

Response

Somalia: Armed groups and recruitment in the south

Topics/questions:

- Who is recruited into armed groups, and how does recruitment occur?
- Which armed groups currently operate in active struggle against the transitional government in southern Somalia?

General background

Years of conflict, soaring unemployment and poor prospects, combined with lack of political leadership, have provided fertile ground for the emergence of a number of militias and violent extremist groups, including al-Shabaab. The Ethiopian presence in Somalia during 2007 – 2008 as well as the atrocities committed by both Somali and Ethiopian soldiers, contributed greatly to the support rebel groups received from the population. In spite of the Ethiopian withdrawal in January 2009 and the establishment of the national unity government, al-Shabaab and the Hizb ul-Islam alliance continued their warfare, demanding that the peacekeeping forces of the African Union (AMISOM) leave the country.

However, the terrorist attacks against AMISOM and governmental targets in Mogadishu also affect civilians, and radical Islam is alien to most Somalis. The support which these Islamist groups have received from the population has, according to most observers, significantly reduced in recent years. In December 2010, a weakened Hizb ul-Islam was dissolved, and several of the organisation's members joined al-Shabaab. Al-Shabaab continues to support poor, unemployed young men, teenagers and children, and to provide them with clothing, food and weapons. Al-Shabaab is currently in a strained military and economic situation, and there are indications of certain changes in the group's recruitment pattern (interviews with international representatives and Somali sources in Nairobi, March 2011).

Forced recruitment and use of violence

Several observers have, during meetings with Landinfo in recent years, explained that opposing al-Shabaab's execution of authority can lead to very serious consequences and, in the worst case, death. None of the sources who have ever been in contact with Landinfo have ruled out the possibility that al-Shabaab soldiers make death threats in connection with recruitment, but no one has been able to verify murder. Fear contributes to the fact that few, if

any, dare resisting recruitment face to face with members of al-Shabaab. It reduces to a matter of trying to gain more time, while those who are able, leave home in order to escape. Even though the causes of several killings of young men in Mogadishu are unknown, rumours that al-Shabaab are behind them are enough to create widespread fear of the consequences of opposing al-Shabaab.

There is seemingly no standard practice in the areas controlled by al-Shabaab in southern and central Somalia. Local conditions, and the relationship between the rebel movement and local clans, create different patterns. Information conveyed through diplomatic sources in Nairobi, and conversations with both Somali sources and well-informed international representatives in Nairobi up until Spring 2011, may indicate that forced recruitment is a larger problem in areas where the Murusade, Duduble and Galjel clans live, than in other areas. These clans support al-Shabaab, which gives reason to assume that the clan elders collaborate with al-Shabaab. Those unwilling to join the rebel movement, may therefore face greater difficulty in escaping recruitment, than in areas where such a relationship between al-Shabaab and the local clans does not exist (E-mail, diplomatic source, 22 December 2010; interviews in March 2011).

The military offensive that started in February has also meant that recruitment through other local clan leaders has increased in scope. Widespread and systematic use of violence for recruitment purposes is unlikely sanctioned by al-Shabaab's leadership at either a local or central level, as this would undermine the rebel movement's authority and legitimacy. Several of Landinfo's interlocutors in March 2010 and 2011 pointed out that impunity of al-Shabaab soldiers is widespread and al-Shabaab soldiers who commit abuse rarely risk punishment.

The most influential international and Somali observers point out that indoctrination and brainwashing are methods still used to recruit new followers (interviews in Nairobi, March 2011). Various Islamist organisations have been carrying out charity work in Somalia for years. They have, among other things, provided educational and health support to large parts of the population who have not received support elsewhere. Through these channels, certain groups with agendas other than purely humanitarian aid have the opportunity to spread their message. Religious arguments are consistently used in the context of recruitment, while threats and violence, according to well-informed sources, are currently not usual or necessary. Yet, no one has ruled out cases involving the use of force (interviews in Nairobi, June 2008, March 2009, March 2010 and March 2011). Some of Landinfo's interlocutors in March 2011 claimed, for example, that they knew of cases where young boys and men have been forced off of buses or out of schools, and sent against their will to training camps.

The places where extremists can most easily recruit new followers and soldiers are in the settlements for the internally displaced. Here, people lack the basics. Several international and Somali sources report that the groups also recruit members from marginalised minority groups, such as the Jareer¹ and Benadir groups – populations that have been subjected, both during and after the civil war, to abuse and misuse of power (interviews in Nairobi, March 2009 and March 2010; Shabelle.net 2011).

