

AL-SHABAB: THROUGH THE SMOKESCREEN



Al-Shabab fighters at a graduation ceremony in undisclosed location.

INTRODUCTION

During war and conflict, there is always a distinct and striking difference between the propagated news and the reality on the ground. In such environment, propaganda is an instrumental tool of deception in creating an image or a view that is intended to label the adversary in the eyes of public as an imminent threat whose obliteration is a legally binding matter.

In Somalia, the misinformation in the electromagnetic waves has been in overdrive since the rise of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) in 2006. The ICU grew in popularity as it brought

stability to Mogadishu and beyond by defeating notorious warlords who were sponsored by the US embassy in Nairobi, Kenya. But that brief respite was short-lived when Ethiopian troops invaded and overthrew the ICU installing a secular transitional government with the approval and support of the Bush administration in late 2006. Al-Shabab, the military wing of the ICU, emerged as a strong contender, and it has forced the well-trained Ethiopian forces to withdraw in a bloody war that lasted from 2006 until early 2009. Furthermore, Al-Shabab has evolved over the years; it pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda making Somalia a new battle ground for jihad.

So, who is Al-Shabab? According to international media, it is a terrorist organization that indiscriminately targets civilians with suicide bombings. It ruthlessly extorts the locals due to financial difficulties led by illiterate self-serving criminals, and they are utterly despised by the public at large. So, how accurate is this depiction of Al-Shabab that we have accustomed to hear? Few journalists and researchers were able to go behind the curtain to expose the truth of this so-called 'terrorist' group. They have released reports and research studies that begun to shed light on Al-Shabab as an organization and its administrative practices.

PUBLIC SAFETY AND BASIC SOCIAL SERVICES

Somalis are a close-knit tribal society and this social structure has been a source of many conflicts because of the lingering rivalries among tribes which has the tendency to ignite over simple mistake. Firstly, Al-Shabab members come from all tribes, both large and small, and the ghost of tribal hatred has been purified with Quranic verses resulting a religious based bond brotherhood that has no boundaries. It has a deep understanding of the different tribes in their areas; ancestral grazing lands, past feudal history, and it has built good relationship with the leading chieftains in each tribe, a relationship that is important when dealing with tribal grievances to avoid unanticipated consequences. It has filled the security vacuum with a familiar banner, having seen the difference between the past and the present conditions, the locals have genuinely accepted Al-Shabab as a legitimate force for good. As a result, many people prefer to live in Al-Shabab controlled areas, not only for safety measures but also for its transparent familiar judicial process. Nonetheless, this confidence building process was gradual, frank and it did have its difficulties over the years.

Some international media outlets have reported on this phenomenon by corroborating the realities that are already known to Somalis as well as aid organizations on the ground. An article published by The Washington Post titled *"This is why al-Shabab won't be going away anytime soon"* by counter-terrorism analyst Tricia Bacon, stated this about Al-Shabab:

What's more, al-Shabab is relatively uncorrupt and efficient. You can see that clearly on the roads that it controls, where it operates checkpoints that require set payments, offer a receipt to passengers, and keep the roads relatively safe.[1]

In addition, a freelance reporter named Asad Hussein had the audacity to travel through Al-Shabab territory was published by The New York Times titled, *“My Parents’ Country, in the Grip of the Shabab.”*

A journey through Shabab country was predictable. There was a sense of order: You knew what to expect and how much you had to pay. It was striking in a country where all institutions had broken down, where corruption choked everything [ii]

The law and order in Al-Shabab controlled areas is not a surprise to locals because it enforces the Sharia penal law which is fully accepted by all. It includes a variety of punishments including amputation, public lashing, stoning to death etc. Though the West regards such penalties as inhumane and barbaric but it yields public safety far better than any other disciplinary system. Some offenses may simply need cautionary remarks while other are dealt with severely. For example, if a mature and sane individual commits an act of theft while fulfilling all jurisprudence conditions, he/she will lose his/her right hand. The idea is not to amputate people’s limbs but to deter others who are bent or have the ambition to act criminally. And as a result, the crime rate in Al-Shabab land is virtually negligible.

