-Ethiopian insurgency, it was hoped that with the Ethiopian withdrawal popular opinion would turn against the organisation (Menkhaus 2009, 9; Shinn 2009, 4). To some extent this has happened, with some notable

defections to the TFG as well as several armed challengers to al Shabaab's authority arising, the most prominent being the militant Sufi movement Ahlu Sunna wal Jama (ASWJ) (Harnisch 2010a, 18; Hassan 2009, 5). Al Shabaab's association with the wider militant Islamist movement and the active recruitment from outside of Somalia has also drawn the attention of the United States, amongst others, which in response, not only assisted the TFG but also conducted strikes against the organisation (Vidino et al 2010, 223). Although these efforts appear to have done little to curtail al Shabaab's overall effectiveness, they have likely prevented al Shabaab from completely overrunning the entire southern Somalia and certainly caused notable casualties in the leadership.

### *The Alienation of Somalis*

Although it is impossible to accurately gauge the level of support al Shabaab holds within its territories, there is ample evidence to suggest it is not high. In general, Somalis have long been known for their displeasure at overt foreign involvement in their country's politics. As such it is believed that the strong foreign aspects of al Shabaab have been met with disapproval in the local communities and has eroded its previous popularity (Dagne 2010, 7; Shinn 2011, 214). Al Shabaab's heavy regulation of aid agencies, promotion of non-local leaders, especially from the northern situated Issaq clan, and several ideologically inspired attacks on prominent Sufi shrines and preachers are widely viewed in Somalia as evidence of unwelcome foreign influence (al Jazeera 2009; Le Sage 2010, 3-4). In addition to its foreign taint, al Shabaab's often draconian administrations have prompted several local communities to either rebel or support opponents of the organisation (Harnisch 2010a, 18). For example, several central Somali communities declared that, though they were appreciative of the order al Shabaab brought, its oppressive laws and execution of dissenting elders had prompted them to side with ASWJ (Hassan 2009, 7).

This alienation and unpopularity has resulted in significant setbacks for al Shabaab, often identified as the direct cause of several prominent militants defecting and many notable incidences of popular resistance to the organisation. For example, the senior Shabaab commander Ali Hassan Gheddi, who defected to the TFG with 550 of his militiamen in 2009, declared that his reason for doing so was his opposition to the organisation's growing foreign agenda and vetoing humanitarian aid groups (Dagne 2010, 7; Harnisch 2010a, 15-16). Examples of popular resistance to al Shabaab include the large December 2009 protests throughout Mogadishu that saw al Shabaab's insignia publicly burnt in response to the organisation's bombing of a graduation ceremony that was attributed to 'foreigners' within the movement (Bruton 2010, 13; Harnisch 2010a, 18). On a grander scale, there have been several pockets of

armed resistance to al Shabaab's rule throughout southern Somalia. Many of these are affiliated with ASJW, currently the most prominent resistance group to al Shabaab which operates effectively as an umbrella organisation of loosely allied militias united by anti-al Shabaab sentiments and adherence to Sufi Islam (Bruton 2010, 11; MGSE 2011, 11). Militarily speaking, though ASWJ militia are of inferior quality to al Shabaab's forces, they are apparently superior in number and can rely on Ethiopian support, which has allowed them to capture the central towns of Guraceel and Dusa Mareb from al Shabaab (Hussan 2009, 5-6).

