

Al Shabaab

AT A GLANCE

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HOW TO CITE

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SUMMARY

Formed: December 2006

Disbanded: Group is active.

First Attack: March 26, 2007: A man named Adam Salam Adam used a car bomb to conduct a suicide attack against Ethiopian soldiers in Mogadishu. Al Shabaab claimed responsibility for the bombing, allegedly the city’s first suicide attack. (~73 killed, unknown wounded).¹

Last Attack: June 15, 2021: Al Shabaab militants killed over 15 Somali army recruits in a suicide bombing outside of the General Degaban military camp in Mogadishu (15+ killed, 20+ wounded).²

OVERVIEW

Al Shabaab, meaning “The Youth” in Arabic, is a Salafi militant organization that seeks to build an Islamic state in Somalia. Although based in Somalia, Al Shabaab has also conducted attacks in neighboring countries, including Kenya, Djibouti, and Ethiopia. Al Shabaab emerged as an independent organization around December 2006 after the dissolution of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), for which it had served as the military wing. Since the late 2000s, Al Shabaab has had close ties to Al Qaeda and has sought to frame the Somali struggle as part of a global jihadist movement. The group has engaged in bombings, suicide attacks, and armed assaults, especially against Somali government targets, religious minorities, private civilians, foreign troops, diplomats, and aid or non-governmental organization workers.

NARRATIVE SUMMARY

Al Shabaab is a large militant organization in the Horn of Africa that seeks to establish an Islamic state. The group’s name translates to “The Youth” or “The Young Men” in Arabic.³ Al Shabaab’s exact origins are somewhat ambiguous. The group may have ties to [Al Ittihad Al Islamiya \(AIAI\)](#), an armed group active in Somalia and Ethiopia between 1984 and 1997. Al Shabaab’s first leader, Aden Hashi Ayro,

served in AIAI from 1991-1997. Sometime after 1997, Ayro joined what would be called [the Islamic Courts Union \(ICU\)](#), a court system founded by locals that sought to take control of and infuse order in Mogadishu, due to the chaos left in the wake of Somalian dictator Siad Barre's death.⁴

A series of ICU leaders were assassinated in 2005, allegedly by Somalia's Transitional Federal Government (TFG). It was in this context that the armed enforcement wing of the ICU – Al Shabaab led by Ayro – rose to prominence. The group developed into a cohesive and effective militant organization under Ayro's leadership, where he helped recruit and train its fighters. Al Shabaab advocated for violent revenge against TFG personnel, which drew criticism from Hassan Dahir Aweys, another former AIAI member who was serving as the chair of the ICU's legislative council. Aweys also criticized Ayro's other brutal actions, such as the 2005 disinterment of an Italian colonial-era cemetery, which he argued would damage the ICU's reputation. In June of 2006, the ICU gained control of Mogadishu and other areas in central and southern Somalia. As the courts spread their influence, they began to make tangible improvements to civilian quality of life. They removed roadblocks and trash from the Mogadishu streets, provided peace and security, and returned property to locals that was commandeered by US-backed warlords. For these reasons, the ICU enjoyed a large degree of support from the civilian population under its control.⁵

The ICU's reign over Mogadishu was short lived, lasting approximately 3 months. This was partly due to escalating tensions within ICU leadership. Aweys, who was considered a Salafist, advocated for a nationalistic agenda of establishing an Islamic state in Somalia ruled by locals. On the other hand, Ayro pushed for the group to connect the struggle in Somalia to a broader international jihadist agenda. These struggles foreshadowed what would become to be Al Shabaab's greatest weakness – its ideological cohesion. As the group's outspokenness grew throughout 2006, the TFG became increasingly concerned. On December 20th 2006, a coalition of United Nations-backed Ethiopian troops, TFG forces, and competing warlords launched an offensive against the ICU. The ICU effectively disintegrated soon after this offensive. The ICU's leaders left Mogadishu six days later and formally resigned their leadership on December 27, 2006. Although the ICU had been effectively demolished as an organization, Al Shabaab remained active under Ayro's leadership and broke away to become an independent militant group.⁶

The Ethiopian-TFG offensive was a crucial event for Al Shabaab. It led to the dissolution of the ICU, catapulting Al Shabaab into a role as one of the main anti-government and anti-foreign forces in Somalia.⁷ Ahmed Abdi Godane – former AIAI member who was serving as executive chairman of Al Shabaab – was instrumental in reorganizing the group and laying the groundwork for their insurgency.⁸ Although Al Shabaab designates a central commander – firstly Ayro – it operates with a decentralized leadership structure. Top leaders known as emirs operate specific regional areas, each with its own political and administrative entities. This decentralized structure allows Al Shabaab to manage its interspersed geography across south and central Somalia. The Ethiopian offensive led to the elimination of the majority of other Islamist factions, allowing Al Shabaab to further radicalize and expand its influence.⁹ Beginning in January 2007, Al Shabaab conducted attacks against Ethiopian and TFG forces using a wide variety of tactics, including bombs, rocket-propelled grenades, and fire fights. Almost daily attacks in Mogadishu killed dozens, with over 1,000 civilian deaths in April 2007 alone. In early 2007, the African Union authorized peacekeeping forces from the African Union Mission to Somalia (AMISOM) to stabilize the country. Troops from Uganda and Burundi arrived to support the AMISOM mission, and Al Shabaab launched attacks against those troops as well.¹⁰

In September 2007, former ICU leaders and members met with elements of other Somali opposition groups in Asmara, Eritrea to form an alliance, reemerging as the Alliance for the Reliberation of Somalia (ARS).¹¹ ARS-Asmara, under the leadership of Aweys, sought to continue the Somalian resistance against foreign occupation.¹² However, Al Shabaab refused to attend the meeting in Eritrea and denounced the new group for failing to adopt a global jihadist agenda.¹³ Al Shabaab leader Ayro sought to expand the

group's struggle beyond Somalia and link it to the broader jihadist movement. In his previous role as a member of AIAI, Ayro established connections with Al Qaeda (AQ) which he further cultivated after the disintegration of the ICU. In several statements between 2006-2007, AQ leaders Osama bin Laden and Ayamn Al-Zawahiri called on Muslims to aid Al Shabaab's efforts in Somalia. The group also adopted AQ tactics, including suicide bombings.¹⁴

In February 2008, Al Shabaab was designated a foreign terrorist organization by the United States. Three months later, Ayro was killed in a U.S. missile strike, and Ahmed Abdi Godane – also known as Mukhtar Abu Zubeyr – became Al Shabaab's top leader. Under Godane, Al Shabaab aligned itself more closely with AQ in ideology and tactics, leading to fundamental changes within the group.¹⁵ Godane published a statement that praised AQ, and for the first time, publicly and explicitly framed the group's struggle in Somalia as part of a larger global jihad. Al Shabaab leveraged its relationship with AQ to attract foreign fighters and monetary donations from AQ's supporters. Al Shabaab members traveled abroad to train with AQ, and the group increasingly focused on conducting AQ-style suicide attacks. Although Al Shabaab retained most of its local Somali leaders – like regional commander Sheikh Mukhtar Robow – it began to include AQ militants in its leadership after 2008.¹⁶ These changes led to a rapid transformation of Al Shabaab from a local Islamist-nationalist group into an internationally oriented, AQ-aligned terrorist organization.

