

Somalia's al-Shabab Reconstitutes Fighting Force

By Anonymous

IN JANUARY 2008, the African Union (AU) issued a warning that the Somali radical militant group al-Shabab had expanded its activities to areas outside of Mogadishu and were training new recruits and planning attacks. AU Commission Chairman Alpha Konare said al-Shabab's strategy appeared to be that of

further weakening the TFG [Transitional Federal Government] by destabilizing as many areas as possible, fully aware that the government does not, at the moment, have the capacity to deploy significant numbers of troops in all regions.¹

Konare's statement is significant for two reasons. For one, it was the first public admission by the AU that it believes al-Shabab, which suffered heavy losses in battles against Ethiopian troops in December 2006, has been fully re-constituted as a fighting force and is gaining strength in areas that it previously had little or no influence. Second, it revealed the AU's growing concern about al-Shabab's potential to deal a death blow to the UN-backed TFG, which is on the verge of collapse following a bitter power struggle in October between its president, Abdullahi Yusuf, and its former prime minister, Ali Mohamed Gedi.

The Origins of al-Shabab

An on-the-ground investigation strongly suggests that the radical al-Shabab organization, which is claiming responsibility for the Iraq-style violence in Somalia, may have emerged in 2004 partly as a reaction to a failed CIA attempt to capture one of the three Somalia-based al-Qa`ida operatives wanted in connection with the 1998 U.S. Embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania. Fazul Abdullah Mohammed, Saleh Ali Saleh Nabhan and Tariq Abdullah (also known as Taha al-Sudani) were believed to be

hiding in Somalia under the protection of al-Shabab founder Aden Hashi Ayro and his long-time mentor, Shaykh Hassan Dahir Aweys.² In July 2004, the CIA received a tip that bomb-maker Abu Taha al-Sudani was holed up in a compound in Mogadishu that belonged to Ayro. A raid on the compound was subsequently carried out by militiamen loyal to factional leader Mohamed Qanare. Neither al-Sudani nor Ayro were inside, but Ayro's brother-in-law was killed during a brief firefight.³ Shortly after that raid, Ayro began a covert recruitment drive in Mogadishu to establish an army "to protect Islam and save the Somali nation from infidels." Clan elders did not initially react with alarm, apparently because many viewed the effort as little more than an attempt by Ayro, who did not command a militia, to build a team of personal bodyguards.⁴

Ayro shrewdly targeted the most plentiful and the most vulnerable segment of the population—poor, disillusioned and disaffected young men, looking desperately for work, a sense of belonging and self-worth. Ayro brought them on board with a message that skillfully blended Somalia's powerful nationalist sentiment and its traditional reverence for Islam: "Gain self-respect and dignity by defending your religion and people from non-believers and imperialists, who are trying to destroy us," he stated.⁵ By the time Ethiopia launched its invasion of Somalia in December 2006 to oust Somali Islamists from power, as many

as 5,000 young men were thought to have been recruited into al-Shabab in Mogadishu alone.

By late 2005, al-Shabab had turned into a highly disciplined fighting force, whose professionalism and dedication surprised even Ayro.⁶ The vast majority of the recruits were foot soldiers, who were by and large nationalists, not religious fanatics.⁷ Their allegiance was not specifically to Ayro but to the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), an amalgamation of different clan-based religious courts which, for several years, had been gaining credibility and popularity among Mogadishu's war-weary residents for their work in setting up hospitals and schools, as well as resolving legal disputes and maintaining a tough stance on law and order.⁸

Yet, several hundred elite al-Shabab fighters, handpicked by Ayro mostly from his Ayr sub-clan, were of a different breed; they were fiercely loyal to their leader and thoroughly committed to the goal of creating a new Islamic caliphate in greater Somalia.⁹ According to an interview with an al-Shabab fighter, most, if not all, of these fighters were flown to Eritrea and given advance training in explosives and guerrilla war fighting tactics, including how to make roadside bombs, car bombs and suicide vests using explosive material cannibalized from various weapon systems.¹⁰ Another al-Shabab fighter,

6 Personal interview, Somali journalist source, Mogadishu, January 3, 2007.

7 Personal conversations with three unidentified al-Shabab foot soldiers in Mogadishu, January 4, 2007. All three emphasized that they were drawn to al-Shabab primarily because they saw it as a group dedicated to fighting Ethiopia, a traditional enemy which they believe is "bent on destroying our religion and turning Somalia into a vassal state to plunder her resources and control her ports." They said they were also impressed with Ayro, whom they describe as a "kind, charismatic, and caring" father figure.

