

The concept of "terrorism" is far from being strictly defined under international law<sup>1</sup>.

A paradigmatic case of the political nature of the concept of terrorism in eastern Africa is offered by the recent hearing of Ginbot 7 leader Berhanu Nega before the European Parliament in November 2016: the person invited in Brussels to discuss possible exit routes to the political crisis and ensuing state of emergency in Ethiopia was leading an armed movement that stages attacks against government installations and military garrisons in Ethiopian territory and is designated as a terrorist group by Addis Ababa. The European Parliament was not of the same opinion, however, since it officially asked Ethiopia in May to "close the case against Berhanu Nega" and "cease using the Anti-Terrorism Act to suppress peaceful forms of protest and dissent"<sup>2</sup>.

Given the inability to cover exhaustively all organizations that are labelled as terrorist by governments in the region, this Instant Study will focus on those groups that are considered to be on the top terrorist list in the Horn of Africa region: Al Shabaab - officially part of Al Qaeda's international network - and the Somali affiliations of the Islamic State (IS).

### **Al Shabaab: structure and modus operandi**

Al Shabaab grew up and emerged as a leading member of the Somali insurgency in connection with the invasion of Somalia by Ethiopia at the time of the Islamic Courts. In 2010, Al Shabaab was control of almost the whole central-southern Somalia, building a complex structure of governance in territories under its control. The military intervention of AMISOM forces and the death of Ahmad Godane in 2014, however, have gradually led to the fragmentation of the movement, now divided into three macro-blocks with greater operational autonomy: the first faction is located in the north of the country, in the Galgala Mountains under the jurisdiction of Puntland; the second group is stationed in the central regions and in the capital Mogadishu; while the third section is placed in southern Somalia and in the "no-man's lands" at the crossroads with the Kenyan border.

The northern and central sections of Al Shabaab have maintained a predominantly national agenda and act in close coordination, as showed by the rapid displacement of militia from central Somalia to Puntland during the offensive against the local cell of the Islamic State (IS ) in Galgala. In the south of the country, however, the agenda of the movement was deeply affected by the process of state building in Jubbaland and the contemporary Kenyan military intervention, which favoured the regionalization of its political manifesto. The widening of the scope of Al Shabaab is not a news: in 2011, a franchise known as Al-Hijra began to recruit manpower in order to spread the Jihad in Kenya, carrying out spectacular attacks such as the assault in Mpeketoni in 2014<sup>3</sup>.

---

1 The impossibility to find a common understanding led member states to exclude the crime of terrorism from the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court. For a general review, see: Reuven Young, "Defining Terrorism: The Evolution of Terrorism as a Legal Concept in International Law and its Influence on Definition in Domestic Legislation", *Boston College International and Comparative Legal Review*, 23, 2006.

2 European Parliament Resolution of 18 May 2017 on Ethiopia, notably the case of Dr. Merera Gudina. Vedi: <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//NONSGML+TA+P8-TA-2017-0219+0+DOC+PDF+V0//EN>

3 For an in-depth analysis of Al Shabaab and its affiliates in Kenya, see: David Anderson, Jacob Mc-Knight, "Understanding Al Shabaab: Clan, Islam and Insurgency in Kenya", *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 3, 2015.

In 2013, Ahmed Godane also increased the number of officers in charge of propaganda in Swahili language in order to encourage the entry of non-Somali recruits and ordered the creation of two additional units responsible for the foreign operations of the movement.<sup>4</sup>

One of them, Jaysh Ayman, consists predominantly of non-Somali fighters and is called upon to handle military operations in East Africa, but has so far concentrated its activity mostly in the Kenyan county of Lamu, taking advantage of its proximity to the faction's sanctuary in the Boni forest.<sup>5</sup>

