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Expert Talk



Al-Shabaab's Tentacles Extend West

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In recent months the US-Pakistan offensive on al-Qa'ida and the Taliban in the tribal areas of Pakistan has intensified significantly. With the future of that terrorist sanctuary now in question, Waziristan in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan has been diminished in many would-be jihadists eyes as the premier destination for those seeking to join al-Qa'ida. The dimming of Waziristan has coincided with the elevation of Somalia as an alternative destination and hub for global jihad.

Al-Shabaab

The al-Qa'ida-linked al-Shabaab movement is the key terrorist group operating in Somalia. The group was formed from the former youth wing of the defunct Union of Islamic Courts and is ideologically and operationally aligned with al-Qa'ida. It controls substantial portions of Somali territory, where it has been fighting the Transitional Federal Government and the African Union Mission in Somalia. It is also implementing a severe form of Islamic law. Men, women and children have been beaten, butchered or otherwise maimed for perceived non-compliance with the group's Taliban-like sharia code. Recent Shabaab activity in this respect includes organising a makeshift dentist's office on the street where locals with 'un-Islamic' gold or platinum teeth have them yanked out in medieval fashion or suffer death by hit squad.

The toll of the violence and instability on locals has been significant. Since the start of 2007, the fighting in Somalia has killed more than 18 000 people and displaced 1.2 million civilians. Since May of this year alone, over 100 000 civilians have been forced to flee their homes due to the shelling of civilian areas. And according to the UNHCR, the UN refugee agency, some 300 000 have fled to camps in Dadaab in Kenya. For al-Shabaab, the instability sowed by conflict and state failure provides it with a safe haven for its terrorist activities, which have international dimensions.

While the Somali jihadist group operates mainly in a localized context, it has become increasingly globalised. Radicalisation and recruitment in Somali diaspora communities have been taking place since the group developed inroads into the US, Europe and Australia. Two prized commodities for any terrorist group are people and money, and al-Shabaab seems to have been adept at garnering both from Western countries.

Al-Shabaab is thought to include several hundred foreign jihadists among its members, mostly from Pakistan and Afghanistan. But there have been videos of training camps inside Somalia where British, Scandinavians, and Americans are allegedly being trained. The "martyrdom" of an American-Somali man, Shirwa Ahmed, who blew himself up in the Somali region of Puntland fighting with the Shabaab, is indicative of this development. Shirwa Ahmed is thought to be the first US suicide terrorist.

Al-Shabaab is adept at using new media to connect with Somali communities around the world. A group of young men radicalized in Minneapolis who joined al-Shabaab in Somalia used Facebook to reach out to other possible recruits within their social networks. Al-Shabaab appears to make more deliberate use of the Internet to recruit and gain support around the diaspora. While its communications networks are highly decentralized, it does make official statements and disseminates them through select channels. Al-Shabaab stated recently that there is an "official party that is authorized to release statements, voice messages, and videos of the movement. This is the Sada al-Jihad Media Center that belongs to the Global Islamic Media Front," a frequent media distributor of official Al-Qa'ida statements. While the audio and video often tout the group's claims on the battlefield, they also show training and camaraderie, to aid recruitment of young Somalis in the West.

Al-Shabab has been especially active in the Stockholm suburb of Rinkeby, where a large number of Sweden's Somali population resides. A youth leader at a Rinkeby community center recently told a Swedish broadcaster that he saw four young men recruit Somalis in a public square. "They talked about jihad and what was happening in Somalia. That it was right to go there, and that they'd help you out with a plane ticket if you needed it." There have been instances of Swedish-Somali men who have

travelled to Somalia to blow themselves up for al-Shabaab. While this development is worrisome, the threat of these fighters returning to their host countries in the West to carry out attacks, is perhaps a worse scenario for Western security services.

There is a risk that those radicalised recruits with foreign passports could come back to their home countries and use their training to carry out attacks. This scenario seems to be already coming to fruition. A cell linked to Al-Shabaab in Australia was responsible for the most prominent terrorist plot in that country's history. Young Australian citizens of Somali and Lebanese origin planned to carry out suicide attacks on Holsworthy Army barracks in Sydney. Two of the terrorists had travelled to Somalia to train with al-Shabaab. The other two were unable to travel so turned their attention to their home country. Members of the Australian cell had made calls to Somalia requesting the approval of a Muslim cleric and seeking a fatwa for the planned suicide attack to lend credibility to support their "martyrdom." Al-Shabaab has denied operational links with the Australians, indicating that the homegrown threat may be present and growing.



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Al-Shabaab is not only sourcing recruits from around the world, but perhaps more importantly it has also developed a significant financial support network that extends outward from Somalia to the diaspora abroad. For example, the spiritual leader and roving ambassador of the group, Xasaan Xuseen, recently travelled to Bellevue mosque in Goteborg, Sweden, as part of what is believed to be a fundraising and recruitment campaign. A substantial portion of the funds for al-Shabaab most likely use hawala networks in Kenya. An estimated sum of up to \$3 million passes through Nairobi's Somali enclave Eastleigh each year.

It has become clear that al-Qai'da's arm in the horn of Africa has become increasingly internationalised. Every institution with counterterrorism responsibilities in government and the private sector should take account of these fluid developments to tailor appropriate responses. The implication of homegrown terrorism and terrorist financing taking place in more Western countries, due to the conflict in Somalia may become a more prominent part of the global jihadist movement. Countries with significant Somali diaspora communities should immediately engage community leaders to help stop the recruitment and financing pipeline that is developing. The logistic supply chain for al-Qaida's affiliate in Somalia runs through many Western countries. While government has its obvious role to play, the private sector too must do its part to defend against the aviation, telecommunications and financial systems being used to support terrorism at home or abroad.