### *Reactions of Foreign Enemies*

Al Shabaab's active association with the wider militant Islamist movement and extensive foreign recruiting has drawn the attention of the USA and, to a lesser extent, European policy makers. In early 2008, citing al Shabaab's ties to al Qaeda and leadership's experience in Afghanistan, the US government designated al Shabaab as a terrorist organisation (Dagne 2010, 5; Vidino et al 2010, 223). Although in an interview Robow initially claimed the designation was an honour showing that the organisation was on the right path (al Jazeera 2009; Gartenstine-Ross 2009, 29), actions since taken by the USA and European Union (EU) have frequently frustrated al Shabaab's operations. Both the USA and EU are known to provide equipment, logistical support and training to the TFG. For example, the EU has successfully trained 600 Somali troops in Uganda and intends to train at least another 1400 to assist the TFG and AMISOM forces (Harnisch 2010b, para 10). How effective these efforts have been is debatable for, even after four and half years, the TFG is rarely able to project authority beyond Mogadishu and it is predicted between a third and a half of the provided supplies ends up in the black market, often to be bought by al Shabaab itself (Bruton 2010, 14; MGSE 2011, 44).

The USA has also conducted several military strikes against al Shabaab, usually targeting the organisation's key operatives. High ranking casualties of note include Ayro, al Shabaab's founder and first Emir, who was killed by a US missile strike in his central Somali home during May 2008 (Harnisch 2010a, 12; Shinn 2009, 2) and AQEA member Nabhan who was killed when US Special Forces attacked his convoy in southern Somalia during September 2009 (al Jazeera 2011; Vidino et al 2011, 223-224). Several mid-ranking members have also been targeted by the US in efforts to disrupt al Shabaab's activities. Two recent examples include a missile strike in June 2011 on an al Shabaab position outside of Kismaayo that reportedly killed two al Shabaab operatives planning attacks outside of the country as well as AQAP liaison Warsame who was captured in northern Somalia during April 2011 (Kahan 2011, para 4). Ethiopia is known to engage in operations against al Shabaab, notably providing extensive assistance for ASWJ forces and conducting several incursions of varying success into

al Shabaab's territories (MGSE 2011, 51-52). One important point of difference between Ethiopia and the USA is that the former is more concerned with al Shabaab's possible engagement with Eritrea and various Ethiopian separatist movements than the organisation's involvement with other Islamists.

### **The Overall Effectiveness of Foreign Elements Involvement**

Although there have clearly been some serious negative repercussions, by augmenting local force's capabilities the various foreign elements have played a crucial role in al Shabaab gaining its current favourable position. By providing enhanced tactical capacities and strategic considerations, foreign influence has assisted al Shabaab to develop from a small, motivated militia within the ragtag anti-Ethiopian insurgency into one of the most effective militant movements in Somalia. Whilst at first glance the adverse side effects of foreign engagement could provide an Achilles heel to al Shabaab, on closer inspection they appear to be less fatal than hoped. Although the numerous defections and resistance to al Shabaab demonstrates that many Somalis do not agree with al Shabaab's foreign inspired ideology and methods, many other Somalis appear to prefer the relative security its effective, if authoritarian, administration provides. In contrast, alternative organisations such as the TFG and ASWJ have never been able to solicit much local support and as such are more dependent upon their foreign backers than al Shabaab has ever been. The efforts by al Shabaab's international opponents, though no doubt impeding the organisation, have not had the detrimental impact intended. Overall, al Shabaab's engagement with foreign elements has seen the benefits noticeably outweigh the negative impacts.

## Concluding Remarks

In essence, whether it has been by providing al Shabaab with quality fighters and trainers, its leaders with a vision for the country or the movement's administrations with supplies, the various foreign elements have effectively enabled al Shabaab to outmanoeuvre its adversaries and establish a position of dominance within Somalia. By identifying the instrumental role played by external actors upon al Shabaab, this analysis provides several implications for potential policy propositions and avenues for further research. The current focus of most policy has been to support and reform the TFG in the so far vain hope of establishing a legitimate alternative to al Shabaab. Perhaps it is time for those interested parties to instead shift their attention towards methods of counteracting or at least reducing the foreign assistance that gives al Shabaab's strength, possibly via a blockade of al Shabaab controlled ports or more actively combating the regional smuggling networks. Should these not prove feasible, than the recognition of the large influence of various foreign elements over al Shabaab at least provides a method to understand and predict al Shabaab's behaviour and shape policy around that. Also, as this dissertation is far from exhaustive, further research should be conducted into the lesser explored areas such as the movement's complex ideology and those non-ideological cartel-like elements that al Shabaab engages with in order to gain the full picture of the organisation.

