



SC0207 | 2018  
03/07

**EGIC**  
Euro-Gulf  
Information  
Centre

## STRATEGIC CONTAGION SERIES

# Islamist Contagion in Somalia

By Nikola Zukalová

After more than two decades of bloody war, Somalia remains teetering on the brink. Its strategic location, across from the Arabian Peninsula, heightens the country's fragility — rendering it prone to the political crosswinds from the Middle East. Although ethnically diverse, Somalia is among the most religiously homogenous states in the world with some 99% of the population identifying themselves as Sunni Muslim. Traditionally clan-based, Somali society used to rely more on customary law rather than religious rules and the established Sufi groups tended to shy away from politics... until recently. Reacting to the emergence of strands of political Islam, Sufis are now more engaged than ever. As are their religio-political — radical Salafist — opponents.

The proliferation of Islamism in other parts of the Middle East introduced Political Islam to the country. Egyptian scholars from Al-Azhar University founded the first Institute of Islamic Studies in Somalia (1953) and brought with them the Arabic language and the ideology of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. At present, the Muslim Brotherhood is well established, and their influence is growing due to the increasing engagement of Turkey and Qatar. But the story does not end there.

### **RESPONDING TO THE GOVERNMENT'S POLITICAL RETARDATION**

Islamist movements gained public support due to their opposition to the military regime of Siad Barre — politically oppressive and economically inefficient. Somalia's ceding of Ogaden in the 1977/8 war against Ethiopia, significantly weakened the military and aggravated popular discontent with the regime. It also helped Somali Islamist movements further organise and recruit. This generated momentum to merge several Islamist groups and create Al-Itihaad Al-Islamiyya (AIAI), a radical Salafist movement opposed to traditional Sufism and clan structures. AIAI sought to establish an Islamic state in

the Horn of Africa. Some of AIAI's members would later emerge as leading figures in the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) — re: Hassan Dahir Aweys — and Al-Shabaab — re: Ahmed Abdi Godane. Islamists' popularity was primarily due to pragmatic not religious reasons. The embattled regime adopted suppressive measures to force Islamists underground and abroad, mainly to the Arab Gulf, which intensified the discontent and increased popular support for the Islamists. Somalia's flirtation with militant Islamism began in earnest towards the end of the 1980s. It would have been a moot point if not for a specific chain of events after the overthrow of Barre in 1991 — the descent to lawlessness and external interventions (notably: the United Nations, United States, Ethiopia).

### **ISLAMISTS AND THE CIVIL WAR**

From their Lugh base, adjacent to the Ethiopian border, the AIAI radicalised ethnic Somalis in Ethiopia. This resulted in a spate of terrorist attacks which prompted Ethiopia to intervene in Somalia in 1996 with the objective of targeting and weakening the AIAI. The Islamists then sought support of the population through filling the vacuums left by state collapse — providing security and other, more social, services. Religious orthodoxy gained increased influence as it offered an alternative to traditional power-centres: clans, emergent criminal elements (i.e. warlords) and assisted in streamlining opposition to foreign intervention forces. It was during this period that the Islamic Sharia Courts were popping-up across the country and rapidly-morphing former AIAI militants organised into functioning militias. The Ifka Halane Court in western Mogadishu, led by Aweys (former official of the AIAI) became the base for jihadi Islam. Among the radical wings of the Courts was Hizbul Shabaab led by Aden Hashi Ayro. Both, Aweys and Ayro, were linked to Al-Qaeda and the 1998 US Embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania. In 2004, some of these Courts formed the ICU, a union of Sharia courts united with Islamists as a rival administration to the Transitional Federal Government (TFG).

### **FROM THE ICU TO EVEN MORE RADICAL MILITIAS**

When, in 2006, most of southern Somalia, including Mogadishu, fell to the ICU, Ethiopia — sensing an emergent threat — again intervened; this time to help Somalia's TFG regain control. Ethiopia's intervention was seen by many Somalis as an invasion by a non-Muslim country, backed by the US, which supported the warlords to contain extremist groups. However, the US involvement generated the opposite effect. The ICU garnished local support precisely because it defeated the US-supported warlords and brought a semblance of order to Somalia for the first time since 1991. Nevertheless, the ICU was also suspected of harbouring Al-Qaeda operatives, therefore international intervention was necessary.

After relinquishing almost all its territorial gains, the ICU fragmented. Some of its moderate members fled to Eritrea and Djibouti, while more militant ones formed new radical Islamist groups, such as: Harakat Al-Shabaab Al-Mujahideen (Al-Shabaab); Hizbul Islam, led by Aweys (which merged into Al-Shabaab in 2010 and split again in 2012 to renounce violence and continue as a political party) and the Ras Kamboni Brigades, part of which merged into Al-Shabaab, whereas the other faction fights against it. While foreign intervention ended the extremist ICU rule, it also provoked an insurgency led by even more radical groups, waging war against the Federal Government and foreign forces, particularly the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM). Islamist ideology also penetrated the country's politics when the TFG formed a unity government with the successor of the ICU—the Alliance for the Re-Liberation of Somalia (2009) and former ICU leader, Sharif Sheikh Ahmed, became President of Somalia. The election of Hassan Sheikh Mohamud (2012) and Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed (2017) as President of the Federal Government of Somalia, was perceived as a step towards a more moderate, although slightly Islamist, leadership.