In contrast. the Somali government soldiers are notorious for robbery, extortion, rape, and unjustified killings are common practices. Tricia Bacon wrote:

That contrasts sharply with how others, including government forces, manage roads, which are rife with predation and repeated extortion, which has both safety and economic repercussions — as I heard repeatedly from citizens, business people and aid workers alike.[iii]

Equally, Asad Hussein wrote this on Somali security forces:

Most drivers preferred Shabab-controlled roads to government-controlled ones. They saw the Somali government soldiers as greedy and corrupt and had a name for them: “Cali-Uus,” or “the big-bellied Ali.[iv]

While in Afgoye, a government-controlled town on the outskirts of Mogadishu, Asad Hussein was fearful for his life and his possessions.

I could use my smart phone and play music. I had my freedom. I wasn’t sure about my safety.[v]

Similarly, the UN Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea report of November 2017 reports predicament that locals face during the rainy season. In the rainy season, many dirt roads are muddy and are not unusable until the dry season, therefore, the travelers are forced to pass through some of the government-controlled checkpoints. The Somali security forces charge the drivers with hefty fees for evading them during the dry season.

Local authorities and armed actors took advantage of the drought response by tripling checkpoint fees in some areas. In April 2017, 60 trucks were blockaded at Wanlaweyne, Lower Shabelle region, when Federal Government security forces attempted to force commercial trucker to pay “arrears” for the times they had used the alternative Al-Shabaab-controlled route to Baidoa. Transporters in many places preferred Al-Shabaab routes where payments were honored, receipts were issued and the violence associated with the security forces was avoided.[vi]

As experts have noted, the Somali security forces are unpaid tribal militias who lack moral ethics to perform their duties. The military uniform serves as an alternative way of paying the bills by robbing the public at gunpoint particularly the travelers. Unfortunately, the government has failed to understand the importance of proper education, discipline, and leadership skills, and it has largely satisfied with their warlike potentials, a failure that has threatens the very existence of Somalia’s weak government. Thus, the drivers and passengers alike take long detours on unpaved dirt roads just to stay in Al-Shabab controlled areas to avoid the Somali security forces checkpoints.

In addition, US Senator Jack Reed who visited Mogadishu on 20th of February 2018, vented his disappointment in Farmajo’s administration, and he characterized it as:

The government is perceived by many people as corrupt and not serving their ends. [1]

Apart from public safety, Al-Shabab provides basic social services to locals through its various *Wilayaat* or local administrations. Tricia Bacon stated:

Al-Shabab has deftly managed clan dynamics and provided basic services in ways that have brought it political power and influence throughout southern Somalia, especially the rural areas, where residents are wary of the still-fragile government.[2]

Al-Shabab has built infrastructure in towns and villages under their control like providing electricity and clean running water, opening hospitals, and schools, re-organizing the local markets, etc. With its limited resources, Al-Shabab had renovated roads, repaired bridges, and dug up water canals. The concept is ‘self-reliance’ rather relying on politicized humanitarian

assistance. Christopher Anzalone, an Al-Shabab expert, summed up an array of Al-Shabab's administrative efforts in a recent article titled, '*Black Banners in Somalia*'

The group's civil administration continues in 2018 to carry out a variety of governance activities, including the running of sharia courts, holding meeting with clan leaders, and providing aid collected as religiously mandated charity (zakat). Al-Shabaab administrators also ran sharia institutes, schools, and courses for clan youth, merchants, and craftspeople and organized traveling health and vaccination clinics for people and livestock.[3]

Furthermore, the UN Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea 2017 reports that Al-Shabab has done much to help those in need during the drought:

Al-Shabaab mounted a well-publicized drought response, setting up regional drought committees and activating its Al-Xhasan humanitarian wing. In March 2017, the group conducted a series of high-profile food and water distributions in the regions of Bay, Bakool, Galgadud, Hiran, Lower Shabelle and Mudug.[iv]

Even the UN has acknowledged that Al-Shabab's response was swift and effective in covering vast stretches of land with a piggybank budget.

JUDICIAL SYSTEM

As experts have indicated, the residents in government-controlled areas travel for justice to Al-Shabab's Sharia courts. Tricia Bacon mentioned the following:

Al-Shabab offers a modicum of security in areas under its influence. It operates courts, including mobile courts, to punish crime and resolve disputes. That's especially important in an area rife with local conflicts, especially land disputes, and few effective ways to settle them, except violence. While media reports focus on al-Shabab's harsh sharia punishments, some Somalis seek out al-Shabab courts, knowing that they will deliver a relatively thorough verdict and will enforce resolution.[v]

Also, the UN Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea report in November 2017 reports the same service illustrating that rather than loathing and fearing Al-Shabab, Somalis actually seek them out.