All of the newly-arrived male refugees Landinfo met at refugee camps in Dadaab, Kenya during Spring 2010, listed fear of recruitment by al-Shabaab as a main reason for fleeing

¹ *Jareer* is a Somali term for the Bantu people, meaning “hard hair”.

Somalia. Several were approached by recruiters with promises of money. None had been harmed, yet none dare contradict al-Shabaab. This trend, according to a highly informed international representative who quite regularly communicates with newly-arrived refugees, continued into 2011.

Pressure on al-Shabaab has been increasing over the past eight to nine months – the Ramadan offensive of August 2010 was resource-draining and yielded few results. The TFG offensive, which began in February 2011, has inflicted further heavy losses upon the rebel movement. There have also been cases of defection, as the more who defect, the more new recruits are needed to refill the ranks. Their solution is to approach students and their parents or guardians more aggressively, at regular schools and Koranic schools (Duhur 2011; interviews in Nairobi, March 2011). It is also alleged that middle-aged and older men are recruited by force – yet, by far the most important target group is still young boys aged 12 – 16 years. The children are lured in and instructed to fulfill their duty as devout Muslims – for a child, both their understanding of the risks involved and their ability to say no, are very limited. Parents are in turn cross-pressured. For many families, there are few opportunities to make a living – one possibility is to have one or two family members join al-Shabaab. Somali sources who met with Landinfo in Nairobi in March 2009 and March 2010, reported ongoing recruitment in the Eastleigh suburb in Nairobi² and within refugee camps in Dadaab.

The use of force is a poor strategy if the goal is to create loyal, armed forces. The perceived illusion of voluntary association and of being rewarded in this life (and in the hereafter) reduces the risk of soldiers escaping, along with their weapon, to the opposing side.

Recruitment of women

Several of Landinfo's interlocutors in Nairobi in March 2011 claimed that al-Shabaab recruits women, not as combatants, but for intelligence work. Girls and women are also expected to contribute by marrying the soldiers (see the response on al-Shabaab and forced marriage; Landinfo 2011).

Defection from armed groups

Defection from al-Shabaab can warrant death, according to observers. The risk of being caught has been high, as al-Shabaab has a highly functional intelligence network, local communities are transparent and newcomers tend to be noticed (interviews in Nairobi, June 2008, March 2009, March 2010 and March 2011). However, there are several observers who claim that al-Shabaab, in its current pressured situation, is less likely to spend resources on seeking out defectors. The youngest defectors, i.e. up to sixteen years old, are not executed, but whipped and then sent back to the front. The basis for this observation is an example from the Bay region, where a boy defected only to have his family send him back to al-Shabaab. The rebel movement is locally entrenched in this region, which may explain both the family's own reaction as well as the punishment.

In those areas where al-Shabaab has lost ground as a result of the TFG offensive, many have defected from al-Shabaab and surrendered to the local clans. In Mogadishu, individuals and small groups of defectors have surrendered to AMISOM. Many of the defectors, both in the

² The majority of this suburb's inhabitants are ethnic Somalis.

Gedo region and in Mogadishu, are youths. They are being granted amnesty, and UNICEF is prepared to commence working with the young defectors.

With regards to the reprisals for defection amongst different militias and rebel groups, several Somali sources Landinfo met in Nairobi in March 2009, explained that it can vary depending on the type of militia. Regardless, it is first and foremost the defectors' families who are held accountable. Militias led by business interests will ensure that the family pays compensation to the militia if the son runs away, while a religiously motivated group such as al-Shabaab can react much more strongly – even with the use of violence. When it comes to clan militias (which can also be militias paid by businessmen), participation is expected, yet the use of violence or threats in the context of recruitment is not common or necessary. Loyalty to the clan runs deep, and it is commonly assumed that participation is a given. Withdrawing from these militias leads to being held responsible to the clan elders. In such cases, violent punishment is, according to Somali sources, unlikely (interviews in Nairobi, June 2008 and March 2009). However, defection from the militias led by warlords can, according to the same sources, entail a certain risk of violent reactions.

