



ḤARAKAT AL-SHABĀB AL-MUJĀHIDĪN AND CHALLENGES

Dr. Amira Mohammed Abdel Halim

African Affairs Expert
Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies, Cairo

Introduction

Arguably, many researchers claim that Al-Shabaab Al-Mujahideen was founded in 2002, with the headquarters set up in Salahuddin Camp, Mogadishu. They also remark that one year into its inception, Al-Shabaab Al-Mujahideen engaged in terrorist activity, targeting Somalis not from Somaliland. However, the official establishment of Al-Shabaab Al-Mujahideen dates back to 2006, after the Islamic Courts Union tightened its grip on southern Somalia, hence became the main force in the country, achieving stability in the areas under its control.

The Ethiopian invasion of Somalia in 2006 was a major turning point in the trajectory of the Al-Shabaab Al-Mujahideen, as it mounted stiff resistance to the Ethiopian interference using guerrilla-style raids. Trapped between the devil and the deep blue sea, the Ethiopian forces screamed for the UN support to help them out of the Somali quagmire, with Al-Shabaab Al-Mujahideen reaping enormous gains. Remarkably, Al-Shabaab Al-Mujahideen rose to prominence and attracted many sympathizers and volunteers. As it declined to join the Alliance for the Re-Liberation of Somalia (ARS), refusing to enter into negotiation with the then-occupying forces (Ethiopia), Al-Shabaab Al-Mujahideen gained stronger influence in the Somali arena, and a significant weight in the conflict situation flaring up in the region; it further sought to form an opposition against the provisional government headed by Sheikh Sharif Ahmed, which was totally thrown out by Al-Shabaab Al-Mujahideen. The flight of the leaders of the Islamic Courts Union, who had a moderate influence on Al-Shabaab Al-Mujahideen from Somalia and the Ethiopian invasion made Al-Shabaab Al-Mujahideen snowball into being more extremist and violent, severing its ties with other Somali groups.

Since 2008, terrorist operations carried out by Al-Shabaab Al-Mujahideen in Somalia have escalated steadily, as it notoriously targeted officials of the interim Somali government. In the wake of the assassination of Saleh Nabhan by the American forces in 2009, who was a senior leader of Al-Shabaab Al-Mujahideen, it pledged allegiance to Al-Qaeda. Its leaders sent letters to Osama bin Laden, requesting to join Al-Qaeda, but he declined their request at that time. Following the assassination of bin Laden in 2011, Al-Shabaab Al-Mujahideen renewed its request to join Al-Qaeda, to which Ayman Al-Zawahiri responded positively, and Al-Shabaab Al-Mujahideen announced its official affiliation to Al-Qaeda in February, 2012.

Some western research studies reveal that Al-Shabaab Al-Mujahideen leaders were in constant contact with Al-Qaeda in the period before it moved to Afghanistan in 1996, when Osama bin Laden along with some leaders lived in Sudan for several years, training members of Al-Shabaab Al-Mujahideen. Then, the first leader of Al-Shabaab Al-Mujahideen, Aden Hashi Ayro, moved back to Afghanistan to make his expertise available there, providing training and support.

The application of *Sharia* according to the strict interpretations of Al-Shabaab Al-Mujahideen is one of its most important goals. Therefore, it sought to overthrow the Somali government being a secular government as deemed by Al-Shabaab Al-Mujahideen, and to establish a government that best observes *Sharia*, instead. Al-Shabaab Al-Mujahideen seeks to eliminate all external interferences in Somalia, as it fights back African forces present across the country, and carries out terrorist attacks against the countries involved, forcing them to withdraw from Somalia while also targeting western interests, especially the USA in Somalia and the East African region.

Financial Resources

The external financial sources of Al-Shabaab Al-Mujahideen still remain unidentifiable given the paucity or dearth of the precise and reliable information available. However, according to multiple reports and statements by Somalis who once joined Al-Shabaab Al-Mujahideen and served as officials in some countries, it relies on many different sources:

Foreign Transfers

The United States closed down a number of money transfer institutions in Somalia, including the Al-Barakat Institution. Furthermore, the American authorities have also arrested many Somalis on charges of transferring money from the USA to Al-Shabaab Al-Mujahideen.

Trade

This especially refers to charcoal trade; Al-Shabaab Al-Mujahideen controlled the Somali port of Kismayo, which it used to smuggle raw coal. It also obtained large sums of money from the proceeds of trafficking and funneling arms, sugar and tobacco.

Zakat Funds and Taxes

Until 2011, Al-Shabaab Al-Mujahideen controlled huge swathes of territory in central and southern Somalia, making it possible to impose laws there and collect Zakat from the citizenry on sales of agricultural produce and livestock and illicit production of sugar. Al-Shabaab Al-Mujahideen also imposed import taxes at Mogadishu port, as reported by the United Nations. Likewise, the taxes paid by people at the roadblocks put up by Al-Shabaab Al-Mujahideen make up one of its key revenues. Some reports emphasize that drought-impacted displaced persons pay part of the international aid at the roadblocks. Simply put, a large part of the international aid doled out to the Somali people sneaks into the hands of Al-Shabaab Al-Mujahideen.