The recent famine within al Shabaab's territories, coupled with several bouts of factional infighting amongst al Shabaab's leadership, has resulted in a noticeable weakening of the organisation, with some observers predicting al Shabaab's defeat in the coming months (Chothia 2011; Gentleman 2011). However, expectations of al Shabaab's imminent collapse should not be too high as the organisation has proved notably resilient, surviving several predictions' of its demise previously. Although challenges from the famine and internal resistance has prompted al Shabaab to withdraw from several areas at once, including Mogadishu, these areas were largely on the periphery of al Shabaab's control and several key areas in Southern Somalia, notably Kismaayo, Marka and Baidoa, are still firmly under the organisation's control.

Al Shabaab's key local opponents the TFG and ASWJ have been largely unable to capitalise upon al Shabaab's withdrawal with the void being largely filled by former al Shabaab allies, warlords and various clan militias who have established amongst them more than 20 self declared mini-states (Gentelman 2011). However, even the most successful of these mini-states such as Azania or the Shabelle Valley Administration rarely span more than a few villages and effectively act as proxies for neighbouring Ethiopia and Kenya who supply most of their weapons and funds. As such, though al Shabaab has suffered several setbacks recently it still



remains one of the dominant groups within Somalia. Indeed, al Shabaab is already showing signs of regrouping, ensuring that the organisation, with its transnational ideology and foreign augmented forces, will remain a Somali, regional and international concern for some time to come.