Al-Shabaab's court in Afgoye continued to be the go-to jurisdiction for many with respect to land disputes, even in Mogadishu.[vi]

Regarding the Sharia courts, there are two important reasons that motivate people to go there. Firstly, Somalis go to Sharia court in settling their disputes and quarrels because they believe that Sharia law is based on divine revelation that is free from human deficiencies and

biases. Secondly, Somali people view Al-Shabab as Islamically legitimate group that follows the footmarks of Prophet Muhammed, peace be upon him, and they know that any faults that arises during a court proceeding is not due to Islam but to human defects and individual's sense of interpretations. The allure lies in court's impartiality, transparency, justness, and interestingly, the popularity of courts has reached beyond Somalia's borders. It has been reported that plaintiffs came from the neighboring countries and some are from as far as Europe. Consequently, Al-Shabab enjoys a positive approval rating among the locals.

So, why the Somalis go to Al-Shabab courts rather than the government administered courts? The Somali government's courts are corruption riddled institutions and it lacks objectivity in its deliberation. If the government somehow overcomes its fraudulence practices and gains the trust of its people, it will still be missing the very element that lures people to Al-Shabab courts: Sharia law. And, instead of winning the hearts and the minds of its citizens, the Somali government issued a threatful warning against such trips, it did a little to deter the public from going to Al-Shabab areas for justice.

MILITARY ETHICS

In the media, Al-Shabab is characterized as a terrorist group that indiscriminately bomb civilians and military personnel alike with suicide operations or improvised explosive devices. However, according to a recent study done by the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point titled, *"Targeted Terror: The Suicide Bombers of Al-Shabaab"*, written by Jason Warner and Ellen Chapin, shows that Al-Shabab strictly targets AMISOM, Somali forces, and those who are serving them behind the scene. The researchers paper studied Al-Shabab operations over the past decade, and it clearly disproves the widely-publicized notion that Al-Shabab targets civilians. The report says:

As the subsequent section details, we assert that al-Shabaab relies on suicide bombers in order to wreak maximum destruction on personnel and institutions—especially through assassinations of specific individuals—while generally avoiding targeting civilians and not explicitly seeking simply to engender a culture of shock and awe.[xv]

It clearly expresses that Al-Shabab avoids areas populated by non-combatants.

Our data shows that al-Shabaab largely avoids indiscriminately suicide bombing civilians and civilian spaces.[xvi]

The study goes on to attempt to explain the rationale behind this 'phenomenon':

One rationale for al-Shabaab's tendency not to indiscriminately target civilians lies in the fact that the group seeks to serve as a viable alternative of legitimate governance to the Somali government. [xvii]

According to study, the second rationale is that Al-Shabab follows al-Qaida's strict war ethics which prohibits civilian targets contrary to the common perception that al-Qaeda encourages the wholesale slaughter of those who are not theologically in line with them. Interestingly, the study presents some of the al-Qaida war doctrine that its affiliates must adhere to:

- 1. Generally, avoid fighting or targeting those who have not raised arms against us or aided in any such hostile act and maintain focus primarily on the Crusader Alliance and then upon their local surrogates.***
- 2. Refrain from killing and fighting against non-combatant women and children, and even if they are families of those who are fighting against us, refrain from targeting them as much as possible.***
- 3. Refrain from harming Muslims by explosions, killing, kidnapping, or destroying their wealth or property.***
- 4. Refrain from targeting enemies in mosques, markets, and gatherings where they mix with Muslims or with those who do not fight us.*** [xviii]

Islamic principles strictly prohibit shedding the blood of innocents, and for groups like Al-Shabab, Quranic verses outweigh any political considerations.

THE FAILURE OF MILITARY APPROACH

The US does not have a well-defined foreign policy on Somalia but rather it relies on a trial-and-error method that has backfired on various times already. Since the collapse of Said Barre's government, Somalia has seen foreign troops on its soil and the outcome has been persistently bloody. Alex Perry of Time wrote an interesting article titled, "*Kenya Invades Somalia. Does It Get Any Dumber?*" which summarized Somalia's record with the invading forces.

