

The Challenge of Al-Shabaab

Written by Macharia Munene

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MACHARIA MUNENE, FEB 17 2012

There are few militia groups in Eastern Africa that have recently captured as much attention as Al-Shabaab; it poses two types of challenges. First is the physical threat and destruction that result from its military and guerilla operations. Second is the threat to the mind and the socio-cultural and economic way of life. It has become part of Kenya's national psyche in terms of cultural outlook, has changed the way people think, act and live, and is a reflection of Kenya's, and Eastern Africa's, unpredictable socio-cultural dynamics. It has created such a serious perception of threat that Kenya has mounted military operations in Southern Somalia.

Few understand the Al-Shabaab ideology except that it is closely associated with Islamic fundamentalism, Al Qaeda, and probably has a link to Somali pirates in the Indian Ocean. In many people's minds, Al-Shabaab is less an organised group and more the product of a disoriented youth that were looking for something to occupy themselves. As long as its adherents operated in fragmented Somalia, Kenyans did not worry too much about it.

In comparative terms, Hannah Muthoni argues[1] that the closest Kenyan example of an Al-Shabaab type of militia group is Mungiki which also appeals to disgruntled youth, appears organized in militaristic ways, and has a disciplined hierarchy. Both thrive on fear and send messages to target audience by inflicting heavy punishment on their victims. Yet Mungiki is nowhere near Al-Shabaab in terms of effectiveness or global notoriety.

Kenyans now see Al-Shabaab as a clear and present danger. The group emanates from Southern Somalia, mainly Jubaland, which used to be part of colonial Kenya, but is a threat to the broader Horn of Africa region, and beyond. Its origins can be traced to two interconnected failures, local and global. In Somalia, an expansionist dream of bringing every territory occupied by Somali peoples under one political roof, the concept of Greater Somalia, had developed into an ideology for holding diverse peoples together. Siad Barre, the most prominent proponent of the idea of elasticity of the state, had even started a failed war with Ethiopia over Ogaden.[2] With the collapse of his regime, the glue that had upheld the myth of Somali unity disappeared and as a result identity differences that had been suppressed emerged. This failure of the dream for a Greater Somalia came just as the USA was celebrating victory over the Soviets, proclaiming a New World Order in which the American way was *the* only way. This post Cold War sense of American triumphalism, however, was symbolically pricked in Somalia where US troops were dragged through the streets of Mogadishu as Washington looked on helplessly. This episode marked the second significant failure, one which forced the United States to become globally hesitant.[3]

The failure of the two dreams of grandeur, one Somali and one American, had devastating consequences in the region and in the world. First, the failure enabled war lords and assorted terrorist groups to thrive in exploiting the lack of central authority. A semblance of order was restored when some warlords coalesced in the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) and created their own "courts" that were protected by Al Ittihad Al Islami militia[4]. Some of the militia linked up with Al Qaeda for support. For its part, Al Qaeda, apart from training terrorists, liked inflicting visible pain on the United States and its perceived "friends." Al Qaeda had announced its presence in East Africa in 1998 by blowing up American embassies in Nairobi and in Dar es Salaam. Three years later, 2001, it damaged symbols of American economic and military power, attacking the Twin Towers and the Pentagon. The subsequent Anglo-American invasion of Iraq in 2003, without good reason, played into the hands of terrorist groups that readily exploited anti-American sentiments.

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In the same year of the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq, a group of young men in the Al Ittihad Al Islami defected and created Harakat Al Shabaab Al Mujahedeen, or the Youth Movement, which was later shortened to al Shabaab. Their objective was to revive the irredentist Greater Somalia ideology to be run under *sharia*. Although they did not initially fare well, their fortunes were boosted by Ethiopia's 2006 invasion^[5] and the defeat of the Islamic Court Union which allowed them to portray themselves as defenders of Somali interests against their "traditional" Ethiopian enemies. What was worse, it was claimed that Ethiopia and the West had imposed the Federal Transition Government, TFG, which followed the ICU's demise.^[6] Making it difficult for the TFG to operate, therefore, became a form of legitimization for Al Shabaab as the champion of Islamic values in Somalia against American and other Western socio-cultural contaminations.