# Annex A: The Map of Somalia

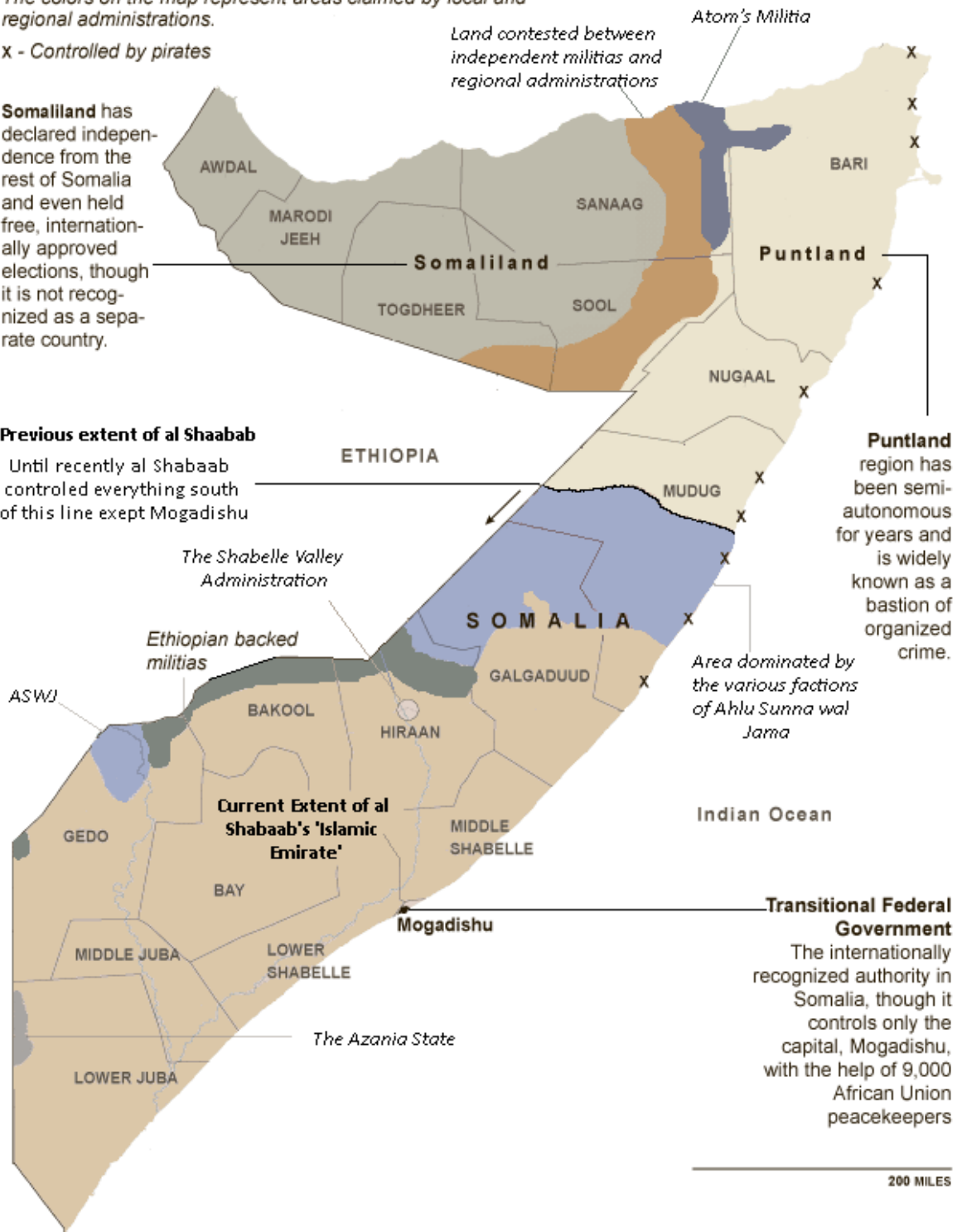


## Annex B: The Current Political Zones in Somalia

The colors on the map represent areas claimed by local and regional administrations.  
 x - Controlled by pirates

**Somaliland** has declared independence from the rest of Somalia and even held free, internationally approved elections, though it is not recognized as a separate country.

**Previous extent of al Shabaab**  
 Until recently al Shabaab controlled everything south of this line except Mogadishu



This map was created by the author by adapting an existing map, omitting unnecessary details and simplifying the shading. Original map can be found at <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2011/09/10/world/africa/20110910-somalia-a-country-broken-into-pieces.html?ref=africa>

## **Annex C: Glossary of Relevant Groups, People and Terms (alphabetically by first name)**

Abdirahman Abdi Salawat: a Somali people smuggler operating out of Nairobi who is suspected to assisted al Shabaab and their affiliates on numerous occasions.

Abu Mansour al Amriki: the alias of Omar Hammami, an American-Syrian Islamist who became one of the first foreigners to join al Shabaab sometime in late 2006. Primarily involved with the organisation's leadership and recruiting efforts.

Abu Suleiman al Banadiri: the Yemeni-Somali adviser to Godane.

Abu Musa Mombasa: a Pakistani militant who is al Shabaab's director of training.

Abu Talha al Sudani: a prominent AQEA operative who was affiliated with al Shabaab as early as 2004. Killed in December 2007 fighting Ethiopian troops in Somalia

Aden Hashi Ayro: the first leader of al Shabaab from its founding in 2003 until May 2008 when he was killed by a US missile strike on his home in central Somalia.

Ahlu Sunna wal Jama (ASWJ): an umbrella organisation of militant Sufi militia opposed to al Shabaab. Although ASWJ is allied with the TFG, it has been branded an Ethiopian proxy owing to its heavy reliance on assistance from Ethiopia.

Ahmed Abdulkadir Warsame: a mid-ranking al Shabaab operative who was acting as a liaison between the organisation and AQAP before the USA captured him in April 2011.