The last 20 years have also seen Somalia emerge with a particularly consistent record of chewing up anyone who arrives carrying a gun, including the U.N. and U.S. special operations troops (1992-3), Ethiopians (2006-9) and Ugandans and Burundians from an African Union peacekeeping force (2008-today). [vii]

Experts unanimously agree that the decision to invade Somalia with Ethiopian troops was perhaps the worst US foreign policy decision ever in an African country, and Al-Shabab gained much-needed support from Somalis who ardently wanted Ethiopians out of their land. Helen Epstein, a visiting professor at Bard College wrote an article published in The Atlantic titled

“Negotiating with Al-Shabaab will get America out of Somalia,” presented the catastrophic outcome of the Ethiopian invasion.

Then the Bush administration, convinced, probably incorrectly, that the ICU was protecting al-Qaeda operatives responsible for the 1998 U.S. embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania, sent navy ships and other artillery to assist Ethiopian troops as they proceeded to flatten Mogadishu, causing three-quarters of its population to flee.[viii]

Soon after the Ethiopians invaded Somalia in 2006, the US could not afford another nation-building quagmire as it did in 1992, therefore, assembling African forces as peacekeepers was ideal both politically and financially. And in early 2007, the African Mission In Somalia (AMISOM) came into being. Over the years, the AMISOM Peacekeepers have shown their true colors. Kristin Shimer mentions some of the tactics used by AMISOM upon arrival.

Throughout 2008-2010, AMISOM’s positions in Mogadishu often came under fire from al-Shabaab. AMISOM troops often responded to these attacks with indiscriminate small arms and mortar fire into civilian populated areas.[ix]

Again, Helen Epstein states some of their violent abuses:

AMISOM troops, particularly Ugandan ones, have committed numerous human rights violations, including the sexual abuse of Somali girls and women, and are notoriously corrupt. Often underpaid because their corrupt government is itself skimming their salaries or not paying them at all...[x]

Somalia expert, Ken Menkhaus, a professor at Davidson College, depicts a real dilemma: the U.S. and EU are not satisfied with AMISOM’s poor military performance on the ground, the human rights violations. and yet they cannot do without them.

The African union is in many ways a problem in Somalia. It has been abusive at times towards local populations, it is not welcome by most of the populations anymore and yet we cannot do without it.[xi]

In other words, the Somali people must continue to bear the brunt of AMISOM transgressions passively. The Trump administration has designated Somalia as an ‘*area of active hostilities*’ like Afghanistan without considering its eventual outcomes . And that categorization has only amplified the misery of Somalis, and it was certainly ineffective against Al-Shabab which has shown a persistent record of weathering various types of military operations. Tricia Bacon had this to say about this designation:

The United States has been increasing its military presence and expanding its rules of engagement in Somalia to counter al-Shabab. On June 11, the United States conducted

its first strike under these new rules, destroying an al-Shabab training and command center, and then conducted a second strike on July 2, with still a third one on July 4. In March, at the urging of the Defense Department, the Trump administration designated Somalia as an “area of active hostilities,” which allows the United States to conduct offensive strikes that do not require interagency vetting.[xii]

As some experts have mentioned, the long-term effects of these short-sighted policies like heavy-handed military approach had inflamed the situation due to mounting civilian casualties, and it has generated exactly the opposite effect. Christopher Anzalone has noted one of the many recent tragedies of post Trump policy:

Increased U.S. military strikes in the country also run the risk of inflaming local tensions and have increased the chances that Somali civilians will be negatively impacted and even killed, as happened in a joint Somali government and U.S. raid in Bariire in August 2017 that killed 10 civilians including children and inflamed tensions between the Somali government and the large and influential Habar Gidir/Hawiye clan.[xiii]

The bottom line is that brute force means more misery for the Somali people. Helen Epstein stated:

If this means more fire power, it will mean only more misery for the Somali people and their regional neighbors. Over a decade of intense firepower and at times brilliant military tactics on the part of AMISOM have not made Somalia or its neighbors safer. In fact, lawlessness has only increased.[xiv]

CONCLUSION

The civil war and internal strife have left a strong impression on Somalis, and having lost all hope, many grabbed to their religious identity which oversteps all tribal barriers. For many, Sharia law became as a safe-haven against aggression and violence; the fighting stopped, the tribal grudges were forgotten, and animosity turned into friendship, and Al-Shabab became the bearer of the good news. Since then, Sharia was seen a safety tool; it became a source of peace in a land that was rife with violence, it healed the wounds with Quranic verses, and it ended a quarter century old bloodshed in a matter of days which the world could not do in years. Having seen its dynamic effectiveness, many see that Sharia as the only way that Somalia can outgrow its present difficulties, a system that can treat Somalia’s tribalism ailments effectively.

