AL SHABAB'S IMPACT ON PEACE IN SOMALIA AND THE HORN OF AFRICA

BY SHUKRI ABDULKADIR

SUMMARY

• The growth of Al Shabab in Somalia and the group's embrace of Sharia law undermine the traditional conflict solving mechanisms of Somali society.

• Achieving progress toward peace in the region will likely require stemming the tide of Al Shabab's recruitment of disillusioned youth with humanitarian or state-led provision of services such as education, recreational facilities, and jobs.

Somalia is one of the world's poorest countries and is characterized by poverty and lawlessness. Since the collapse of its central government in 1991, clan warfare and piracy have predominated. With no clear central authority, various non-state actors vie for control of the country.

The emergence of Al Shabab — a radical Islamist movement with links to Al Qaeda — is the latest addition to the abundance of non-state actors struggling for leadership in the country. Beginning in 2007, Al Shabab has gained control of much of southern Somalia and some parts of Puntland and Somaliland. As the group gains power, Al Shabab has been building a formidable army with recruits from the United States, Canada, and neighbouring East African countries.

Al Shabab's emergence is significant for at least two reasons. As an Islamist group espousing Wahhabism, the group aims to establish an Islamic state in Somalia; but the Wahhabist-inspired methods of achieving this goal are in direct conflict with traditional peace-making mechanisms that are key aspects of conflict resolution in Somali society.

In addition, the growth of Al Shabab's influence in Somalia has regional

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implications for peace and security that can be seen in its support for the Ogaden National Liberation Front in Ethiopia and terrorist bombings and kidnappings in Uganda and Kenya.

This backgrounder examines the growth of Al Shabab and the implications this growth is expected to have for peace and stability in Somalia and the surrounding region.

RELIGION AND POLITICS IN SOMALIA

Somalia is a predominantly Muslim country; over 90 percent of the population is estimated to identify Islam as their religion. Islam has been used as a rallying cry against external domination, as for example, during the country's struggle for independence from colonial powers, Britain and Italy, and long-time enemy, Ethiopia. Somalia's first and most renowned anti-colonial leader, Sayyid Muhammad Abdallah Hassan, used Islam to garner support against the British and Italian colonial administrations by "acting as the poor man of God and mediating in inter-clan and intra-clan disputes" (Adam, 1995). Directly after the threat of western domination was removed after independence in 1960, political Islam became irrelevant in Somali politics, evident in the secularization of the Somali state in the post-independence era under the Siad Barre regime (Ibid).

The re-emergence of Islam in Somali politics is embedded in the policies of the Barre administration (1969-1991) and the subsequent demise of a functional government. Barre's brief flirtation with Marxist-Leninist ideology and later his liberalization of the economy in the 1970s and 1980s in a bid to secure more foreign aid had immediate economic and political repercussions. High levels of underdevelopment and alienation of marginalized groups weakened the state's social infrastructure and resulted in widespread inequality in access and provision of services in Somalia (Yusuf, 2003: 11-35). These were key factors that instigated the overthrow of the Barre regime in 1991 by a coalition of several rebel groups. It is within this context of waning socio-economic conditions, poverty and inequality that Islamic groups mobilized, by providing much needed relief in the form charity.

Following the demise of the Barre regime, anarchy, insecurity, and severe poverty ensued across Somalia, marked by rampant violence among various clan groupings. After nearly 20 years of failed reconciliation

between warring clan factions and worsening living conditions and security, the people of Somalia were fed up, and began turning to political Islam as a way out of the miserable conditions. By the mid-1990s, Islamic groups emerged as an alternative to government, settling business disputes and restoring law and order through the implementation of Sharia law (Ibrahim, 2010: 283-295). However, these groups were only effective in administering the rule of law within the context of clan politics as opposed to the political groupings to which they belonged.

In 2006, Islamic groups re-emerged under the umbrella of the Union of Islamic Courts (ICU). For the first time since the start of the civil war, areas under ICU control witnessed relative peace, security, and unity. The ICU's leadership constituted educated scholars who often employed moderation and rationale in their approach to resolving political differences. But the peace brought by the ICU was short-lived. Neighbouring Ethiopia attacked ICU areas in Southern Somalia in December 2006 with full support from the United States, which wanted the group ousted in order to strengthen the rule of the weak and ineffective Transitional Federal Government, which was established in 2004 (Ibid).