In mid-2008, Al Shabaab launched a violent campaign to revenge Ayro's death, focusing on attacks against government targets in Somalia. Among other attacks during that campaign, Al Shabaab simultaneously executed five suicide attacks against U.N. and other government targets on October 29, 2008, killing almost 30 people.¹⁷ Throughout 2008, Al Shabaab continued to use guerrilla and terror tactics against Ethiopian troops, gaining control of most of southern Somalia and some of Mogadishu by early 2009. During this time, Al Shabaab also gained control of important Somali cities like Baido and the port city of Kismayo.¹⁸ These success in 2008-2009 emboldened the group, allowing it to rally considerable support for its cause in south-central Somalia.

In January 2009, Ethiopian forces withdrew completely from Mogadishu in accordance with a 2008 U.N.-backed agreement between the TFG and the ARS, which also stipulated the deployment of U.N. peacekeepers.¹⁹ Al Shabaab claimed that it had succeeded in expelling the Ethiopians from Somalia and turned its attention on forcing other foreign soldiers from the country. Its attacks particularly targeted TFG and AMISOM troops. Under the terms of the U.N.-backed agreement, the ICU's former leader, Sheikh Sharif, became the TFG's president. Sharif's ascension provided some stability in the country, and he vowed to implement Shariah law. After Sharif became president and Ethiopian troops left the country, Al Shabaab lost some of its basis for popular support. The group's goal to force out the Ethiopians was complete, and its efforts to implement Sharia law were taken up by Sharif. In an attempt to remain relevant and undermine the TFG, Al Shabaab established its own governing structures in the territories under its control. These local governments transcended existing clan divisions by drawing leadership from a wide representation of kinship groups.²⁰ Through these structures, the group provided social services and collected taxes.²¹

In February 2009, [Hizbul Islam](#) emerged as a coalition of Somali Islamist groups opposed to the U.N.-backed agreement and cooperation with the TFG. ARS-Asmara, previously led by Hassan Aweys, was one of the four organizations that merged to form the coalition. Between May and July 2009, Al Shabaab and Hizbul Islam cooperated to target TFG forces and secure control of large areas of south-central Somalia and most of Mogadishu. The two groups had a shared interest in combatting the TFG, but their cooperation ended there. Hizbul Islam and Al Shabaab competed militarily for influence over the Somali insurgency and for control of territory. Ideologically, the groups clashed on a number of topics. For example, Hizbul Islam supported TFG president Sharif's efforts to implement Sharia law, while Al Shabaab staunchly opposed them. In addition, Aweys strictly opposed Godane's efforts to court AQ and

have foreign jihadists interfere in Somalia. These tensions led to armed clashes between the two groups in late 2009.²² Hizbul Islam slowly lost ground to Al Shabaab and ultimately chose to merge with it in late 2010 after a series of internal defections.²³ The merger was seen by some observers as a takeover of Hizbul Islam by Al Shabaab.²⁴ In 2012, disagreements between Al Shabaab militants and its Hizbul Islam members led Hizbul Islam to split from the group.²⁵ The two factions disagreed about the nature and extent of the organization's goals. Al Shabaab militants fought to internationalize the Somali conflict in the name of global jihad, while Hizbul Islam militants had more nationalist objectives and wanted to focus strictly on Somalia.²⁶ After the split, Hizbul Islam became inactive and renounced violence.²⁷

Godane faced increasing criticism from Al Shabaab members following the failed Mogadishu Ramadan offensive of August 2010. The operation, which was reportedly planned by Godane, resulted in the deaths of hundreds of militants.²⁸ In August 2011, mounting pressure from a coalition of TFG and AMISOM forces caused Al Shabaab to withdraw from Mogadishu. The coalition also expelled Al Shabaab from major seaports south of the capital, which the group has not been able to regain as of 2021.²⁹ The control of these port cities, principally Kismayo and Barawe, allowed the group to gain revenue from smuggling and taxing overseas shipping.³⁰ These losses were reportedly a major humiliation for Godane. Two weeks later, Godane removed Mukhtar Robow and Ibrahim al-Afghani – both founding members of Al Shabaab – as deputies over their criticism of his leadership abilities. Godane also suspended meetings of Al Shabaab's Shura leadership council.³¹ Despite setbacks and internal tensions, the group maintained control over large swaths of territory in central and southern Somalia. Al Shabaab later made the southern Somali city of Jilib its de facto capital following the loss of Mogadishu.³²

Al Shabaab's internal struggles came to a head in February 2012 with Godane's announcement of a formal affiliation with AQ.³³ The move caused disputes between the group's leaders, reflecting disagreements over AQ's role that have divided Al Shabaab since its ICU days.³⁴ In March 2012, an American Al Shabaab militant named Omar Hammami posted a video online announcing his defection from the group. Hammami said his life was in danger, leading him to join other Al Shabaab defectors in publicly goading Godane's dictatorial methods.³⁵ The ensuing public relations nightmare concerned Godane, who feared that dissidents might break away from Al Shabaab. He issued a statement shortly after warning that anyone who tried to "weaken and tear Muslims apart" would be considered the enemy. Hassan Aweys responded publicly a week later by accusing Godane of being "far removed from Islam."³⁶

In early 2013, Al Shabaab leaders began calling for Godane's removal. An Al Shabaab militant known as Abu al-Muhajir accused Godane of serious abuses in an open letter issued in March. The following month, Ibrahim al-Afghani published an open letter to AQ leader Ayman al-Zawahiri. Al-Afghani, who was a longstanding friend to Godane, reiterated al-Muhajir's accusations and warned that Al Shabaab's jihad risked failure. Godane quickly and decisively responded to quell opposition. In June, he ordered the Amniyat, Al Shabaab's intelligence unit, to arrest al-Afghani along with another founding member of the group, preacher Mu'allim Burhan. They were both killed shortly after under disputed circumstances.³⁷ In September, the Amniyat tracked down Omar Hammami, killing him and other dissidents. Other Al Shabaab pragmatists fled for safety, including Aweys who was captured by the Somali government when attempting to escape the country. Although Godane and his loyalists ultimately succeeded in their goal to consolidate power, it came at a great cost to the group. Analysts argue that the removal of respected leaders within the group cost Al Shabaab substantial leverage with local populations. Godane and his loyalists reportedly suffered alienation from the broader Somali Salafi community.³⁸