Little is known about the militant Islamist group's inner life. There are no written primary sources on either politics, ideology or organisational structure (International Crisis Group 2010, p. 4), however, it is clear that there were differences between these groups. Al-Shabaab and Hizb ul-Islam were first and foremost divided in their views on two key factors: nationalism and the clan. While Hizb ul-Islam emerged as nationalists and supporters of a Greater Somalia (which includes the ethnically Somali-inhabiting parts of Somalia's neighbouring countries), al-Shabaab aims to establish a new, global Islamic caliphate. Opinions on the clan system also divided the two groups. Hizb ul-Islam had a pragmatic attitude towards the clan system and exploited it, while the extremist wing of al-Shabaab views clan ideology as an expression of lack of commitment to Islam. However, the more moderate wing makes use of the clan system when it is advantageous (International Crisis Group 2010, p. 5).³

Al-Shabaab (Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujaahidiin)

The organisation was originally the youth division of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU). Al-Shabaab's leadership and several of its members were known for their very militant and dogmatic Islamist attitudes. The ICU controlled Mogadishu and much of southern Somalia from Summer 2006 until the Ethiopian invasion in December 2006. In March 2007, al-Shabaab and other insurgents initiated a major offensive in Mogadishu against the Ethiopian forces and the transitional government. In 2008, the rebel movement was added to the U.S. List of Designated Foreign Terrorist Organizations. In 2009, al-Shabaab adopted the formal designation Harakat Shabab al-Shabaab al-Mujaahidin, to emphasise the rebel movement's global jihadist identity (International Crisis Group 2010). Al-Shabaab seemingly still consists of several factions, groups and cells that originate from the original core group (interviews in Nairobi, June 2008, March 2009 and March 2010). The widely acknowledged expert on

³ Rosen (2010) believes that, although some al-Shabaab members believe they are fighting for “God and Honour”, the leaders are far more pragmatic, and the conflict is anything but a holy war; jihad. Behind the religious rhetoric, this conflict is also an expression of social biases and the struggle for political power between rivaling clans and groups who fear losing rights, access to development funds and political power.

Somalia, Ken Menkhaus (2008) also points out that differing views on ideology, tactics and leadership have contributed to internal divisions. According to the think-tank International Crisis Group (2010) and other observers, there are many indications of foreign jihadists from Afghanistan, Chechnya and Pakistan, and a core group of local radicals, becoming increasingly more influential (interviews in Nairobi, March 2010). Several of Landinfo's interlocutors in Nairobi in March 2011, claimed that the vast majority of foreign jihadists have left Mogadishu. However, it has not been possible to confirm this information. Furthermore, different observers point out that most so-called foreigners are Somalis with citizenships of neighbouring countries or the West. The “real” foreign jihadists are, according to a well-informed observer and compared to 2007 – 2008, ever more often people from other East African countries (interviews in Nairobi, March 2011).

A central figure in al-Shabaab is the so-called emir Sheikh Mohamed Mukhtar Abdirahman “Abu Zubeyr”, who is an Issaq from Somaliland. He is seemingly identical to Sheikh Ahmed Abdi Mohamud aw “Godane”. Other prominent persons are Ibrahim Haji Jama Mey'aad “al-Afghani”, Fou'ad Mohamed Khalaf “Shangole” and Abdillahi Hassan Hersi “Turki”. “Turki” was the leader of the Hizb ul-Islam group Ras Kiamboni, but switched over to al-Shabaab in February 2010 (Ryu 2010a). Both Godane and al-Afghani govern the areas controlled by al-Shabaab in Mogadishu and Kismayo, respectively – as well as surrounding areas through local, loyal clan leaders. According to the International Crisis Group (2010), the rebel movement established a centralised command structure where foreign jihadists had direct tactical and operational control, with Godane, Shongole and Ibrahim Jama “al-Afghani” as leaders.⁴

Al-Shabaab finances its activities through donations from the diaspora, support from friendly regimes and local businessmen, as well as through charity and taxation of everything from small-scale trade to animal husbandry (interviews with Somali source in Nairobi, 26 March 2009; interviews in Nairobi in March 2011). The organisation also has several websites and FM stations through which they spread their message.

Al-Shabaab refers to its military wing as the Usra army. According to the specialist group responsible for monitoring the arms embargo on Somalia (UN Security Council 2008), al-Shabaab's forces consist of the brigades of commanders Sa'ad Bin Abu Waqas, Mus'ab Ibnu Umeyr and Imam Ahmed Gurey. Aden Hashi Ayro led al-Shabaab's Mogadishu unit, as well as the forces in southern Somalia, until he was killed in May 2008. The leadership of al-Shabaab in this region has since been taken over by Mukhtar Timojili, Hassan Afrah, Mahad Garadey and “Abu Qatada”, amongst others (UN Security Council 2008).

The religious “moral police” Maktabatu Hasba's mission is to ensure that religious orders are followed and that those who disobey these decrees are punished (UN Security Council 2008).

⁴ Mukhtar Robow “Abu Mansur”, who belongs to the Rahanweyn clan Leysan, was the rebel movement's spokesman until the end of May 2009, when he was replaced by Sheik Ali Mahmud Ragi “Dheere” (Hiiraan Online 2009). Ma'alin Mohamed Jiinay and Hassan Ma'alin Takow have been referred to as Robow's commanders. Robow's forces cooperated with other al-Shabaab units, including a group led by Mukhtar Timojili who operated in Mogadishu (UN Security Council 2008).