Ahmed Abdi Godane: also known as Abu Zabayr. Al Shabaab's second leader from Ayro's death in May 2008 until he was usurped by moves in the Shura council in late December 2010. Appears to remain a prominent commander within the organisation

Al Itihaad al Islamiya (AIAD): the primary Islamist group in Somalia throughout the 1990's that faded to irrelevance by the mid 2000's. Al Shabaab's founders split from the group in disagreement with the elder leadership's direction in 2003.

Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP): a militant Salafi movement that operates primarily in Yemen and is allegedly one of al Qaeda's franchise organisations. Believed to have an active partnership with al Shabaab, although the exact details as to their relationship are unclear.

Al Qaeda in East Africa (AQEA): an al Qaeda cell not highly active since the early 2000's but most widely known for being responsible for the US embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania

during 1998. Many of its members have since found shelter in Somalia and are believed to have become a part of al Shabaab.

Ali Hassan Gheddi: formerly an al Shabaab commander who defected to the TFG with 550 men in 2009, citing several al Shabaab's policies such as regulating humanitarian aid agencies as his motivation for switching sides.

Ali Mohamed Rage: a commander and currently the chief spokesman for al Shabaab

Alliance for the Re-liberation of Somalia (ARS): a broad coalition of Somali groups that were opposed to the December 2006 Ethiopian invasion that overthrew the ICU. Initially based in Eritrea, ARS split in 2008 when moderates joined in the peace negotiations in Djibouti and the militants led by Aweys who returned to Somalia to eventually merge with other local groups to form Hizbul Islam

Alliance for the Restoration of Peace and Counterterrorism (ARPC): a USA facilitated alliance comprising mostly of local warlords with the intent to reverse the growing power of the ICU. Were decisively defeated by the ICU mid 2006

The African Union Mission to Somalia (AMISOM): the African Union force mandated by the United Nations to protect the TFG and has a current strength of 9000 although an additional 3000 more soldiers are expected to reinforce them later in 2011. So far only two nations, Uganda and Burundi, have contributed troops.

Azania State: a small self declared state that contests land with al Shabaab along the Kenyan border. Effectively a proxy of Kenya from which Azania gains extensive assistance

Faud Mohamed Khalaf Shangole: one of al Shabaab's founders and a prominent commander, believed to control the militia around the port of Marka.

Fazul Abdullah Mohommed: AQEA's mastermind, known to have worked closely with al Shabaab and was a key ally of Godane. Killed June 2011 at a TFG checkpoint in Mogadishu

Hassan Dahir Aweys: a prominent Somali Islamist who has held a leadership position in nearly every prominent Islamist group in Somalia since AIAI. Currently a commander in al Shabaab

Hassan al Turki: the commander of the Ras Komboni Brigade which defected from Hizbul Islam to join al Shabaab in February 2010. Remains a commander for al Shabaab in southern Somalia

Hizbul Islam: the now disbanded Somali Islamist group led by Aweys that frequently competed with al Shabaab for territory and allegiance, although the two were officially allied to combat the

TFG. Was absorbed into al Shabaab in December 2010 after suffering a string of defections and defeats

Ibrahim Haji Jama al Afghani: one of the founding members of al Shabaab, controlling operations in Puntland and Somaliland before becoming Emir in late December 2010.

Islamic Courts Union (ICU): originally a coalition of eleven minor Islamic administrations around Mogadishu who joined together around mid 2004. Gradually more groups joined the ICU and it grew in power and influence effectively controlling much of southern and central Somalia. Overthrown by the 2006 Ethiopian invasion that placed the TFG in power

Jihadi-Salafi: the strain of Salafism that al Shabaab adheres to which advocates the need for a struggle, or  *jihad* , often in the form of aggressive political activism or revolutions, to establish Islamic states that would ensure  *sharia*  is correctly implemented.

Mohamed Abu Faïd: a Saudi Arabian militant who is a financier for al Shabaab

Mohamed Siad Barre: the socialist inspired dictator whose regime was the last authoritative government in Somalia. As a General, Said Barre seized power in the 1969 coup and ruled until 1991 when he was overthrown by warlords. He died in 1995 exiled in Kenya.