8 Personal interview, security source, Mogadishu, January 3, 2007.

9 Ibid.

10 Personal interview, 18-year-old al-Shabab fighter "Abdi," Mogadishu, January 5, 2007. According to Abdi, he and about 300 others who performed well in a basic training course held in Mogadishu in July 2006 were flown to Eritrea in late September to receive two months of additional training from Eritrean and Somali instructors at an undisclosed camp outside of Asmara.

1 "Somalia: Anti-Government Activities Spreading, Warns AU," IRIN, January 21, 2008.

2 Aden Hashi Ayro was the former military chief of the Hawiye-dominated Islamic Courts Union, a position to which he rose through his clan ties (Ayr sub-clan of the Habr Gedir) and close association with the ICU's religious head, Shaykh Hassan Dahir Aweys. Aweys, an Islamic fundamentalist who led the radical Somali militia al-Ittihad al-Islami in Puntland in the early 1990s, is believed to have met Usama bin Ladin in Sudan in the mid-1990s and arranged to have Ayro trained by al-Qa`ida in Afghanistan sometime between 1997 and 2000.

3 Personal interview, Matt Bryden, former International Crisis Group analyst, Nairobi, December 5, 2006. Al-Sudani was unwittingly killed on or about January 23, 2007 near the Somali-Kenyan border in an Ethiopian air attack on fleeing Islamists. Americans and Ethiopians did not realize al-Sudani was dead for several months.

4 Personal interview, Ayr clan leader, Mogadishu, January 4, 2007.

5 Personal interview, 27-year-old al-Shabab foot soldier "Hassan," Mogadishu, January 5, 2007.

known as "Hassan," explained how he had been trained at one of the half dozen secret training camps set up by Ayro around Mogadishu.¹¹ At the camps, new recruits were divided into small groups. Each group had to complete a six-week fitness program, designed to strengthen endurance and improve running, crawling and jumping skills. The final lesson was learning how to shoot accurately on the run. Hassan said that those who performed well overall were sent to the front lines to battle Ethiopian troops. He also confirmed reports that Ayro had incorporated foreign fighters among the ranks of al-Shabab; about 25 Arabs fought alongside Hassan outside the town of Bur Hakaba, near Baidoa.¹²

Between June and November 2006, UN arms monitors compiled a report that accused Eritrea of being one of 10 countries in Africa and the Middle East that had provided fighters, weapons, training and logistics support to Somalia's Islamist movement.¹³ The report did not mention al-Qa`ida by name, but it is widely assumed that in addition to Eritrea, semi-autonomous al-Qa`ida cells in various countries had actively assisted Ayro in turning al-Shabab into the most feared organization in Somalia.¹⁴

Abdi noted that before any recruit received advanced training, a thorough background check was conducted to ensure he was not a spy.

¹¹ Personal interview, 27-year-old al-Shabab foot soldier "Hassan," Mogadishu, January 5, 2007. Hassan went through al-Shabab boot camp two months before Ethiopia began its military invasion of Somalia in December 2006. He said that he was trained at Fish Trafico, one of half a dozen secret training camps Ayro had set up around Mogadishu. An al-Qa`ida training camp in Ras Kamboni may have also been used to train recruits, but Hassan said he did not meet anyone who had been sent there.

¹² Ibid. Hassan did not know from which countries the Arabs had come, but he said all of them spoke reasonable amounts of Somali.

¹³ Leaked UN arms report to the Security Council, November 15, 2006. The report accused 10 countries, including Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea, Iran, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Syria and the Lebanese militia Hizb Allah of funneling arms and other aid to militants in the ICU. Some of the report's allegations have been largely discredited, in particular the finding that 720 Somali mercenaries fought alongside Hizb Allah in its July 2006 battle with Israeli forces in southern Lebanon and that Iran shipped arms to Somalia's Islamic militants in return for access to uranium mines.

¹⁴ Personal interviews, Somali journalist sources, Mog-

In June 2006, al-Shabab fighters led the ICU to victory in Mogadishu over a U.S.-backed alliance of self-styled anti-terrorist warlords. Once in power, Ayro seized the position of military chief of the ICU. Ayro, his mentor Shaykh Hassan Dahir Aweys, and other hardliners are said to have used al-Shabab to intimidate, threaten and sideline scores of moderate ICU leaders, the latter of whom criticized efforts to strengthen ICU ties with Eritrea and al-Qa`ida and were fearful of the increasing presence of foreign fighters in Mogadishu and elsewhere in central and southern Somalia.¹⁵

The Return of al-Shabab and its Connection with the Youth Mujahidin Movement

After the Ethiopian military intervention ended the ICU's six month rule, the government of Yusuf and Gedi, installed in its place, had a window of opportunity to turn public distrust of the TFG into grassroots support by including moderate Islamists in the ICU in a broad-based governing structure. Western powers, including the United States, had hoped that the arrangement could isolate the radical elements of the ICU, curb their ability to find new recruits and bring enough stability for a speedy withdrawal of Ethiopian troops from Somalia.