Operational Development

A previously released statement reveals that the emergence of Al-Shabaab Al-Mujahideen was linked to the resistance of the Ethiopian forces that interfered in Somalia in 2006 to support the Somali provisional government at the time and to eliminate the control of the Islamic Courts Union over the country. Ever since 2008, its operational activity has been on the increase, targeting the provisional government institutions, officials and western interests in the country. As such, Al-Shabaab Al-Mujahideen has proven that it has the ability and capability to carry out deadly attacks on areas of western interests and on enemies abroad.

In October 2008, Al-Shabaab Al-Mujahideen plotted and carried out five suicide attacks that struck the UNDP Complex, the Ethiopian Consulate and various government offices, killing dozens of lives. Later in September 2009, Al-Shabaab Al-Mujahideen bombed the African Union Peacekeeping Mission in Mogadishu, killing more than 20 people, while damaging the offices of an American company deemed to have provided support for peace and security.

In a similar vein, Al-Shabaab Al-Mujahideen wrested control of huge swathes of territory given the poor central government in Somalia, reaching its zenith in 2011 when it seized control of parts of Mogadishu and the important port of Kismayo.

In October 2011, Kenya interfered militarily in Somalia, which was an unusual action of the Kenyan foreign policy, and it was the first time that the Kenyan army had crossed its borders in what was called “Operation Protect the Nation.” The Kenyan authorities confirmed that they were seeking to clamp down on the attacks carried out by Al-Shabaab Al-Mujahideen north of Kenya, especially targeting tourists and defenseless visitors. In 2014, Kenyan forces joined the African Union Mission in Somalia.

After 2011, the operational activity of Al-Shabaab Al-Mujahideen targeted some entities and individuals in the neighboring countries within the immediate vicinity of Somalia, especially the forces involved in the African Union Forces in Somalia to drive them out of the country.

Since 2011, Al-Shabaab Al-Mujahideen has carried out more than 150 attacks in Kenya, which were not only related to the reactive response to the Kenyan military interference in Somalia, but also to what Kenya represents as a center of gravity for western and Israeli interests. The most serious of such operations was the attack carried out in September 2013 on the upscale Westgate Mall in Nairobi, killing at least 67 people. It also carried out terrorist attacks on the students of the University of Garcia claiming the lives of 147 students. Later in 2016, it carried out a deadly attack on a Kenyan army camp in Uday, killing 200 soldiers. Just recently in January of 2019, another frenzied attack was carried out on a hotel complex in Nairobi, killing at least 21 civilians while hundreds were held hostage. A recent attack by Al-Shabaab Al-Mujahideen on a Kenyan military base used by the United States killed one member of the American Service and two Defense Department contractors, as reported by the US Command for Africa on January 6, 2020. A research study of the Combating Terrorism Center (CTC) of the American Military Academy in West Point reveals that Al-Shabaab Al-Mujahideen carried out 155 suicide attacks by 216 members, an average of 4 operations per month from September 18, 2006, until October of 2017.

Confrontation Methods

Counterterrorism plans in the East African region in general and the confrontation methods against Al-Shabaab Al-Mujahideen in particular adopt security and military approaches more than soft approaches; the African forces that have replaced the United Nations forces in Somalia since 2007 have been confronting the operations of Al-Shabaab Al-Mujahideen within the framework of the mandate granted by the Peace and Security Council to protect the institutions of the national government. However, given the reliance of Al-Shabaab Al-Mujahideen on terrorist operations, the African

forces switched to other counterterrorism plans, although the mandate to counter terrorism was only granted to these forces in 2014.

The United States adopted a two-pronged approach in Somalia: first, by providing financial and security support to the African Union Mission in Somalia; second, by implementing counterterrorism operations by deploying a few elements of the American Special Operations Forces aimed at launching strikes, using drones to bombard the militants there, and providing intelligence and building capabilities for the forces from local partners to carry out ground operations. The plan relied on a limited American military presence to the minimum extent possible to reduce the possibility of human casualties among American forces and material losses. Since 2007, the United States has provided more than half a billion dollars for training and raising the efficiency of the forces.

Based on a decision issued on February 29, 2008, the US State Department designated Al-Shabaab Al-Mujahideen as a terrorist movement, and the Ministry declared that the Al-Shabaab Al-Mujahideen funds would be frozen in the United States. The American forces targeted Al-Shabaab Al-Mujahideen leaders, providing air support to the government and the Ethiopian forces to bomb its headquarters in early 2007 by a warship belonging to the American army, while repeating its bombings also in June and December of 2007. The leader of Al-Shabaab Al-Mujahideen was killed in a US bombing in 2008.