Training camps

Foreign jihadists operate, according to certain observers Landinfo met in Nairobi in March 2011, several training camps for al-Shabaab soldiers. These are centres of indoctrination where the recruits receive military training for half a year, before being sent into battle. Two of these camps are located in lower Shabelle, one in central Shabelle, one in Hiraan and Galgaduud and several in the Juba regions. This list is not exhaustive, yet no one with a complete overview of these camps, seems willing to share this information with outsiders. The camps are well-guarded and neither family nor other outsiders are permitted to enter, and recruits are not permitted to leave until the training period is completed. Mobile phones are not permitted, yet the food provided is sufficient and the recruits receive necessary medical treatment.

Hizb ul-Islam

Hizb ul-Islam⁵ (The Islamic Party) was formed in February 2009 by Ali Yassin Mohamed. In December 2010, the alliance merged with al-Shabaab and was dissolved de facto (Omar & Wild 2011). The alliance originally consisted of four groups that joined forces against President Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed and the government that was formed in January / February 2009 (Wikipedia, et. al.). In February 2010, the leader of Ras Kiamboni, Hassan Abdullah Hersi “Hassan Turki” shifted to al-Shabaab, and in May, Ras Kiamboni announced that the group had withdrawn from Hizb ul-Islam (Ryu 2010a, 2010b). The four groups were:

- Ras Kiamboni (Mu'askar Ras Kamboni), which has its base in the Darood clans, Ogaden and Majerteen.
- Dahir Hassan Aweys' ARS-Eritrea (also known as the Asmara faction), which has some support in the Hawiye Haber Gedir Ayr clan.
- Jabhatul Islamiya (The Islamic Front), whose leadership originated from Hawiye Haber Gedir Ayr and elsewhere.
- Mu'askar Anole.

All groups took part in the resistance against the Ethiopian presence in 2007 – 2008. The alliance did not share, according to well-informed observers in Nairobi, any common ideological platform, and bore characteristics of a 'marriage of convenience'. Furthermore, it struggled with internal conflicts and divisions. In May 2009, the then leader Omar Iman handed over leadership of the alliance to Hassan Dahir Aweys, after what many believe to have been an internal power struggle (Garowe Online 2009a).

The internal conflicts also contributed to the alliance splitting into two factions: one led by Dahir Aweys and the other led by the notorious warlord Yusuf Mohamed Siad “Indh Adde”, who had shortly before Aweys' seizure of power, joined the governmental side (Xinhua 2009).

On 1 October 2009, heavy fighting broke out between Hizb ul-Islam and al-Shabaab in the port city of Kismayo. The battle was for control of the city – as well as the essential revenue its trade provides – which Hizb ul-Islam lost, withdrawing from Kismayo.

⁵ The group's name can be written as *Hizbul Islaami*, *Hizbi Islam* and *Hezb ul-Islam*, depending on the source.

In early 2010, there were new clashes in the Hiraan region. The fighting ended with al-Shabaab taking control of the region. Towards the end of 2010, Hizb ul-Islam was forced out of the Bay region. On 20 December 2010 Sheikh Aweys surrendered and agreed to the merger of the two rebel movements. Some observers, including analyst Ali Sheikh Abdi (Bloomberg 2010), believed that the merger would strengthen al-Shabaab in the fight against the coalition government and

AMISOM, while other observers believed that the merger did not necessarily strengthen al-Shabaab in terms of numbers, although the rebel movement had obtained more weapons. The ideological differences between the groups, combined with a non-existent or weak sense of loyalty to al-Shabaab among the former Hizb ul-Islam soldiers, supported this assessment. The occurrences that took place during the military offensive that began in February 2011, so far confirms this assessment.

The Country of Origin Information Centre (Landinfo) is an independent body that collects and analyses information on current human rights situations and issues in foreign countries. It provides the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration (Utlendingsdirektoratet – UDI), Norway's Immigration Appeals Board (Utlendingsnemnda – UNE) and the Norwegian Ministry of Justice and the Police with the information they need to perform their functions.

A response consists of answers to specific questions presented to Landinfo by case workers within the Norwegian immigration authorities. Responses are not intended to provide exhaustive reviews of a topic or theme, but should answer the specific questions posed and include relevant background information.

Landinfo's responses are not intended to suggest what Norwegian immigration authorities should do in individual cases; nor do they express official Norwegian views on the issues and countries analysed in them.

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