Mohamed Saïid Atom: leader of an Islamist militia in the north of Somalia that is closely associated with al Shabaab. Has been known to receive significant assistance the organisation and has possibly become a division of al Shabaab.

Mohamoud Mujajir: a Sudanese militant believed to be in charge of recruiting suicide bombers for al Shabaab

Mukhtar Ali Robow: also known as Abu Mansuur. One of the founders, previous chief spokesman and a prominent commander within al Shabaab, believed to command forces in the Bay and Bakool regions.

Muslim Youth Centre: a Kenyan organisation that reportedly assists al Shabaab by recruiting and indoctrinating Kenyans to act as part of the organisation's foreign contingent.

Quran and Sunna: the Muslim holy texts. Muslims believe the Quran was divinely dictated to the Prophet Mohammed and is therefore literally the word of God. The Sunna is 'the example of the Prophet' comprising of a collection of sayings, or  *hadith* , attributed to Mohammed himself that elaborate on the ambiguous areas in the Quran.

Ras Komboni Brigade: an Islamist militia based in southern Somalia headed by al Turki. Comprised of approximately one quarter of Hizbul Islam's strength and the entire militia's defection to al Shabaab in February 2010 marked the beginning of the end for Hizbul Islam.

Salafism: a revivalist school of Islamic thought that seeks to rectify what adherents consider as centuries of corrupting influences and misguidance over Islam by turning to the fundamentals of the religion outlined in the Quran and Sunna. The only acceptable additional guidance for Salafis comes by the Prophets companions, in Arabic the *salaf*, who were considered rightly guided themselves. All other forms of knowledge, including human reasoning, are considered flawed and, if used, will lead to a return of the ignorance and barbarity that Islam saved mankind from.

Saleh Ali Nabhan: a prominent al Qaeda operative who was hosted by al Shabaab between 2008-2009, providing assistance with its recruiting and training during his time in Somalia. Killed when US Special Forces attacked his convoy in southern Somalia during September 2009

Shabelle Valley Administration: a small self declared state in southern Somali region of Hiraaan. Like ASWJ, the Shabelle Valley Administration is effectively a proxy of Ethiopia.

Sharia: Islamic law prescribed in the Quran and Sunna to justly govern society

Sharif Sheikh Ahmed: the current head of the TFG. Formerly the moderate leader of the ICU, he was gradually becoming sidelined by radicals before the Ethiopian invasion. Led the moderates in peace negotiations during 2007-2008 and was elected President of the new TFG in early 2009.

The Shura Council: al Shabaab's executive body, believed to comprise of 85 members.

Takfir: the process of declaring a Muslim apostate, intended to be a serious undertaking. Jihadi-Salafis tend to use it more liberally in order to legitimise their struggles. Al Qaeda expanded the concept to also include the requirement to attack the source of apostasy.

Tawhid: the concept that encapsulates the uniqueness and perfection of God that entitles Him alone to be worshiped. For Salafis this also means humans are obligated to follow the social guidelines and laws outlined in the Quran and Sunna and forms the basis of their reasoning.

Technicals: sometimes called battlewagons. A modified utility truck, often armour plated, equipped with an anti-aircraft or other heavy machinegun on the back. Commonly used by militia throughout Somalia for mobile heavy firepower and even troop transport when needed.

Transitional Federal Government (TFG): the feeble but internationally recognised Somali government. Known to be widely corrupt and incompetent, the TFG institutions and parliament,

which is currently about 550 strong, is unable to exert its authority far beyond Mogadishu and relies heavily on allied militia and AMISOM forces to survive and combat al Shabaab.

Umma: the universal Islamic community

Zakat: Islamic alms or charitable donations. Al Shabaab collects and distributes them as part of its taxation and public relations efforts.



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