Foreign deployments continued to attack Al Shabaab throughout 2012-2014, leading the group to respond by conducting large-scale attacks on civilian and military personnel abroad.³⁹ In September 2013, Al Shabaab attacked Westgate Mall in Nairobi, Kenya, sparking a four-day siege in which at least 67 people were killed.⁴⁰ Six months later, the group struck a nightclub in Djibouti, killing Turkish and EU nationals.⁴¹ In June of 2014, over 48 people were killed after Al Shabaab attacked hotels, restaurants, and

a police station in the Kenyan coastal city of Lamu.⁴² Al Shabaab claimed that its attacks on foreign targets were meant to pressure troops from to withdraw from Somalia.⁴³ The foreign attacks also appeared to raise the group's profile, boosting recruitment and morale of its troops. Godane enjoyed the increased media attention that came as a result of these attacks for only a short time before being killed by a U.S. airstrike in September 2014. Following Godane's death, Ahmed Umar Abu Ubaidah, also known as Ahmed Diriye, became the emir of Al Shabaab. He previously served as one of Godane's deputies and was reportedly a leader in the 2013 Amniyat crackdown on internal dissidents.⁴⁴ Al Shabaab leaders also considered another candidate – Mahad Karate – to become the new emir of the group, but analysts argue they opted for a conservative figure like Abu Ubaidah to ensure a smooth transition of power.⁴⁵

Under Abu Ubaidah's leadership, Al Shabaab continued to launch high-profile attacks with the goal of forcing foreign troops out of Somalia, especially those of the Kenyan armed forces and the African Union Mission to Somalia (AMISOM).⁴⁶ In April 2015, Al Shabaab militants targeted Kenya's Garissa University College, killing at least 147.⁴⁷ A month later, IS began challenging Al Shabaab's greatest vulnerability – its ideological cohesion – by encouraging defections from the group. The media apparatus of IS produced numerous propaganda films starting in May 2015, featuring Somali foreign fighters in Iraq urging Somalis to join the Islamic State. The IS claimed that they were "the only group truly fighting against the oppression of Ethiopian Christians." IS's propaganda was met with limited success in Somalia yet elicited a strong response from Al Shabaab leadership. In November 2015, Abu Ubaidah ordered the Amniyat to crackdown on internal dissidents. However, a small group of pro-IS defectors from Al Shabaab survived the purge.⁴⁸ They operate in the northern Somali region of Puntland where occasional clashes between Al Shabaab and defectors have erupted.⁴⁹

Despite the ideological struggles and setbacks Al Shabaab experienced in 2015, the group managed to carry out several major attacks in 2016. In January, militants killed over 100 soldiers at a Kenyan AMISOM base in one of the deadliest attacks on a foreign operation in Al Shabaab's history.⁵⁰ The next month, in an attempt to target Western intelligence officials, a group member detonated a bomb concealed in a laptop on a flight headed from Mogadishu to Djibouti City. The explosives only killed the bomber, and the plane was able to land safely. These attacks demonstrated the effectiveness of Al Shabaab's evolving military strategy involving high-profile strikes against majority civilian targets, guerilla warfare, and attacks on vulnerable AMISOM or government positions.⁵¹ In fact, Al Shabaab grew to become the deadliest militant group in Africa in 2016.⁵² The next year, Al Shabaab killed more than 500 people in a twin truck bomb strike in Mogadishu.⁵³ This incident is considered to be the deadliest attack since the inception of Al Shabaab's insurgency in 2006.

Despite the increasingly devastating attacks, countries participating in AMISOM began to make plans in 2017 to gradually withdraw from Somalia. Foreign leaders were angered by their own domestic security concerns, as well as the decision of the EU to decrease its contributions to AMISOM.⁵⁴ However, a series of extensions by the UNSC has delayed the departure of AMISOM troops until at least the end of 2021.⁵⁵ At the time that AMISOM exit plans were floated, analysts were concerned that the Somali Federal Government (SFG) would be unable to counter Al Shabaab, enabling the militant organization to recapture swaths of territory it once held.⁵⁶

Starting in 2017, the United States increased its involvement in the fight against Al Shabaab. In March 2017, the United States expanded its rules of engagement to allow for more strikes, including preemptive strikes against members of Al Shabaab.⁵⁷ Previously, U.S. airstrikes only targeted high-value targets, such as past Al Shabaab emir Ahmed Godane. In June of 2017, a U.S. airstrike destroyed an Al Shabaab camp in the Middle Juba region of south Somalia. According to Somali government officials, the camp was "a key command and supply hub."⁵⁸ The surge in U.S. drone strikes, however, did not significantly degrade Al Shabaab's capabilities. Instead, Al Shabaab remained adaptable, moving away from direct confrontations with enemy armed forces and engaging in more bombings against soft targets.⁵⁹ Though the

group survived external threats, it continued to struggle with internal leadership disputes in 2017-2019. Al Shabaab's leader, Abu Ubaidah, was reportedly bedridden due to illness in early 2018. Abu Ubaidah's incapacity likely triggered a leadership crisis within Al Shabaab later that year. In June 2018, he was believed to be near death. The cost of his medication diverted funds meant for Al Shabaab's operations.⁶⁰ Abu Ubaidah's failing health and its drain on Al Shabaab's resources were believed to have weakened his control over the group, spurring a power struggle.⁶¹ Meetings of Al Shabaab's Shura council of senior leaders in 2018 reportedly ended in deadlock, unable to coalesce around a single figure to succeed Abu Ubaidah as emir.⁶² According to Kenyan intelligence sources, Al Shabaab financial administrator Hussein Ali Fiidow allegedly attempted to organize a coup to replace Abu Ubaidah during the first half of 2018.⁶³ Additionally, Shura council member Mahad Karate – who had been serving as head of the Amniyat since Godane's death – allegedly attempted to wrestle power from the emir.⁶⁴ At the time, these organizational disputes and increased military efforts led many analysts to believe that Al Shabaab was on the decline. In January 2019, Al Shabaab attacked a five-star hotel in Nairobi, Kenya, resulting in over 15 deaths and severe injuries. The group claimed that the attack was retaliation for the increase in U.S. military activity in the region, and that it was retribution for the decision of U.S. President Donald Trump to move the U.S. embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem in May 2018.⁶⁵ However, given the length of time elapsed between the move of the embassy and the hotel siege, some observers assert that the attack was just part of Al Shabaab's broader campaign to end Kenyan military intervention in Somalia.⁶⁶ On September 25, 2019, Al Shabaab carried out twin attacks on U.S. and E.U. troops using vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs).⁶⁷ Overall, Al Shabaab's 2019 attacks overturned analysts' assumptions about the group's decline and sent a clear signal that the group was still able to coordinate complex attacks.⁶⁸

In August 2020, the Somali National Intelligence and Security Agency (NISA) announced that Abu Ubaidah had temporarily transferred power to Abukar Aden, who was serving as his deputy.⁶⁹ According to NISA's Twitter announcement, Aden took over the group's activities amidst a bitter power struggle between Abu Ubaidah's supporters and those of Mahad Karate. For some time, Karate targeted Ubaidah by refusing to provide the emir with access to the group's finances. Karate also killed several kinsmen from the Rahawein clan, where the majority of Ubaidah's support came from. In retaliation, the emir attempted to expel Karate and his supports. Abu Ubaidah's actions drew criticism from clan elders who demanded for the emir to "cede power to a new generation."⁷⁰ These internal clashes exacerbated existing financial struggles within Al Shabaab, – brought on by the loss of important port cities – reportedly leading to "massive defections" from the group.⁷¹