Ethiopia's ouster of the ICU brought about two significant consequences. First, the Ethiopian invasion unearthed internal rivalries within the ICU, pitting the radical Al Shabab followers against the moderate leaders of the ICU. Second, in the ideological power struggle that ensued between the two factions, Al Shabab won and succeeded in dismantling the ICU's moderate leadership.

Following the collapse of the ICU and the subsequent loss of its power base, Al Shabab emerged as the only powerful force capable of successfully mobilizing Somalis to fight the Ethiopian occupation, feeding the population with nationalistic sentiments and grievances triggered by the invasion (Gartenstein-Ross, 2009). After the withdrawal of Ethiopian troops in late 2008, Al Shabab's legitimacy and its rampant human rights abuses (i.e., killings, stoning of suspected adulterers, and torture) came under scrutiny from the Somali people who initially supported the group because of the objective of expelling Ethiopian troops from Somali soil.

At present, Al Shabab has an estimated 7,000 fighters, including 300 of its most ideologically radicalized members holding positions of importance. Al

Shabab recruits young men through promises of financial security, force or through Al-Qaeda type propaganda methods. Its recruiting processes also appeal to young Jihadists beyond the borders of Somalia. Since late 2007, at least 20 young American men have been enlisted by Al Shabab with one of the recruits, Shirwa Ahmed, becoming one of its first suicide bombers in October 2008 (Ephron, 2009). Canadian officials recently confirmed that 20 Canadian youth have been radicalized by Al Shabab recruiters and have enlisted to fight in Somalia (CBC, 2011).

Al Shabab controls much of southern Somalia, including the Bay and Bakool region, south-central Somalia, Gedo, and the lower and middle Shebelle region. Al Shabab controlled the capital, Mogadishu, and only withdrew from the city after defeat by the Transitional Federal Government and African Union troops in August 2011, declaring the withdrawal as a "change of military tactics" (BBC, 2011). Control of southern Somalia's key port towns, Marka and Kismayo, have worked to secure Al Shabab's survival as goods coming in are taxed and supplied with ease to the areas they control.

AL SHABAB AND EROSION OF TRADITIONAL CONFLICT-SOLVING MECHANISMS

For the most part, Somalis are by tradition Sunni Muslims with high regard and respect for Sufism. Prior to the advent of Islamic extremist groups, Islam in Somalia has been described as "a veil lightly work" (Menhaus, 2002:2), where strict interpretation and application of Islamic laws had no room in society. Somali women traditionally did not veil and customary law (*Xeer*) and civil laws superseded Sharia law, which was confined to family law.

 As Al Shabab came to power, it introduced a staunch interpretation of Islamic law influenced by Wahhabist ideology and directed at governing all aspects of Somali society. Somali women are now forced to cover in full body veil and are banned from commercial activities and other forms of public engagement (Human Rights Watch, 2010:27). Women are also barred from going out in public without a male relative and unmarried women are forced into marriage, and in some instances are systematically raped and in rare cases beheaded if they refuse to comply (Macleod, 2010). Music, dancing, sports, and mixing of genders is prohibited by Al Shabab's strict interpretation of Sharia law, with severe consequences for

those who do not abide by it (Gartenstein-Ross, 2009). Al Shabab also created and implemented new rules for the purpose of maintaining and increasing their power and influence. Most of these new regulations prohibit the dissemination of any reports "of which the administration was unaware" and any news that do not conform to the tenets of Sharia (Weinstein, 2008). These dictates effectively hamper freedom of expression and curtail human rights.

Throughout much of Somalia's history, conflict was initially between warring clan and sub-clan factions, but with the advent of Al Shabab and the demise of the ICU, this has changed. Clan-centered conflict and disputes shifted to conflict based on religious group affiliation and creating difficulty in resolving disputes.