### **AL-SHABAAB AND AL-QAEDA**

Al-Shabaab is an East African branch of Al-Qaeda which has been waging jihad against Somalia's Federal Government and allied international forces for over a decade. Despite advances against the group, driving it from major cities, including Mogadishu, it remains active and relatively strong in rural areas, mainly in the south and central zones.

Al-Shabaab continues to carry out deadly terrorist attacks across Somalia, targeting AMISOM and pro-government forces with civilians often victims of collateral damage. The Mogadishu truck bombing (14 October 2017), the third deadliest attack recorded in history leaving almost 600 dead, is a stark reminder of its potency. Since 2010, Al-Shabaab began operating abroad — mainly in Kenya, Uganda and Ethiopia. Since 2017, Al-Shabaab has stepped up its rhetoric against Kenya and intensified the number of attacks in the neighbouring country, calling on Kenyan jihadists to form an Islamist army. Al-Shabaab seems to be strengthening and has regained control of some of the lost areas in the south. Their attacks in Kenya and Somalia are unlikely to cease.

The group was designated as a terrorist group by the UK, US and the UAE among others. However, neither Qatar nor Turkey have followed suit. For years, Qatar has been suspected of channelling support for Al-Shabaab through Eritrea. A Qatari-linked terrorist, Mohammed Ali Saeed Atm, served as one of Al-Shabaab's senior

officials. Abdul Rahman Al-Nuaimi, a terrorist financier and facilitator, who held senior positions in official Qatari organisations — including founder of the government-linked Sheikh Eid bin Mohammed Al-Thani Charitable Association, President of the Qatar Football Association and a board member of Qatar Islamic Bank — stands accused of transferring millions of dollars to various Al-Qaeda affiliates, including Al-Shabaab. Despite sanctions against Al-Nuaimi from the European Union, UN, UK, and Turkey, he continues to live freely in Doha and enjoys friendly relations with Qatari senior figures, such as Qatar's Prime Minister Abdullah Al-Thani, who was photographed with Al-Nuaimi at his son's wedding in April 2018.

Rumours are floating around that the group is loosening its ties to Al-Qaeda but in April 2018 the group released a series of videos confirming enduring allegiance to Ayman Al-Zawahiri. Two videos contained rare speeches from Al-Shabaab's elusive leader, Ahmad Umar (Abu Ubaidah), where he spoke about Syrian jihad and advised his fellow Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) affiliates in Yemen. That Abu Ubaidah addressed Al-Qaeda members outside of Somalia implies his increased importance in the global Al-Qaeda network. Moreover, titles that Abu Ubaidah used in his speeches: Emir of the Taliban, Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada — "Commander of the Faithful" — and for Al-Qaeda's leader, Al-Zawahiri — "our father emir" — shows his support for Al-Qaeda's alliance with the Taliban.

Despite the few members of Al-Shabaab that have defected from the group, pledging bayah (an oath of allegiance) to the Islamic State (IS), the group remains loyal to Al-Qaeda and its security service, Amniyat, continues to hunt down those who betray it for IS.

## **ISLAMIC STATE IN SOMALIA**

Over the past months, the Islamic State in Somalia has stepped up its attacks in the country. The main faction of IS in Somalia, led by Abdulqadir Mumin (who defected from Al-Shabaab with 20 fighters in late 2015), operates mostly in the Bari mountains—northern Puntland. The group is very small compared to Al-Shabaab and has lost significant numbers of its previously reported 200-300 members. Currently, a mere 70 fighters are affiliated to IS. Yet, it should not be discounted. It carried out its first ever terrorist attack in Somalia in April 2016. A year later (May 2017), it carried out its first suicide bombing and seized Qandala, a port town, for a short time. There are other [ sleeper ] cells in central and southern Somalia, carrying out attacks in Mogadishu and Afgooye, however it remains unclear if there is any coordination with Mumin's faction.

The number of fighters loyal to the Islamic State in East Africa is a known unknown. But as the group loses more and more ground in the Middle East it is likely to shift to Africa. Although, the group seems to be more established in the Maghreb and central Africa, the increase in attacks claimed by the IS in Somalia indicates that the group is seeking to establish itself in the country, despite losing the competition to Al-Qaeda-loyal Al-Shaabaab. Also, the first airstrikes by the US military conducted against the Islamic State in Somalia (2017), point to the increased activity of the group in the East African country. All in all, things in Somalia — and the wider region — are likely to get much worse before they get better.