In response to the onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, Al Shabaab provided public medical services for Somalis. Al Shabaab opened a dedicated COVID-19 treatment center in Jilib, south of the capital Mogadishu.⁷² In addition to providing specialized care for the respiratory symptoms, Al Shabaab claimed to have a fleet of vehicles ready to collect and transport civilians showing symptoms of COVID-19. Providing these medical and social services is critical to Al Shabaab's political strategy which depends on the support – or reluctant acceptance – of local communities which have sometimes provided both material and information to the militant group.⁷³

After a brief decline in activity in the first half of 2020, Al Shabaab increased its attacks in the second half of the year. Between September and November, the group carried out several high-profile attacks in Kismayo – a city previously considered to be safe. One of these attacks targeted Jubaland's deputy state speaker of parliament.⁷⁴ In December 2020, the United States announced it would withdraw all of its troops from Somalia.⁷⁵ The highly criticized move came at a crucial time, as the Somali government planned to hold parliamentary and presidential elections in the first months of 2021. Coupled with the November 2020 withdrawal of Ethiopian troops, experts argued that the U.S.'s move would create a security vacuum in Somalia from which Al Shabaab would benefit.⁷⁶ Especially concerning was Al Shabaab's increasing number of suicide attacks, which doubled in number from the first to the second

half of 2020.⁷⁷ Al Shabaab's violent activities directly threatened the 2021 Somali election, which the group considered to be an "apostate activity." Observers worried that Al Shabaab's threats would intimidate voters and undermine election results.⁷⁸

Worries about Al Shabaab's activities became heightened after U.S. President Biden took office in January 2021. The new U.S. administration tightened the previous rules of engagement on counterterrorism drone strikes, causing concern amongst senior Somali military officials.⁷⁹ Unable to control Al Shabaab, the Somali government canceled the February 2021 elections due to security concerns. In April 2021, Somali President Farmaajo signed legislation to extend his presidential term. As a result, political infighting and violence increased in Mogadishu between opposition forces and forces aligned with the Farmaajo government.⁸⁰ According to sources, Al Shabaab has taken advantage of the political gridlock by recruiting more fighters to its ranks.⁸¹ In April 2021, prominent international bodies warned of grave consequences for the Somali government if Al Shabaab would be allowed to continue to take advantage of the leadership divisions emerging from the political crisis.⁸²

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

A. LEADERSHIP

Aden Hashi Ayro (Unknown to May 1, 2008): Ayro was the founder and first leader of Al Shabaab. Before establishing Al Shabaab, Ayro was a member of Al Ittihad Al Islamiya (AIAI) from 1991 to 1997. In the late 1990s, Ayro received training at Al Qaeda (AQ) camps in Afghanistan and reportedly met with Osama bin Laden. Sometime later, Ayro returned to Somalia and joined what would be called the ICU. Ayro may have led a loose group of militants before joining the ICU, which suggests that Al Shabaab may have existed in some form before serving as the ICU's military wing. Whatever its foundations, observers agree that Al Shabaab mainly developed as part of the ICU. Ayro helped recruit and train its fighters and oversaw the use of controversially brutal tactics. Though Ayro and his militants fought for the ICU, he had significant ideological differences with the ICU leadership. Ayro argued for connecting the Somali struggle to the global jihadist movement, while ICU leaders preferred a strictly nationalist agenda. He began shifting Al Shabaab toward this globalist ideology after the group became independent from the ICU in 2006. Ayro was killed in a U.S. airstrike on May 1, 2008.⁸³

Hassan Dahir Aweys (Unknown to Unknown): Aweys is sometimes referred to as the spiritual leader of Al Shabaab, but his exact relationship with Al Shabaab is unclear. Aweys led the militant wing of Al Ittihad Al Islamiya. He later joined the ICU and became one of its top leaders, and he reportedly authorized Ayro to lead Al Shabaab as the ICU's militant wing. However, Aweys disagreed with Ayro's use of brutal tactics and his push for joining the global jihadist movement. Aweys fled the country after Ethiopian forces invaded in 2006, leaving Ayro to run Al Shabaab without oversight. Aweys became a leader of the Alliance for the Reliberation of Somalia (ARS), which was opposed by Al Shabaab. Aweys later led Hizbul Islam, a rival group to Al Shabaab that was ultimately absorbed into Al Shabaab. Aweys left Al Shabaab in 2012 and was arrested by the Somali government in June 2013. In 2014, Aweys was transferred from prison to house arrest.⁸⁴

Ahmed Abdi Godane (2008 to September 1, 2014): Godane, also known as Mukhtar Abu Zubeyr, assumed leadership of Al Shabaab after Aden Hashi Ayro was killed in 2008. Under Godane, Al Shabaab aligned itself more closely with AQ in ideology and tactics, leading to fundamental changes within the group.⁸⁵ Godane was the first Al Shabaab leader to publicly and explicitly frame the group's struggle in Somalia as part of a larger global jihad. The group pledged its allegiance to Al Qaeda in 2009, though this pledge was not formally accepted by Al Qaeda until 2012. Godane's

leadership capabilities allowed for the rapid expansion of Al Shabaab's territory from 2008 to 2010. However, his desire for complete control of Al Shabaab's power and violent crackdowns on internal opposition caused him to suffer alienation from the broader Somali Salafi community towards the end of his reign.⁸⁶ Godane was killed in a U.S. air strike on September 1, 2014.⁸⁷

Ahmed Umar Abu Ubaidah (2007 to Present): Abu Ubaidah, also called Abu Diriye, was named as Al Shabaab's new leader in September 2014 shortly after Ahmed Abdi Godane was killed in a U.S. air strike. Abu Ubaidah is from the Gedo region of Somalia and is a member of the minority Dir clan. He joined Al Shabaab in 2007 under Aden Ayro.⁸⁸ Abu Ubaidah was reported to be severely ill in 2018, leading to an internal struggle for the leadership.⁸⁹ In August 2020, Abu Ubaidah handed over temporary power to his deputy, Abukar Aden. It is unclear whether Ubaidah is alive as of June 2021.

Abukar Ali Aden (unknown to present): Aden, also referred to as Ibrahim Afghan or Abukar Adan, is the current provisional leader of Al Shabaab.⁹⁰ According to an announcement by Somalia's National Intelligence Security Agency (NISA), Aden was given partial power of the group around August of 2020.⁹¹ He previously served as Ahmed Umar's deputy leader and principal advisor, as well as the head of Al Shabaab's military unit, the Jabhat.⁹² As of June 2021, Aden is still serving as the leader of Al Shabaab.