From the start, however, Yusuf and Gedi entrenched themselves in corrupt Somali clan politics, determined to carry out their own personal agendas. Instead of working on building consensus and trying to forge an alliance with moderate ICU exiles in Eritrea, Yusuf and Gedi concentrated their efforts on fighting each other for political dominance, for control of Somalia's infrastructure and natural resources, and used the threat of terrorism as an excuse to brutally crack down on dissent and punish

adishu, January 9, 2007. On January 5, 2007, an audio recording, allegedly by al-Qa`ida's number two leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, was released, urging Somalis to use guerrilla tactics, including suicide attacks and roadside bombings, against Ethiopian troops in Somalia. The journalist sources with clan ties to radical militia fighters said that they feared as many as 3,500 mostly disbanded al-Shabab members in Mogadishu stood ready to re-group and heed al-Qa`ida's call because the terrorist group "had already given a lot of al-Shabab fighters good training to carry out such attacks."

¹⁵ Personal interviews, Hawiye clan elders, Mogadishu, January 10, 2007.

opponents.¹⁶ The consensus among Western Somali observers is that the TFG's rapid descent into factional politics, and Ethiopia's apparent disinterest in doing anything other than propping up the TFG militarily, has provided an ideal environment for al-Shabab to re-organize, recruit and expand the group's reach.¹⁷

To that extent, it appears that the command structure of al-Shabab may have been decentralized and the group broken down into cells to give regional al-Shabab commanders greater independence to carry out attacks when and where they see fit. For example, Ayro's former deputy in the ICU, Muktar Robow (also known as Abu Mansour), is said to be leading a cell in his home region of Bay, targeting Ethiopian and government troops protecting the Somali parliament in the town of Baidoa.¹⁸ Another high-ranking militant in the ICU, Hassan Turki, is believed to be leading an al-Shabab cell in his stronghold in the Lower Juba region. He is thought to be responsible for January's remotely-detonated roadside bombing, which killed several foreign aid workers and Somalis in the town of Kismayo.¹⁹

A decentralized command structure could also explain why it is not yet clear who is in overall charge of the group. Ayro was wounded during a U.S. airstrike near the Islamist stronghold of Ras Kamboni on January 7, 2007 and disappeared for several months.²⁰

¹⁶ Personal interviews, Hawiye clan elders, Somali journalists, civil society leaders, businessmen and Western aid workers, Mogadishu, April-June 2007.

¹⁷ Views of the Western Somali observers are best reflected in an article by Michael Weinstein, "Somalia's New Reality: A Strategic Overview," Power and Interest News Report (PINR), December 27, 2007.

¹⁸ "Local Officials Flee Town Near Baidoa, Cite Islamist Gunmen," Garowe Online, January 7, 2008. The report said that in late November 2007 the governor of Bakool region said al-Shabab fighters were organizing in Bakool and Bay regions, with unconfirmed reports that the fighters belonged to Muktar Robow. In an interview with Reuters on December 16, 2007, Muktar Robow acknowledged that he was based in the southern Bay province.

¹⁹ "INGO vehicle struck by RCIED in Lower Juba, Kismayo Town," NGO SPAS Security Advisory 004/08, January 28, 2008.

²⁰ Alex Perry, "Somalia on the Edge," *Time*, November 27, 2007. Ayro's personal effects were found at the site of the AC-130 attack on his convoy.

In March 2007, al-Qa`ida named Ayro as its top leader in Somalia, leaving open the possibility that he was still engaged in al-Shabab activities and communicating with his commanders in Mogadishu from a hideout in Ras Kamboni.²¹ Ayro did resurface in the capital in August 2007, but he apparently did not stay long, rejected by clan elders who asked him to leave the city because they feared he would “bring more trouble to everybody.”²² Ayro is now said to be constantly on the move, never staying in one town or in one area for more than a few days.²³ Last month, a report appeared on a Somali website announcing the election of Shaykh Muktar Abdirahman (also known as Abu Zubeyr) as the new *amir* of al-Shabab in Mogadishu.²⁴ Little is known about Abu Zubeyr other than he, like Ayro, received training in Afghanistan under the Taliban and is virulently anti-Western.