The modus operandi of the various branches of Al Shabaab is featured by a common matrix, characterized by the combined use of attacks against civilian infrastructures such as hotels and restaurants, improvised explosive devices (IED) against military convoys and conventional operations on a larger scale against government or AMISOM bases. In June, for example, the northern wing of the movement climbed to the chronicles for attacking a military base in Puntland at Af-Urur, about 100 KM west of Bosasso. Here, a commando of about one hundred fighters killed more than 60 soldiers and seized war material, marking one of the most serious defeats in the recent history of Puntland's armed forces. The wing in central Somalia picked up another major victory on July 30, when an Islamist commando attacked a Ugandan military convoy, causing the deaths of 23 soldiers and causing Ugandan detachment in the area to reposition them to protect the road between Mogadishu and the port of Barawe. Al Shabaab took advantage of the evacuation of AMISOM troops to regain the town of Leego, a strategic link in the transportation network between the capital and the Bay and Bakool provinces. Al Shabaab's conduct along the Kenyan border is similar.

The Kenyan counties of Mandera, Lamu and Garissa have been in the last months shaped by repeated attacks with IED, the targeted killing of civilians and conventional operations on a larger scale such as the one that took place on July 5, when 200 fighters engaged the Kenyan security forces near a police station in Lamu<sup>6</sup>.

Al Shabaab's activism has been counterbalanced in recent months by the dual military and diplomatic offensive of the federal government, which has focused mainly on the region around Mogadishu. On the one hand, the federal army conducted a campaign of "cleansing" custom points established by the Islamists along the roads between the capital and the countryside, while also conducting selective killings against senior members of the group in collaboration with US commandos. Potentially more problematic for the fate of the Islamist movement is the on-going negotiation between the federal government and the Al Shabaab faction of Mukhtar Robow, the former spokesman who retreated in his rear base in Bay and Bakool after a dispute with the top hierarchy of the movement in 2013. The United States dropped a \$ 5 million reward for Robow's arrest in mid-June at request of the Somali federal president, who hopes to bring Robow's 300 hundreds strong militia on the government's side and cut communication routes between northern and southern Somalia. The potential setback of Robow's surrender have prompted other Al Shabaab factions to head en masse towards his sanctuary in the Bay and Bakool and catch him, but so far without success.

The war against terrorism launched by President Abdullahi Mohamed has also taken on a financial character. The President is trying to cut off Al Shabaab's economic base by hitting its main supporters within Somalia and abroad.

---

4 Al Shabaab as a Trans-National Security Threat, IGAD Security Sector Program and Sahan Foundation, March 2016, pp. 19-24.

5 Christopher Anzalone, "The Resilience of Al Shabaab", *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 9, No. 4, April 2016.

6 Caleb Weiss, "Shabaab steps up attacks in Kenya", *Long War Journal*, 6 June 2017. See: <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/06/shabaab-steps-up-attacks-in-kenya.php>

In this respect, the decision to make void several contracts signed by the former government with some tax-levied companies is part of the overall strategy to centralize surplus extraction prerogatives in the hands of the federal government and reduce profit margins that may be captured by private intermediaries of uncertain loyalty.

### **Social contract and territorial control.**

One of the factors that have hitherto favoured the longevity of Al Shabaab has been its ability to intercept the interest of the diaspora and the local business community in maintaining the status quo – read, to prevent the establishment of a strong government able to collect taxes – in return for financial support. The Islamist movement has built a strong network of loyalty in the areas under its control, using a *mix* of concessions and coercion to meet its immediate military needs while legitimizing itself as an alternative ruler.

A litmus test of these dynamics is provided by the dispute that took place in Bosasso when the Puntland administration introduced a new commercial transaction fee, stirring up the vibrant protests of local merchants. What may appear like an ordinary dispute between the public and private sector is, in fact, a piece of the wider mosaic of the federal government's financial counter-insurgency.