Mukhtar Robow (unknown to 2017): Robow served as a founder, spokesman, and second-in-command of Al Shabaab. In 2017, Robow defected and pledged his loyalty to the Somali government. In 2018, he announced his candidacy for a regional presidency. The U.S. has withdrawn its \$5 million reward for Robow's capture, yet he is still the subject of sanctions imposed in 2008 when he was labeled a "specially designated global terrorist."⁹³

Hussein Ali Fiidow (unknown to present): Fiidow has served as a financial administrator for Al Shabaab and has generally avoided public appearances. He is from the Hawiye clan and the Murusade sub-clan of Somalia.⁹⁴ In 2018, some analysts identified Fiidow as the most likely successor to Umar, though the position was ultimately given to Abukar Ali Aden. According to Kenyan intelligence reports, Fiidow allegedly attempted to stage a coup against Umar in early 2018.⁹⁵

B. NAME CHANGES

Al Shabaab has not changed its name since its founding.

C. SIZE ESTIMATES

- 2008: 6,000-7,000 (Stratfor)⁹⁶
- 2013: 5,000 (United Nations)⁹⁷
- 2015: 7,000-9,000 (BBC)⁹⁸
- 2017: 7,000-9,000 (State Department)⁹⁹
- 2019: 7,000-9,000 (The Washington Post)¹⁰⁰
- 2020: 7,000-9,000 (Council on Foreign Relations)¹⁰¹

D. RESOURCES

Al Shabaab has allegedly received funds and training from Al Qaeda-linked foreign jihadists.¹⁰² The group has also obtained funds from Somali diaspora communities, including in the United States. In August 2010, for example, fourteen Americans were indicted for lending material support to and fundraising for Al Shabaab.¹⁰³ The U.S. and Somali governments have also accused other countries of supporting Al Shabaab by providing resources. (For more information, see the "External Influences" section of this profile.)

Inside Somalia, Al Shabaab has stolen equipment from various organizations. It has looted private media stations, for example, to acquire media equipment and to conduct its own broadcasts.¹⁰⁴ Al Shabaab has also allegedly looted U.N. compounds in the city of Baidoa, stealing emergency communication equipment as well as furniture and cars.¹⁰⁵ In November 2011, Al Shabaab banned the presence of nongovernmental organizations and other aid groups in Somalia, seizing their offices within its territory. Al Shabaab reportedly took control of sixteen NGOs and six U.N. compounds in eight different regions. Militants ordered office personnel to leave and subsequently confiscated their equipment.¹⁰⁶

Before 2012, Al Shabaab militants controlled Kismayo, an important port city from which the group received massive profits in charcoal exports. However, in 2012, Al Shabaab was forced out of Kismayo and several other major cities. As a result, the group lost key sources of revenue. In the territories that it does control, Al Shabaab has collected protection fees and taxes from businesses and other organizations. One of these taxes, the zakat, is an annual obligation for Muslims to pay a specific percentage of their wealth to the poor. Al Shabaab heavily exploits the zakat in south-central Somalia, according to U.N. reporting.¹⁰⁷ Other sources of revenue for Al Shabaab have included profits from the ivory and sugar trades.¹⁰⁸ The group also capitalizes on illegal production and export of charcoal, a trade believed to be worth \$10 million per year, despite a U.N. embargo on Somali charcoal.¹⁰⁹ Al Shabaab manages its funds in a highly centralized system, utilizing numerous accounts at various financial systems across Somalia. The funds are reportedly under the control of the shura council, which then designates budgets to Al Shabaab's various departments. According to reports published in 2020, Al Shabaab is operating with a significant budgetary surplus.¹¹⁰

E. GEOGRAPHIC LOCATIONS

Disclaimer: This is a partial list of where the militant organization has bases and where it operates. This does not include information on where the group conducts major attacks or has external influences.

Between 2006 and 2011, Al Shabaab controlled the capital city of Somalia, Mogadishu. During this time, the group also expanded its influence into rural areas of south-central Somalia. Prior to 2012, Al Shabaab controlled swaths of coastal territory including the port city of Kismayo, which provided the group with supplies and significant revenue. However, most of this land was lost by the end of 2012 following AMISOM and Somali military offensives.¹¹¹ While Al Shabaab retreated from and lost control of Mogadishu in late 2011, it frequently conducts attacks in the city.¹¹² Mogadishu suffered its worst attack yet in October 2017, when Al Shabaab militants detonated twin VBIEDs that killed more than 500 people and wounded 300 more.¹¹³

Beyond its activity in Somalia, Al Shabaab has conducted attacks in Kenya, Uganda, and Djibouti. The group was also implicated in a failed bombing in Ethiopia.¹¹⁴ Al Shabaab's first attack outside of Somalia came in 2010, when suicide bombings killed nearly 75 people in the Ugandan capital of Kampala.¹¹⁵ By 2014, Al Shabaab's operations were concentrated in Somalia and northeastern Kenya. From 2015 to 2018, the group did not stage any high-profile attacks outside of this limited region.¹¹⁶ In January 2019, Al Shabaab attacked a hotel in the Kenyan capital of Nairobi, located in the southern part of the country, again displaying its ability to operate in a wider geographic range.¹¹⁷ As of June 2021, Al Shabaab exerted substantive control in large areas of Somalia's southern and central regions. In recent years, Al Shabaab has conducted attacks in the northern region of Puntland, mainly against fighters aligned with the Islamic State.¹¹⁸

STRATEGY

A. IDEOLOGY & GOALS

Al Shabaab's primary goal is to topple the Somali government and establish an Islamic state within Somalia guided by a strict reading of Shariah law.¹¹⁹ The group's first leader, Aden Hashi Ayro, received training in Afghanistan, and he modeled Al Shabaab's principles after those of the Taliban.¹²⁰ Like the Taliban and Al Qaeda, Al Shabaab promotes a jihadist Salafi religious ideology. In the territories under its control, Al Shabaab has carried out punishments in line with Sharia law, such as amputating the hands of thieves and stoning women accused of adultery. The group has also banned items and activities such as music, videos, shaving, and bras.¹²¹ In an effort to rid the country of foreign influences, Al Shabaab shut down the British Broadcasting Corporation's (BBC) transmissions in Somalia and banned its broadcasting in 2010, accusing the station of promoting an anti-Muslim colonialist agenda.¹²²

Al Shabaab opposes the presence of foreign troops in Somalia, chiefly the African Union's peacekeeping mission, known as AMISOM, which is supported by the United Nations and European Union.¹²³ As part of its quest to establish a Somali state based on Islamist principles, Al Shabaab seeks to dislodge AMISOM and other foreign military troops from the country.

