

## Al-Shabaab: A Case Study

Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen, hereafter referred to as al-Shabaab, is a militant Islamic insurgent group based out of Somalia. While insurgencies can arise anywhere, most lack the capability and resources to start. Seth Jones outlined leading contributors to the formation of an insurgency as grievances, weak governance, and greed in *Waging Insurgent Warfare*. In the case of al-Shabaab, these factors played a role not only in how it began, but how it has been maintained to this day. While it is an East African affiliate of al-Qaeda and aligned itself with their fundamentalist beliefs, al-Shabaab has also established international relations with other terrorist factions like ISIS and Boko Haram (Speckhard and Shajkovci 2019, 3). Ultimately, these alignments have benefitted them even when the group was on the brink of collapse.

Al-Shabaab exploded onto the international stage in 2013 during the Westgate Shopping Center attacks in Nairobi, Kenya. At this point, however, the extremist group had already been around for years. Though there are several claims as to the true origins of the group, it is largely believed to have been formally conceived in 2003, though its conceptual roots began decades prior (Hansen 2013, 19). Nevertheless, reports indicate that it was eventually established as a sub-group of al-Ittihad al-Islamiya (AIAI), an Islamist militant group based out of Somalia in the 1980s. The fighters in AIAI, mainly comprised of veterans returning from Afghanistan, believed in violent jihad; furthermore, they referred to their fight as “defensive jihad”, protecting the Muslim *ummah*, against Western intrusion” (21). It was AIAI’s beliefs and actions as well as the Sharia Courts that contributed to the foundation of al-Shabaab (Jones et al. 2016, 10). In combining the belief of *ummah* and Salafi-jihadism, “Salafi ideology offers a comprehensive critique of the existing local and global social/political situation as immoral and inhuman and seeks to instill in the *ummah* a powerful sense of moral outrage and commitment to holy war” (Shultz 2008, 91-92).

As a young insurgency, al-Shabaab specifically targeted impoverished youth within its capital city of Mogadishu and Mombasa, Kenya in recruitment efforts. In 2016, a study was conducted by The Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers to better understand the primary motivations behind those recruited. What it revealed was that al-Shabaab, translated to “The Youth,” targets potential recruits when they are most impressionable (Botha and Abdile 2016, 4). A recruit’s age and impressionability are not the only primary drivers, however. The same study also addressed religious and economic push factors being highly influential in a recruit’s decision making. Additionally, the al-Shabaab has been largely successful by capitalizing its efforts with the use of social media, a common recruitment tool used by many extremist groups today (2). The groups aptitude for using these platforms has allowed the group to continually gain momentum despite counterterrorism efforts (Conway et al. 2017, 4; Fassrainer 2020, 86; Jones 2019, 114).

Moreover, despite international effort to help stabilize Somalia, its state institutions were weak. Since the early 1990s, the state was “battered by undulating phases of a civil war playing out among the country’s many fractious clans, larger entities aspiring to statehood” (Felbab-Brown 2018). Vanda Felbab Brown of the Brookings Institute wrote, “Characteristically, the most effective, even if brutal, stabilizing actors in Somalia have been Islamist groups. More than other contestants for power, they have been able to rise above clan divisions and administer a uniform rule, protect marginalized minority clans, and deliver swift, predictable, and non-corrupt justice” (2018). Thusly, al-Shabaab was not strengthened by countering an autocratic regime, rather, it was fueled by weak institutions.

From my research, there is little literature on how greed may have factored into the success of the establishment of al-Shabaab. To some degree, however, it has debatably played a role in its

ability to thrive. From 2005-2006 the group grew from a several dozen core members to several hundred (Jones et al. 2016, 13). This surge was short lived. As of early 2007 the power that al-Shabaab had established was beginning to splinter. Several of its core members and influential leaders were killed and “remaining forciers were demoralized and defeated” (14). However, as Hansen noted, like a phoenix, al-Shabaab began to rise from the ash (Hansen 2013, 49). As it regrouped, funding for the group increased, largely due to their affiliation and increasing alignment with al-Qaeda (Jones et al. 2016, 14). This was significant for the group and for their shared cause, as it spread their interpretation of Sharia Law transnationally (Ghaisany Sjah 2014, 41).

U.S. defense officials have categorized al-Shabaab as “uniquely dangerous among Salafi-jihadist groups” (Barnett 2020, 21). The fact that the group has been under researched is itself unique when discussing Jones’s theories about insurgencies. Literature shows that it was largely established by grievances, and that the group was able to capitalize on its grievances through recruitment efforts of impoverished youth and through social media. Though literature reflects that al-Shabaab has not been as researched as other insurgencies, what can be established is that it has “morphed several times, changing itself from a small network, into becoming a sub-group of the Sharia court movement,” and ultimately into the extremist group that it is today (Hansen and Gaas 2011, 279).

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