It is unclear what connection Ayro, Muktar Robow, Hassan Turki or Abu Zubeyr may have, if any, to a radical Somali group that emerged in Mogadishu last February. Some Somalis say the Youth Mujahidin Movement (YMM) is an offshoot of al-Shabab. Others say it is al-Shabab trying to re-define itself as a popular movement. Whatever the truth, YMM alarmed the Western world, posting battle reports on the internet, a common al-Qa`ida propaganda tactic not previously seen in Somalia.²⁵ In March, 2007, YMM produced their first-ever martyr video, showing a man reciting prayers from the Qur`an before apparently blowing himself up in a suicide attack on an Ethiopian base in north Mogadishu. Since then, al-Shabab/YMM has claimed responsibility for missile attacks on planes and suicide and IED attacks on Ethiopian and TFG forces in Mogadishu and elsewhere, suggesting that al-Qa`ida-linked groups in Iraq,

Afghanistan, Pakistan and the Middle East may be continuing to provide arms, training and personnel.²⁶ Reliable sources in the capital and in Baidoa, however, say that they have not seen foreign fighters in their towns and the attacks are being planned and carried out by Somalis.²⁷

Al-Shabab Looks Inward for Now

For now, al-Shabab appears to be singularly focused on the tasks of throwing out the Ethiopians and re-establishing Islamic rule in Somalia as quickly as possible. The familiar hard line rhetoric of establishing a greater Somalia under the banner of radical Islam has been replaced for the time being with calls for self-sacrifice in the name of patriotism. In Mogadishu mosques, al-Shabab’s senior leaders such as Shaykh Fu`ad Shongole urge all Somalis to join the insurgency, praying for Allah to return “Somali dignity, prosperity, and respect taken by traitors, evil Christian crusaders and occupiers.”²⁸

In an interview with Reuters on December 16, 2007, Muktar Robow said that al-Shabab was now “financially and morally supported by the population.”²⁹ That claim is somewhat backed up in interviews with Mogadishu residents and business leaders, who describe government officials, soldiers and Ethiopian troops as “looters, robbers, and rapists.” A majority admit to giving food, money and shelter to al-Shabab

26 Chris Tomlinson, “Islamic Militants Rebound in Somalia,” Associated Press, April 27, 2007. In the report, Tomlinson said that al-Shabab had provided al-Jazira television with the video of the March bombing. Another video obtained by AP in June 2007 showed a Somali man pointing a shoulder-held missile launcher at the sky and then firing. The video suggests that al-Shabab fighters had brought down a Russian-built Ilyushin-76 that crashed in flames shortly after delivering equipment for Ugandan peacekeepers in Mogadishu on March 23, 2007. All 11 aboard were killed. Witnesses and airport staff reported the plane was brought down by a missile, but government officials said at the time that the pilot had called the control tower to say the plane had engine problems.

27 Personal telephone interviews, Mogadishu-based journalist sources and human rights activists, October 24, 2007.

28 Personal interview, security source, Mogadishu, December 2, 2008.

29 “Somali Insurgency to Intensify—Islamist Leader,” Reuters, December 16, 2007.

insurgents, generally viewing them as “freedom fighters.”³⁰

At the same time, al-Shabab can hardly be regarded as a champion of freedom, conducting activities that appear to be alienating the public in much the same way that the ICU began losing popular support after hardliners in the ICU began enforcing strict Shari`a laws in areas they controlled. Mogadishu residents say they live in fear of al-Shabab informants, who roam the streets in jeans and t-shirts and listen in on private conversations. Anyone overheard criticizing al-Shabab or its tactics is labeled an infidel or a government collaborator and is usually sentenced to death. In Islamist strongholds in the capital, movie theaters have been ordered to shut down. Owners who have disobeyed the order have been executed.³¹

By adopting many of the same tactics used by al-Qa`ida and the Taliban, al-Shabab’s leadership in the past year has demonstrated their readiness, if not willingness, to be incorporated into a larger effort to expand terrorist networks in the Horn of Africa. Worryingly, many ordinary Somalis appear to have given up on the TFG and are angry with the West for supporting Ethiopia’s military occupation. Somali militants are taking advantage of that anger to woo and radicalize the population. Indeed, leaving Somalia to fester in its current state virtually guarantees the creation of an al-Qa`ida haven in the Horn, sooner rather than later.

This report was authored by anonymous.

21 “Al-Qaeda Names Ayro its Leader in Mogadishu,” Reuters, March 22, 2007.

22 Personal interview, Ayr clan elder, Mogadishu, September 4, 2007.

23 Ibid.

24 Abu Zubeyr’s announcement appeared on the Somali-language website Dalkanews.com on December 21, 2007.

25 YMM battle reports have appeared on a regular basis since early March 2007 on the Somali-language internet website www.dalkanews.com.

30 Randomly-selected personal interviews with 15 residents in the Hodan district and Suqa Huluwa (recently renamed Little Falluja) area of Mogadishu and five business community leaders in Bakara Market, December 6, 2007.

31 Personal interview, journalist source, Mogadishu, December 6, 2007.