In September 2014, the United States launched an air strike, killing at least 6 people, including Ahmed Abdi Godane, a senior leader of Al-Shabaab Al-Mujahideen. In May 2016, a US air strike, using drones and manned aircraft, killed 150 members of Al-Shabaab Al-Mujahideen in a training camp north of Mogadishu.

The United States escalated its prolonged and protracted campaign against Al-Shabaab Al-Mujahideen leaders and attacked their military capacity, killing at least five Al-Shabaab Al-Mujahideen leaders by unmanned aircraft strikes and ground operations. The United States has increased the frequency and scope of air strikes on Al-Shabaab Al-Mujahideen since 2016, expanding its troop presence in Somalia in 2017.

Future of Al-Shabaab Al-Mujahideen

Over the recent years, Al-Shabaab Al-Mujahideen has evinced endurance, although it has lost much of its territory it once controlled, suffered from violent internal conflicts, defections and sustained US

continued air strikes. To add insult to injury, some of the tribes rejected its policies such as collecting Zakat forcibly, with an affiliated faction joining the ISIS in 2015.

The future of Al-Shabaab Al-Mujahideen hinges upon many factors; the most important of which is the ability of the Somali government, supported by the international community and regional powers to address and tackle the crises contributory to snowballing Al-Shabaab Al-Mujahideen. Many factors contributed to the emergence of Al-Shabaab Al-Mujahideen and the escalation of its threats in the East African region, let alone the vulnerability and chaos rampant in Somalia for nearly three decades. The rise of the religious phenomenon in international relations, the growth of terrorist groups following the end of the Cold War, using the countries of the East African region as safe havens, as well as the strategic importance of this region in favour of the western interests in general and the American interests in particular, made it a breeding ground for terrorist operations, and provided justifications for external interference in the region.

Likewise, the neglect of the neighboring countries and the Arab countries for the Somali crisis for many years led to the deterioration of the economic and humanitarian conditions in this country, and opened the way for the youth movement to impose its laws, ideas and visions in the areas it controls.

Likewise, the laissez-faire attitude of the neighboring countries and the Arab countries towards the Somali crisis for many years brought about the deterioration of the economic and humanitarian conditions, opening up a Pandora's box for Al-Shabaab Al-Mujahideen to impose its laws and ideologies on the territory under its controls.

When the security and military approaches on which the confrontational plans against Al-Shabaab Al-Mujahideen were based did not pay off as desired, Al-Shabaab Al-Mujahideen sustained a decline at different times but remained steadfast, gaining the necessary support while recruiting more fighters given the continued crisis of the national integration in Somalia and its neighboring countries. Against a backdrop of tumultuous unrest, more threats posed by Al-Shabaab Al-Mujahideen and other armed groups came into play.

The existing relation is still riddled with a spate of problems between the federal government and the Somali regions, and the Somali people still suffer from widespread unemployment, abject poverty and food insecurity, which force and drive the Somali youth to join Al-Shabaab Al-Mujahideen to provide job opportunities and eke out or scrape a living.

The neighboring countries of Somalia are experiencing the same problems, especially the crisis of national integration, as ethnic and religious groups in the region suffer from marginalization and discrimination, especially Muslim groups, making it highly likely to espouse and embrace such an extremist ideology to turn the spotlight on their pressing problems with national governments in the region. The security campaigns launched by these countries, including Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania, within the framework of the counterterrorism plans that they adopt, are directed mostly towards Muslims, leading to hostile trends towards the ruling authorities in these countries, while spreading a public opinion sympathetic to those affected by such heated campaigns.

What fans the flames more and adds another turn of the screw is the foreign interferences in Somalia. Given the ramshackle statehood of Somalia, many countries have sought to achieve their regional and international goals. In return for aid provided to the Somali people, such countries glaringly aimed at increasing the divisions and defections in Somalia, as it has been notoriously shown beyond a shadow of doubt that Somalia has often ballooned into a hotbed to settle old scores between a number of regional and international countries.

The poor empowerment or inability of the Federal Government and the Somali National Forces remains a major challenge facing Al-Shabaab Al-Mujahideen. While the African Union Forces are preparing to withdraw from Somalia treading water for about 13 years, it is not yet clear how the national forces will tackle the various threats in Somalia, as these forces are still not qualified enough to assume such a weighty responsibility.

The efforts made by the international community to curb the revenues funding Al-Shabaab Al-Mujahideen are glaringly slow, although the UN Experts Committee on the Somali Crisis provided evidence that Al-Shabaab Al-Mujahideen still receives funds through donors. Again, several international reports reveal that some countries are involved in supporting Al-Shabaab Al-Mujahideen.