In addition to its domestic goals, Al Shabaab has increasingly framed the Somali civil war as part of the global jihadi movement. Al Shabaab has launched international attacks, including in Kenya and Uganda, and it has issued threats against other countries, such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada.¹²⁴ The group's close relationship with Al Qaeda, especially beginning in 2008, significantly influenced the broadening of Al Shabaab's objectives.¹²⁵

Analysts have remarked on Al Shabaab's apparent commitment to environmental protection, including a ban on single-use plastic bags and cutting down trees in territory under its control, public condemnation of Somalia's logging industry, and criticism of U.S. President Barack Obama's record on climate change.¹²⁶

B. POLITICAL ACTIVITIES

While some members of Al Shabaab have reportedly been open to negotiations with the government, the group has never engaged in peaceful political activity.¹²⁷ Further, Al Shabaab has assassinated peace activists who sought to encourage negotiations and reconciliation.¹²⁸

Part of Al Shabaab's political strategy comes from its outreach to the local communities from which it operates. By providing social services and protection to local constituencies the rebel group has managed to achieve much greater integration and cooperation, both in terms of intelligence sharing and material support. For instance, Al Shabaab has supported the communities it operates within by organizing greater sanitation and healthcare services than otherwise available. The provision of healthcare and other public goods has taken on even greater political significance during the 2020 global pandemic. In response to the pandemic, Al Shabaab opened a COVID-19 treatment center in Jilib where there were no government-sponsored healthcare services.¹²⁹ Public-facing actions like these have helped Al-Shabaab accumulate increasing political capital with local constituents as the central government struggles to provide services.

Beyond health care, the efficiency and effectiveness of Al Shabaab's Islamic courts are often favored by citizens, particularly in under governed areas of Northern Somalia.¹³⁰ Al Shabaab's permanent and mobile courts rule on matters ranging from civil to criminal, leading some Somalis to travel to regions held by the group for the sole purpose of petitioning its courts.¹³¹

As Al Shabaab's political and legal influence has grown, some Somali politicians have called for allowing the group to run candidates in Somali elections given their size and support.¹³² In previous years, former Al Shabaab militants defected from the group and expressed desire to run for political office.¹³³ Most notably, founding Al Shabaab member Mukhtar Robow ran for the presidency of Somalia's South West State in 2018. Although he was detained by the Somali government during his campaign, Robow's

actions set off international debates about the implications of an ex-jihadist gaining power through democratic elections.¹³⁴ While Al Shabaab has been prevented from taking part in Somali government until now, it is possible it will seek a hybrid political-military role as pursued by other armed groups such as [Hezbollah](#) in Lebanon.

C. TARGETS & TACTICS

To further its goals of toppling the Somali government and expelling foreign troops, Al Shabaab has targeted government officials and AMISOM forces. Al Shabaab also works to destabilize the Somali government by disrupting democratic elections and eroding public support for international peacekeeping missions.¹³⁵ The group has targeted police, journalists, peace activists, international aid workers, businesses, diplomats, and other civilians. Driven by Salafi ideology, militants have directed violence towards so-called “enemies of Islam” including Somalia’s Christians and Sufi Muslims.¹³⁶

Al Shabaab has engaged in kidnappings and vandalism, and it has used bombings, shootings, and suicide attacks to inflict violence on civilians and soldiers alike. Al Shabaab’s use of suicide attacks, namely with vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs), has risen since 2008.¹³⁷ Analysts attribute the increased use of this tactic to the group’s close relationship with Al Qaeda.¹³⁸ Al Shabaab has especially made use of VBIEDs to maximize civilian casualties in its attacks in major cities, such as Mogadishu. (For more information on the group’s attacks, see the “Major Attacks” section in this profile.)

Additionally, Al Shabaab has allegedly committed rape and extensive acts of violence against women. The group has also engaged in the forced recruitment of fighters, including children.¹³⁹ In territories under its control, Al Shabaab is known to enforce a strict code of behavior for women; those who breach its provisions are often stoned to death.¹⁴⁰

Al Shabaab has repeatedly targeted Kenyan citizens in high-profile attacks in visible locations, such as the Westgate Mall in 2013 and the DusitD2 hotel in 2019. Analysts believe that the group hopes to erode support for the Kenyan government’s military intervention in Somalia.¹⁴¹ Some analysts have also proposed that Al Shabaab’s increased attacks in Kenya are aimed at provoking a crackdown on Somalis living in Kenya, which the group hopes will facilitate militant recruitment.¹⁴² Researchers have noted that Al Shabaab targets Kenya much more frequently than other East African countries participating in AMISOM. This may be due to Kenya’s strong tourism industry and independent media, which provide soft targets and international publicity, respectively.¹⁴³

In addition to acts of physical violence, Al Shabaab also seeks to control the information environment in Somalia. In an effort to rid the country of foreign influences, Al Shabaab shut down the transmissions of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and banned its broadcasting in 2010, accusing the station of promoting an anti-Muslim colonialist agenda.¹⁴⁴ In the same year, Al Shabaab set up the Al Kataib News Channel – in Arabic and English rather than in the Somali language – through which the group has attempted to recruit foreign fighters, threaten nearby countries, and discourage support for AMISOM.¹⁴⁵ Al Shabaab also makes use of Internet outlets to share graphic videos and propaganda promoting the group’s strength, especially to counter claims that the group may be losing ground in its war against AMISOM and the Somali national government.¹⁴⁶ Al Shabaab attracts recruits through the release of videos on social media. Notably, in 2016, the group utilized footage of then-presidential candidate Donald Trump calling for a ban on Muslims entering the U.S. in a nearly hour-long film critiquing the West.¹⁴⁷

While Al Shabaab’s use of terrorism has received the most attention, some scholars and analysts have identified the group’s extensive intelligence gathering networks – often led by women – as being equally, if not more, important.¹⁴⁸ In many regions, women and girls affiliated with the group are able to cross checkpoints, gather intelligence, and ferry explosives without inspection or scrutiny.¹⁴⁹ Security forces tend to pay more attention to men than women, allowing women to gather critical information and

transport weapons that have been instrumental in major attacks.¹⁵⁰ Although women's cooperation with Al Shabaab is often the result of coercion, women continue to play a crucial role in the group's resilience.

MAJOR ATTACKS

Disclaimer: These are some selected major attacks in the militant organization's history. It is not a comprehensive listing but captures some of the most famous attacks or turning points during the campaign.