The President of Puntland introduced the tax after a high-level meeting on security in Mogadishu, justifying the measure as a federal order whose proceeds will be re-invested entirely in the anti-terrorism campaign<sup>7</sup>. According to local newspapers, the refusal of traders to pay the tax is not only due to profit-driven concerns, however, but is the result of Al Shabaab's explicit directives to Bosasso traders who already pay taxes to the movement. The struggle between the government and Al Shabaab for control of Bosasso's economic wealth has a double value: on the one hand, it strengthens the Islamist movement's legitimacy before its constituencies, since Al Shabaab claims to act in defence of traders against the claims of a greedy and distant administration; on the other hand, it reveals the attempt to monopolize the proceeds from a rich commercial hub that, since 2006, has gradually overtaken Mogadishu as the main market for urban products from Galkayo and Beledweine thanks to the proximity to export markets in the Arabian Peninsula<sup>8</sup>.

A second example of how Al Shabaab combines the struggle for resource control with the search for consensus is offered by the controversy that emerged in July on use of the Somali shillings in local markets in northern-central Somalia. The issuance of (il-)legal Somali shillings has been one of the main devices through which the federal government and the Puntland administration have sought to increase spending in support of the military: Mogadishu in March announced that it would start re-print Somali Shillings with the assistance of the International Monetary Fund; the Puntland authorities, for their part, have printed counterfeit shillings since 2015 to pay the salary of the armed forces<sup>9</sup>. The Puntland government has resorted to the same strategy in May to meet the grievances of its own soldiers, who had staged street protests to demand payment of arrears. Following the issuance of banknotes for several billion Somali shillings, however, the Al Shabaab imposed a ban on the currency in the territories under its control, extending the order to strategic markets such as Bosasso, Galkayo and Beledweyne.

---

7 Tax Dispute Sours Puntland Market, Sahal News, 13 July 2017. See: <http://www.sahalnews.com/?p=106849>

8 R. Marchal, "The Puntland State of Somalia. A Tentative Social Analysis", *HAL*, 2010, p. 20. See: <https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-01044642/document>

9 United Nations Security Council, Letter dated 7 October 2016 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee Pursuant to Resolution 751 and 1907 concerning Somalia and Eritrea, S 2006/919, 31 October 2016, p. 94.

The move can be framed as an attempt to deprive the Puntland administration of financial leverage to support the counter-insurgency campaign, but also allows Al Shabaab to act as the guardian of local traders' interests against the inflationary policy of government authorities.

The management of the food crisis in the Bay and Bakool regions in the first half of 2017 is another example of the entanglement between search for consensus and enforcement of territorial control. The armed group confirmed the tactics it used in the past by denying access to international and federal humanitarian organizations, but at the same time did set up its own parallel humanitarian program through donation from the diaspora and ad-hoc taxes on the wealthiest members of the community.

This strategy is deemed by Al Shabaab to be coherent with its immediate military needs: it prevents a potential exit-flow of intelligence information but at the same time is aimed at preventing large scale migrations to areas served by aid programs, since depopulation would facilitate air bombing by the coalition<sup>10</sup>. In addition, Al Shabaab shows that it has the organizational skills to cope independently with famine, thereby presenting itself as a credible alternative to the government.<sup>11</sup>

In the south of the country, however, the situation is more complex. The loss of Kisimaio to the Kenyan army forced Al Shabaab to revise its livelihood strategy by replacing the proceeds from Kisimaio's harbour with customs fees on smuggling between Kenya and Somalia. This move has further strengthened the relationship with the network of Somali-Kenyan traders along the border, which are now considered as one of the main sources of finance for the group. The social base the Islamist movement's southern wing looks at for recruitment is much wider than in the north.

The rhetoric used in May 2017 by Al Shabaab's spoker-person Ali Rage during the inauguration ceremony of a new group of fighters reflects the attempt to broaden the horizon of the group and exploit the historical grievances of the wider Muslim community in Eastern Africa against settlement programs promoted by the Kenyan state since independence. The orator makes reference to "the situation of Muslims East Africa (...) and the humiliation and suffering they are faced with", then argues that the city of Mpeketoni – which was hit by a large scale attack by Al Shabaab in 2014 – "used to be a Muslim land (...) then the Kuffar transferred the Christians and settled them (...). As a consequence, today you would come across a hundred churches and only one mosque"<sup>12</sup>.