Traditionally, clan disputes were settled through customary law (*Xeer*) and negotiation (*Shir*). If the dispute resulted in death, payment of blood money (*Diya*) would be used to compensate relatives of the deceased victim (Menkhaus, 2007: 87). Mechanisms were primarily practiced in pastoral/nomadic settings, but they remained relevant and paramount in resolving conflict in cities and towns due to Somalis' strong clan-based bond, respect for their elders (who were key figures in resolving conflict), and tight network and connection to the countryside.

 But these traditional conflict resolution mechanisms have been seriously undermined by Al Shabab. Over and above the group's espousal to Sharia law, it also promotes the elimination of clan loyalty and respect for elders — two customs that were an integral part of a functioning of Somali society since antiquity.

Al Shabab's version of Sharia law is problematic on at least two accounts. The group's strict Wahhabist-influenced interpretation of Islamic law is alien to Somali society and unacceptable to many Somalis. And its implementation of Sharia law is administered through coercion and intimidation (Gartenstein-Ross, 2009), which works to further fuel an already volatile conflict and often results in grave human rights abuses.

An example of Al Shabab's strict interpretation and implementation of Sharia law can be seen in the stoning of a 13-year-old old girl in the city of Kismayo in late 2008 for adultery (BBC News, 2008) despite being raped — a stark contradiction to Islamic law, which prohibits such a ruling.

Other reports of amputations for stealing, public flogging and administering of justice without due process by Al Shabab are widespread in southern Somalia.

IMPLICATIONS OF AL SHABAB FOR THE REGION

Al Shabab's regional ambitions in the Horn of Africa and East Africa threaten Ethiopia's internal security due to the group's support for the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), an ethnic Somali separatist group in the Ogaden region of the country (Opalo, 2010). The apparent close relationship between Eritrea and Al Shabab has led to heightened regional tensions. A recent UN report accused the Eritrean government of giving roughly US$80,000 to Al Shabab-linked individuals in Kenya, as well as supplying the group with weaponry (Al Jazeera, 2011). Uganda, one of the countries involved in the African Union's peacekeeping mission in Somalia and a supporter of the Transitional Federal Government, was hit by two separate suicide bombings in July 2010 during the World Cup soccer tournament. Al Shabab claimed responsibility, stating: "We will carry out attacks against our enemy wherever they are…no one will deter us from performing our Islamic Duty" (Rice, 2010).

Kenya, home to a large number of ethnic Somalis as well as Somali refugees, recently gained media attention with the launch of *Operation Linda Nchi* (Operation Protect the Nation) on October 16, 2011 in response to a series of kidnappings by suspected Al Shabab militias. French and British tourists were kidnapped in Kenya's northern beach resorts, near the city of Lamu, a popular holiday destination for foreign tourists. Kenya's tourism industry was hurt by these kidnappings and prompted the government to act swiftly. During the same period, two Spanish aid workers were kidnapped from Dadaab refugee camp also by suspected Al Shabab gunmen, making humanitarian relief efforts in the region even more challenging.

To date, Al Shabab has not officially claimed responsibility for these kidnappings; but, Kenya went ahead and launched a military incursion into Somalia with an army of approximately 2,000 soldiers (Remy, 2011). Past threats made by Al Shabab to carry out attacks in Kenya and the growing number of Somali refugees in Kenyan camps have paved the way for the justification for the invasion and more recent plans to establish a buffer zone within southern Somalia.

PROVISION OF BASIC SERVICES

The conflict in Somalia is becoming direr each day, more so with the growth of Al Shabab proponents, who are not interested in peace and reconciliation. Additionally, Kenya's war with Al Shabab will not only exacerbate the current conflict in Somalia, but will likely bolster support for Al Shabab in the region. Somalis have in the past shown dislike for foreign interventions, exemplified by the 1992 failed US-led United Nations mission in Somalia and the recent Ethiopian incursion.

Following the collapse of the state government in 1991, the Somali population has been in desperate need of humanitarian relief to provide basic necessities and has been living without security and rule of law. The absence of these factors prompted the emergence of religious extremist groups. Al Shabab soldiers are often young, disillusioned men who amidst anarchy and poverty tend to be inspired by the group's leadership. Curtailing the group's recruitment efforts and reversing its propaganda may require the provision of incentives such as education, vocational training, and recreational activities.

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