March 26, 2007: A man named Adam Salam Adam used a car bomb to conduct a suicide attack against Ethiopian soldiers in Mogadishu. Al Shabaab claimed responsibility for the bombing, which allegedly was the city's first suicide attack (~73 killed, unknown wounded).¹⁵¹

October 29, 2008: Al Shabaab conducted five simultaneous suicide car bombings in the cities of Hargeisa and Bosasso, targeting U.N. and government buildings (29+ killed, 36+ wounded).¹⁵²

July 11, 2010: Al Shabaab conducted two simultaneous suicide bombings in Kampala, Uganda. One took place at an Ethiopian restaurant, while the other occurred at a rugby club during the FIFA World Cup final. A group spokesman warned that any country sending its armed forces to Somalia would face similar attacks (74+ killed, 85+ wounded).¹⁵³

April 14, 2013: Al Shabaab bombed court buildings in Mogadishu and then conducted an armed assault inside the buildings. On the same day, Al Shabaab bombed a convoy of Turkish aid workers (30+ killed, unknown wounded).¹⁵⁴

September 21, 2013: Al Shabaab gunmen attacked the Westgate Mall in Nairobi, Kenya, triggering a four-day siege by government forces (~68 killed, 175 wounded).¹⁵⁵

February 21, 2014: Al Shabaab attacked Villa Somalia, the presidential palace compound, with a car bomb before entering the compound to engage in a gunfight with guards (14+ killed, unknown wounded).¹⁵⁶

June 16, 2014: Al Shabaab gunmen attacked several targets in the Kenyan town of Mpeketoni, including a police station, a bank, several hotels, and a hall in which people were viewing the World Cup. The next day, gunmen also conducted an attack on the nearby village of Poromoko (49+ killed, unknown wounded).¹⁵⁷

November 22, 2014: Al Shabaab militants attacked a bus with sixty passengers traveling from Mandera, Kenya to Nairobi. The militants executed passengers who could not recite Quran verses as well as those who resisted the attack (28 killed, unknown wounded).¹⁵⁸

April 2, 2015: Al Shabaab gunmen attacked Garissa University College in Kenya, targeting non-Muslim students (~151 killed, unknown wounded).¹⁵⁹

October 7, 2015: Al Shabaab militants ambushed a car carrying two passengers, killing both. The victims included the nephew of Somali president Hassan Sheikh Mohamoud (2 killed, unknown wounded).¹⁶⁰

January 15, 2016: Roughly 200 Al Shabaab militants attacked an AMISOM base in el-Ade, Somalia, beginning with a suicide bomb attack and continuing with an assault by gunmen. The Kenyan military has resisted releasing information on the extent of the attack, one of the country's greatest military defeats since its independence in 1963. Al Shabaab quickly released propaganda

materials to trumpet the alleged success of its offensive, which observers have deemed a “massacre” (141 killed, unknown wounded).¹⁶¹

October 14, 2017: Al Shabaab militants detonated two truck bombs in busy districts of Mogadishu, severely damaging entire buildings and streets. One of the bombs is believed to have been destined for Mogadishu’s airport but was detonated early by gunfire. This incident is considered to be the deadliest attack since the inception of Al Shabaab’s insurgency in 2006. (512 killed, 312 wounded, 62 missing).¹⁶²

April 1, 2018: Using two suicide car bombs, Al Shabaab militants attacked an African Union peacekeeper base, killing over forty Ugandan troops in the town of Bulamarer (46 killed, unknown wounded).¹⁶³

November 9, 2018: Al Shabaab claimed responsibility for an attack with coordinated car bombs on the headquarters of Somalia’s Criminal Investigations Department and the Sahafi Hotel, a locale frequented by government officials. The bombs were timed to go off around 4pm when pedestrians and traffic flooded the streets (53 killed, hundreds wounded).¹⁶⁴

January 15, 2019: Exactly three years after Al Shabaab’s devastating attack on an AMISOM base in Kenya, militants besieged the five-star DusitD2 hotel in Nairobi, Kenya for 19 hours. The group claimed that the attack was retaliation for U.S. President Donald Trump’s increased airstrikes in Somalia and move of the U.S. embassy in Israel to Jerusalem (21 killed, unknown wounded).¹⁶⁵

February 28, 2019: After detonating a car bomb outside, Al Shabaab militants stormed the Maka Al-Mukarama hotel, killing 29. This hotel in central Mogadishu is frequented by Somali government officials (29 killed, 80+ wounded).¹⁶⁶

March 24, 2019: Al Shabaab militants stormed a government building in Mogadishu after detonating a car bomb. The attack resulted in an hours-long standoff and the deaths of at least 15, including the Somali deputy labor minister (15+ killed, unknown wounded).¹⁶⁷

July 24, 2019: Only hours after a visit by the U.N. envoy to Somalia, a female Al Shabaab suicide bomber detonated inside of the Mogadishu mayor’s office. The mayor, Abdirahman Omar Osman, and 5 other city officials were killed (6 killed, 6 wounded).¹⁶⁸

December 29, 2019: An Al Shabaab truck bomb detonated at a busy security checkpoint in Mogadishu, killing 78 and injuring over a hundred people. The attack, which killed many university students, was described as the worst Al Shabaab attack since the October 2017 bombing that killed over five hundred (78 killed, 100+ wounded).¹⁶⁹

February 2, 2020: Al Shabaab killed 8 Somali soldiers and wounded 13 others when the group attacked a Somali National Army and African Union peacekeeping base in the Shabelle region. Al Shabaab reportedly lost 10 fighters in the attack (8 killed, 13 wounded).¹⁷⁰

October 15, 2020: Al Shabaab militants attacked a Somali military operation and injured dozens more near the town of Afgoye, just northwest of Mogadishu. Al Shabaab claimed that they killed 24 troops, while the Somali military says 13 of its own were killed (~18 killed, dozens wounded).¹⁷¹

December 11, 2020: An Al Shabaab militant killed 14 in a suicide bombing at the entrance to a stadium in the city of Galkayo. Somali Prime Minister Mohamed Roble was scheduled to speak there about the upcoming presidential election (14 killed, unknown wounded).¹⁷²

May 10, 2021: An Al Shabaab suicide bomber killed 6 police officers, including the commander of the Waberi police station, in an attack in Mogadishu (6 killed, unknown wounded).¹⁷³

June 15, 2021: Al Shabaab militants killed over 15 Somali army recruits in a suicide bombing outside of the General Degaban military camp in Mogadishu (15+ killed, 20+ wounded).¹⁷⁴

INTERACTIONS

A. DESIGNATED/LISTED

- Australian National Security List of Terrorist Organizations: August 22, 2009, to present.¹⁷⁵
- E.U. Designated Terrorist Organizations: April 26, 2010, to present.¹⁷⁶
- U.K. List of Proscribed Groups: March 2010 to present.¹⁷⁷
- United Nations Security Council: April 12, 2010, to present.¹⁷⁸
- U.S. State Department Foreign Terrorist Organizations: March 18, 2008, to present.¹⁷⁹

B. COMMUNITY RELATIONS

Since the early 1990s, Somalia has been engulfed in civil war.¹⁸⁰ The deteriorating economic and political conditions allowed Al Shabaab to originally win support from the public by promising to bring stability to a country in turmoil.¹⁸¹ Al Shabaab has established its own governing structures in the territories under its control, providing social services and collecting taxes. The group established a court system, and the efficiency and effectiveness of Al Shabaab's Islamic courts are often favored by citizens, particularly in under governed areas of Northern Somalia.¹⁸² Al Shabaab's permanent and mobile courts rule on matters ranging from civil to criminal, leading some Somalis to travel to regions held by the group for the sole purpose of petitioning its courts.¹⁸³ Additionally, Al Shabaab has tried to cultivate support through the construction and maintenance of infrastructure, as well as the collection of money for distribution to the poor.¹⁸⁴ In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Al Shabaab provided treatment to Somalis and opened a COVID-19 treatment center in Jilib where there were no government-sponsored healthcare services.¹⁸⁵ Additionally, members of Al Shabaab's leadership prioritize the building of relationships with clan elders – the backbone of Somali society – to strengthen recruitment and gain access to territory.¹⁸⁶

C. RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER GROUPS

Al Shabaab interacts both with domestic and transnational militant groups. In Somalia, Al Shabaab's relationship with the short-lived Hizbul Islam alternated between alliance and rivalry, although it tended toward the latter. Between May and July 2009, Al Shabaab and Hizbul Islam cooperated to target TFG forces and secure control of large swaths of southern and central Somalia and most of Mogadishu. Two groups had a shared interest in combatting the TFG, but their cooperation stopped there. Hizbul Islam and Al Shabaab competed for influence over the Somali insurgency and for control of territory. These tensions led to armed clashes between the two groups in late 2009.¹⁸⁷ Hizbul Islam slowly lost ground to Al Shabaab and ultimately chose to merge with Al Shabaab in late 2010 after a series of internal defections.¹⁸⁸ The merger was seen by some observers as a takeover of Hizbul Islam by Al Shabaab.¹⁸⁹ In 2012, disagreements between Al Shabaab militants and its Hizbul Islam members led Hizbul Islam to split from the group.¹⁹⁰ The two factions disagreed about the nature and extent of the organization's goals. Al Shabaab militants fought to internationalize the Somali conflict in the name of global jihad, while Hizbul Islam militants had more nationalist objectives and wanted to focus strictly on Somalia.¹⁹¹ After the split, Hizbul Islam became inactive and renounced violence.¹⁹²

Al Shabaab has also interacted with other domestic groups. Ahlu Sunna Wal Jamaa – a Somali militant organization that was established to protect the country's traditional form of Sufism – began to fight Al

Shabaab in 2008 after the group started destroying Sufi sacred sites.¹⁹³ A third Somali militant group, the Ras Kamboni Movement, was allied with Al Shabaab in the late 2000s. Divisions within Ras Kamboni led one faction to officially merge with Al Shabaab in 2010, while the remainder of Ras Kamboni allied with the Kenyan government to fight Al Shabaab.¹⁹⁴

Al Shabaab also holds ties to militant groups abroad. Since its early years, Al Shabaab has built connections with Al Qaeda and has shared its long-term interest of establishing one Islamic caliphate to unite all Muslims. Al Shabaab and Al Qaeda leaders have trained and fought together.¹⁹⁵ The Al Shabaab-Al Qaeda relationship was strengthened after Ahmed Abdi Godane became Al Shabaab's top leader in 2008. As leader, Godane published a statement that praised Al Qaeda and emphasized the struggle in Somalia as part of a global jihad, a shift from Al Shabaab's previous rhetoric. Al Shabaab also aligned itself more closely with Al Qaeda in ideology and tactics. It began to target civilians through suicide attacks much more frequently, and the organization's leadership grew to include many Al Qaeda members. Al Shabaab leveraged its relationship with Al Qaeda to attract foreign fighters and monetary donations from Al Qaeda's supporters.¹⁹⁶ In 2009, Al Shabaab officially pledged allegiance to Al Qaeda, though this was not officially acknowledged by Al Qaeda until 2012.¹⁹⁷ While both Al Shabaab and Al Qaeda maintain some operational links, the groups operate largely independent from each other.

In 2015, the Islamic State (IS) released a video encouraging Al Shabaab, as East Africa's most prominent jihadi group, to pledge allegiance to IS. Al Shabaab's leadership rejected the offer and reaffirmed its affiliation with AQ, a decision that provoked a schism among its membership and created a rivalry between AQ and IS sympathizers in Somalia.¹⁹⁸ Despite this refusal to pledge allegiance to IS, Al Shabaab is frequently misidentified as an IS affiliate since it shares a similar though not identical flag. Militants supportive of IS splintered from Al Shabaab and founded a new group allied with IS, Jahba East Africa (also known as the East African Front), in early 2016. This group actively recruits from the ranks of Al Shabaab.¹⁹⁹ Al Shabaab and Jahba East Africa are thought to compete for supporters and territory in Somalia.²⁰⁰

In 2016, Somali government officials claimed that Al Shabaab was backing Boko Haram, a Salafi militant group based in Nigeria. Its support for Boko Haram has included training in suicide attack methods, the use of weaponry, and other tactics and capabilities. Both Al Shabaab and Boko Haram share a similar goal: the imposition of strict Shariah law in Somalia and Nigeria, respectively.²⁰¹ Al Shabaab is also believed to coordinate in a similar fashion with Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), which operates primarily in Algeria.²⁰² In addition to these collaborations, various affiliate groups have sworn allegiance to Al Shabaab, including the Kenyan militant organization Al Hijra (also called the Muslim Youth Center).²⁰³

An Islamist militant group operating in Mozambique since late 2017, founded under the name Ahlu Sunnah Wa-Jama ("Followers of the Prophet") is often called "Al Shabaab" by locals, but no link to the Somali Al Shabaab of that name is known.²⁰⁴

D. STATE SPONSORS AND EXTERNAL INFLUENCES

Al Shabaab has allegedly received support from several African and Middle Eastern countries, most notably Eritrea. The U.S. and Somali governments have accused Eritrea of supporting Al Shabaab through weapons and funding, although Eritrea has denied these allegations.²⁰⁵ While the Eritrean government does not share Al Shabaab's ideology, it is believed to have supported the militant organization to counter Ethiopian influence in Somalia.²⁰⁶ In 2017, the U.N. Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea concluded that there was insufficient evidence to prove a link between Eritrea and Al Shabaab.²⁰⁷

Since at least 2018, several Gulf states have increased their provision of training and weapons to various armed factions operating in Somalia, including Al Shabaab. As part of a growing rivalry, both Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have sought to use armed groups like Al Shabaab to pressure each other into abandoning or scaling back commercial contracts in the region.²⁰⁸ In 2019, the Qatari Ambassador to Somalia allegedly claimed that the 2019 Al Shabaab bombing of the Bosaso port in Somalia was expected to push the UAE into abandoning a lucrative shipping contract that the Qatari government hoped to acquire.²⁰⁹

The U.N. has also claimed that Djibouti, Iran, Syria, Libya, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia have provided Al Shabaab with machine guns, missiles, and training. Hezbollah, an armed group operating in Lebanon, is also believed to have given aid to Al Shabaab. This support from these state and non-state actors violates the 1992 arms embargo imposed on Somalia.²¹⁰

MAPS

- Global Al Qaeda
- Somalia

¹ Chris Harnisch, “The Terror Threat from Somalia: The Internationalization of Al Shabaab,” Critical Threats Project (American Enterprise Institute, February 12, 2010), <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/the-terror-threat-from-somalia-the-internationalization-of-al-shabaab>.

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