Rage also cited one of the most controversial episodes in the history of the Kenyan-Somali community – the massacre committed by the Kenyan army against Somali clans in Wagalla in 1984 – thereby framing the Islamist guerrilla as a response to the historical abuses committed by Nairobi against the Somali community along the border.

### **Competition within the jihadist network.**

Another critical factor that explains Al Shabaab's resilience over the years has been the ability to monopolize the field of the opposition to the various Somali governments through co-optation or elimination of any other group that would dare to maintain its autonomy within the galaxy of the Islamist insurgency. The reaction of the movement to the emergence of factions that pledged allegiance to the Islamic State (IS) made no exception: every individual suspected of

---

10 "Instruments of Pain (III): Conflict and Famine in Somalia", *Crisis Group Africa Briefing* No. 125, 9 May 2017, p. 4.

11 Christopher Anzalone, "Building an Insurgent State in Somalia?", *Informed Comment*, 15 March 2011. At: <https://www.juancole.com/2011/03/anzalone-building-an-insurgent-state-in-somalia.html?amp&amp>

12 The integral video with English translation is available at: <http://jihadology.net/2017/05/22/new-video-message-from-%E1%B8%A5arakat-al-shabab-al-mujahidins-shaykh-ali-ma%E1%B8%A5mud-rage-an-analysis-of-events-part-1-emigrants-graduation-ceremony-address/> Last access: 11 Agosto 2017.

sympathy to the IS has been prosecuted or executed, or is otherwise included in the organization's most wanted list.

Defections from Al Shabaab to the Islamic State can be motivated by various factors, such as the growing disaffection against harsh internal discipline or the hope of climbing the hierarchy within the Islamist militancy network. The IS alternative has somewhat affected the unity of Al Shabaab, albeit not in a serious manner yet.

In April, a group of fighters in the area on the border with Kenya who pledged allegiance to IS were immediately executed or forced to escape through the border, but the Kenyan army intercepted a video prepared by another Al Shabaab member where he encouraged his comrades to join Dini ya Kiislamu Super Power (DKSP), another local faction apparently affiliated to IS<sup>13</sup>.

The point of reference of the Islamic State in Somalia seems currently to be Abdulqadir Mumin, a former preacher with British passport. Located in northern Somalia, its formation caught the attention of the media in October 2016, following the short occupation of the coastal town of Qandala, on the Gulf of Aden. After a while, the group resurfaced again in early 2017 with two attacks in Bosasso and another against an AMISOM convoy in Mogadishu. The genesis of the IS in northern Somalia highlights the importance of internal political dynamics in affecting the ups and down of the Somali jihadist galaxy. The capture of Qandala and the persistent presence of an IS cell in the Bosasso area are the result of the complicity that Abdulqadir Mumin has been able to convey among the members of its sub-clan, the Ali Salebaan, and the frictions between the Ali Salebaan and the Puntland administration. The siege of Qandala in October 2016, for example, took place in conjunction with the peace talks between Puntland's president and the former governor of Bari, Absidamen Gallan, an Ali Salebaan who turned to armed opposition after being dismissed by the governorate. Although there is no evidence of direct contacts between the two militias, it may be plausible that Gallan exploited his contacts in the area to facilitate Mumin's action and negotiate his return into the ranks of Puntland from a position of strength. Mumin has also been able to count on the collaboration of another member of the Ali Salebaan, the former pirate and smuggler Mohamoud "Yullux", who gave him access to the Yemeni arms market. Although the war in Yemen and the flow of arms and fighters along the two banks of the Gulf of Aden has opened new spaces of action for terrorists in Northern Somalia, these episodes remind us that the local dimension of Somali politics is a fundamental variable in the competition between Islamist armed groups for control of souls and territory.

---

13 Jamestown Foundation, "Kenya: On Alert as al-Shabaab Factions Clash", *Terrorism Monitor* Vol.15, No. 9, 2017. Available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/591578274.html>