Al Shabaab's professed anti-Americanism and supposed desire to establish a universal caliphate attracts interesting links and diverse support. Bronwyn E. Bruton, writing for the American Council of Foreign Relations in March 2010,^[7] sought to deny popularity to Al Shabaab by calling for its recognition as the ruler in Somalia as a method of "constructive disengagement" with the TFG. Obama, however, chose to freeze the accounts of Al Shabaab leaders. The sources of Al Shabaab finances appear to be diverse, however. They benefit from remittances, or "hawala", from some members of the Somali diaspora^[8], which constitutes roughly 14% of the Somali population. They also imposed "taxation" on businesses and on the pirates operating in the Indian Ocean and anyone "importing" goods into Southern Somalia.

Al Shabaab has turned Kenya into a battleground. In elevating the Muslim Youth Center leader Ahmad Iman Ali based in Majengo, Nairobi, to the rank of Amiiir in charge of Kenya, it instructed him to "raise your sword against the enemy that is closest to you ... Jihad should now be waged inside Kenya, which is legally a war zone." Before giving such public instructions, it had already engaged in terrorist acts including throwing grenades^[9] and kidnapping officials.^[10] Its threats of terror in public places have forced change in the way people behave. Being frisked is now so accepted that a senior judge got into trouble^[11] for refusing to be inspected in a shopping mall.

Al Shabaab knows how to use tools of propaganda, including the internet and social media, and its *Al-Katib* media outlet is, for instance, effective in countering news from other outlets.^[12] In this sense, declaring Ahmad Iman Ali as Amiiir, Kenya as "legally a war zone," and Al Shabaab as an official ally of Al Qaeda^[13] were all attempts to up the ante in what is essentially psychological warfare. It has affected perceptions of Ali's Muslim Youth Center which became a subject of debate regarding whether prominent Kenyan Muslims, who donated money for a Mosque, were funding terrorism or were simply being victimized for being Muslims. In that debate, Cabinet Minister Najib Balala accused the West^[14] of benefitting from piracy and of trying to intimidate the Arab World not to support Islamic projects in Africa. There has been a closing of the Muslim ranks in support of the Muslim Youth Center and it has stopped being an issue. The debate, however, seemingly raised Ali's profile; and Ali publicly identifies with Al Shabaab.

The most disturbing aspect of Al Shabaab's activities is its seeming invincibility despite reports of being hammered militarily. It appears that making it difficult for the AU and the Kenyan forces to win quickly is part of careful political orchestration to achieve psychological victories and to change public perceptions. With no clear support from the "International Community", meaning North America and Western Europe, and seemingly unable to capture Kismayu, Kenyan forces appear to be sinking into a permanent presence that has adverse socio-political implications. As a result, the longer it takes for Kenyan troops to capture Kismayu, declare victory, and return to base in Kenya, the more the Al Shabaab profile is raised into what appears to be a "formidable force".

Thus Al Shabaab increases its ability to reach the youth outside Somalia who are then indoctrinated to internalize and imbibe its ideals. In this way it is gradually transformed from an organ meant only for people of Somali background. Among its volunteers are Nigerians^[15], Americans^[16], and the Kenyan grenade thrower, Elgiva Bwire Oliacha^[17]. It sets up camp in poor rural areas and Kenya's urban slums where poverty creates the right environment for recruiting desperadoes. It begins offering education and basic services that the state has failed to provide the needy; once they are captive, they are inculcated with Al Shabaab "values." It is this capacity to transform its public image that leads children in the outskirts of Nairobi to play war games in which they compete to be "Al-Shabaab" and not "Kenya"^[18].

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When children compete to be Al Shabaab, this is a reflection of serious challenges. Originating in the failure of two dreams of grandeur which converged in the streets of Mogadishu, Al Shabaab would like to revive one of them, and to subject the second to permanent oblivion. In aiming to revive the Greater Somalia ideology and impose *sharia* across the board, it has linked with Al Qaeda and exploited anti-American sentiments aroused by the American sense of triumphalism. It is, however, unlikely that the melted glue of the Greater Somalia ideology can be restored. Equally, the post-Cold War American sense of triumphalism is unlikely to return to Somalia.

The initial perception that Al Shabaab was simply one of the small militias in a fragmented Somalia changed partly because of two developments. First, Kenyan and the AU forces were unable to defeat Al Shabaab decisively and to quickly capture Kismayu. This makes Al Shabaab appear like a formidable force. Second, it has effective propaganda machinery which turns Kenya into a psychological battleground thereby instilling fear and changing ways of life. Al Shabaab has disrupted the Kenyan way of life and it is penetrating the minds of youth who increasingly internalize and try to implement its teachings. It is a growing, not a declining, threat across the globe.

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