America, which openly lost its religious tolerance on September 11th, 2001, is attempting a counter-revolution campaign to eradicate the Sharia law which provides peace in Somalia by

blindly supporting a secular government that is characterized as “*...corrupt and not serving their ends*” by those who brought it into being.

It is clear that secularism will not materialize in the face of people’s resistance, not that Somalis are not opposed to reform but the proposed scheme is not compatible with the Islamic principles. The secularism prompts the fear of losing their traditional way of life, libertine attitude that could erode or adulterate the Islamic moral ethics, and the anxiety of cultural deformation by introducing alien modes that will gradually modify the local customs. And for many, Somalia is on the right path, however the repercussion the current military intervention may be, no power can smother the people’s longing for Sharia.

As documented by various experts, there is a wide gap between propaganda and reality in Somalia noting that Al-Shabab is not a bloodthirsty monster but an organization that is fighting for a genuine cause: the reestablishment of Sharia law in Somalia, a conviction that is widely popular among the Somalis. In addition, it provides public safety, basic social services, a fair judicial system, and educational programs for Somalis of all tribes. Some people claim that Al-Shabab is benefiting from the Somali federal government’s inability to exercise its authority and it has shrewdly filled gap. While in fact, the Somali security forces are terrorists with guns while Al-Shabab controlled areas are a safe-haven for those who are flee from them. Finally, as documented by the West Point research study, Al-Shabab does not intentionally target civilians but only those who it considers foreign invaders and their local allies.

To sum up, this essay an attempt to give the readers a glimpse of truth through the smokescreen by looking at Al-Shabab with factual spectacles. A snapshot of AMISOM’s human rights violations, Somali government forces’ brutalities verified by Western sources, and the U.S.’s fruitless more-firepower policy in Somalia. Hopefully, much of the fog will be lifted through increased efforts by journalists and the unbiased researchers. The U.S. is in war with a group whose ideology is deeply rooted in the Islamic faith, and as it seems that it will be in this marathon for many years to come. If there is a hope of ever talking to Al-Shabab, although that may seem a distant prospect, the U.S. must see through the smokescreen that it has created, and similarly, it must accept the existence of people, Somalis in this case, who wish to live under a constitution drafted by God.

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- [1] Caroline Houck. "We're Finding It Difficult to Hold Territory in Somalia," Defense One, March 2, 2018.
- [2] Tricia Bacon. "This is why al-Shabab won't be going away anytime soon," Washington Post, July 6, 2017.
- [3] Christopher Anzalone. "Black Banners in Somalia," March 2018.
- [iv] "Report on Somalia," Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea, UNSC, November 2017, p.38.
- [v] Tricia Bacon. "This is why al-Shabab won't be going away anytime soon," Washington Post, July 6, 2017.
- [vi] "Report on Somalia," Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea, UNSC, November 2017, p. 17.
- [vii] Alex Perry. "Kenya Invades Somalia. Does It Get Any Dumber?" October 19, 2011.
- [viii] Helen Epstein. "Negotiating with Al-Shabaab will get America out of Somalia," The Atlantic, October 16, 2017.
- [ix] Kristen Shimer. "The Successes and Failures of the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM)," March 30, 2017.
- [x] Helen Epstein. "Negotiating with Al-Shabaab will get America out of Somalia," The Atlantic, October 16, 2017.
- [xi] Ken Menkhaus. A speech given at Syracuse University Maxwell School, 56th minute, 2016.
- [xii] Tricia Bacon. "This is why al-Shabab won't be going away anytime soon," Washington Post, July 6, 2017.
- [xiii] Christopher Anzalone. "Black Banners in Somalia," March 2018.
- [xiv] Helen Epstein. "Negotiating with Al-Shabaab will get America out of Somalia," The Atlantic, October 16, 2017.
- [xv] Jason Warner and Ellen Chapin. "Targeted Terror: The Suicide Bombers of Al-Shabaab," February 2018, p. 16.
- [xvi] Ibid., p. 19.
- [xvii] Ibid., p. 19.
- [xviii] Ibid., p. 20.

