

# Peacebuilding amid Terrorism: Fragile Gains in Somalia

Oct 27, 2009



Brief Analysis

**P**olicyWatch #1594 is the second in a two-part series discussing trends in Somalia. This piece focuses on peacebuilding efforts and Somalia's ties to terrorism, while [PolicyWatch #1593](#) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=3131>) addresses the country's growing insurgency.

On September 14, 2009, U.S. special forces killed Saleh Ali Saleh Nabhan, a senior leader of al-Qaeda's East Africa cell, near the town of Barawe on the coast of southern Somalia. Although the death of Nabhan will seriously disrupt and degrade the capabilities of al-Qaeda and its support groups, without political progress and peacebuilding in Somalia, targeting the terrorist group's leadership will have a short-lived strategic impact.

## Training Camps and Foreign Fighters

With leadership support from Harakat al-Shabab and Hizb al-Islamiyah -- two Somali Islamist movements -- al-Qaeda's East Africa cell has long used Somalia as a safehaven. Al-Qaeda perpetrated the 1998 bombings of U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, the simultaneous attacks in 2002 on Kenya's coast against the Paradise Hotel and a failed effort to shoot down an Israeli charter airliner full of tourists, and the failed attempt in 2003 to attack the new U.S. embassy in Nairobi.

The relationship between al-Shabab, Hizb al-Islamiyah, and al-Qaeda's East Africa cell is close but complicated. On many occasions, the groups appear united and fight side by side against the transitional federal government (TFG). Despite rumors, however, a merger between al-Shabab and al-Qaeda has not yet occurred. Nonetheless, al-Qaeda is able to benefit from al-Shabab's gains, which increase al-Qaeda's space to maneuver and prepare for new attacks. Prevalent rumors suggest that Hizb al-Islamiyah leader Hassan Dahir Aweis is attempting to reinvent himself as a political leader, and may be willing to break his alliance with al-Shabab by negotiating a power-sharing deal with the TFG. While such talks would further isolate the insurgency, it is unknown how realistic Aweis's demands would be. Moreover, granting him any senior TFG position would not be welcomed by either Ethiopia or the United States -- two countries that consider Aweis a terrorist.

At a minimum, the groups appear to be cooperating closely in the administration of the training camps that dot southern Somalia. Some of these are reserved for imparting basic ideological precepts and infantry skills to newly enlisted Somali militia members, while others provide more advanced training in guerilla warfare, explosives, and assassination. The latter camps have become a magnet for foreign fighters from abroad -- the so-called muhajarin -- coming from the Somali diaspora, other African countries, or the Middle East.

The most prominent example of the foreign fighter flow to Somalia is the episode involving approximately twenty young Somali Americans -- the largest known group of U.S. citizens to join a foreign terrorist group -- who returned to Somalia to join al-Shabab in 2007 and 2008. Included among this group was Shirwa Ahmed, the first known U.S. suicide bomber, who was part of al-Shabab's October 2008 attacks in Somaliland and Puntland. Most of the young men were radicalized at home in the United States, particularly in the Minneapolis/St. Paul area. Subsequent FBI

investigations have extended across the United States to Somalis living in San Diego, Boston, Seattle, Portland, and Columbus. Similar investigations and some arrests have also taken place in the UK, Australia, and Scandinavia. In addition to the Somali diaspora's immediate support for al-Shabab inside the country, concern has centered on the potential for these individuals to receive terrorist training in Somalia, and then use their passports to conduct attacks in the West.

The head of al-Qaeda's East Africa cell, Abu Talha al-Sudani, was killed during Ethiopia's invasion of Somalia in 2007. Following Nabhan's recent death, Fazul Muhammad Harun is the most experienced al-Qaeda leader still at large in the Horn of Africa. At a minimum, the loss of Nabhan will severely disrupt the capabilities and planning of al-Shabab and al-Qaeda in Somalia. He commanded, recruited, and conducted training for jihadists across southern Somalia; was believed to serve as a critical link between jihadists in the Horn and al-Qaeda's senior leadership; and ran his own transnational operations targeting Western interests in East Africa. Furthermore, the elimination of Nabhan raises the question of what al-Qaeda's East Africa cell is comprised of today. With the exception of Fazul Harun, who is more often reported to operate on the Kenyan coast than inside Somalia, all of the cell's leadership has been removed. Some junior cell members could try to fill Nabhan's place, but this discrete al-Qaeda cell may end up fully integrated with al-Shabab.

The strike on Nabhan may also signal a shift in U.S. counterterrorism strategy in Somalia. The assault used multiple helicopters operating from a Navy ship off the Somali coast, and the target was selectively engaged in a remote, unpopulated area. Although potentially more risky for U.S. forces, this method limited any chance for collateral damage against civilians. Timing was also a crucial factor in the attack, since the Ethiopian occupation has ended and the Somali Islamist movements are split. This environment made it far less likely that the Nabhan strike would stoke public Somali support for extremism.

#### From Fighting Insurgents to Building Peace

Near universal fear of an al-Shabab-dominated Somalia and the opportunities that a "stateless Somalia" offers to al-Qaeda have served to unify the international community's support for the TFG. While the United States has taken the lead in providing funds and weapons, the TFG is also supported heavily with military and governance training, and negotiation advice by the United Nations, the European Union, the African Union, and many of their member states.

Currently, the TFG and its foreign sponsors have a number of reasons for hope. After the stalled insurgent push earlier this summer, TFG forces, backed by the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), retook some lost ground in Mogadishu. Battlefield successes by pro-TFG forces in Hiran and Gedo regions have drawn many Islamist fighters out of the capital city. In addition, al-Shabab and Hizb al-Islamiyah appear increasingly split on ideological and leadership lines, while the international community is increasingly united in its support for the TFG. Moreover, the public commitments of political, financial, and security support from the United States have both emboldened the TFG leadership and given it more resources.

Overall, these are positive -- yet also very fragile -- gains for the TFG. Even if short-term military cooperation against al-Shabab and Hizb al-Islamiyah forces were successful, there would be significant hurdles to overcome before this anti-opposition alliance can become functional members in a national unity government. If the TFG is able to capitalize on this momentum, and work to build political alliances with key sub-clans in southern Somalia (particularly within the Abgal, Habr Gedir, and Murosade communities in Mogadishu), there might be sufficient space for TFG leaders to begin reconstituting a national militia that can gradually provide security and rule of law in TFG-held areas. Furthermore, serious investment could develop the ministerial capacity to plan and deliver much-needed social services. This is the only realistic path to sustainable peacebuilding in Somalia.

Alternatively, the TFG's recent gains could be reversed if Sheikh Sharif squanders this window of opportunity. Even

without substantial public support, a delay may allow al-Shabab and Hizb al-Islamiyah to reach more durable cooperation agreements. Even worse, insurgent efforts to kill TFG's senior leadership could successfully derail the government's legitimacy and efficacy, which are built on power-sharing arrangements.

Most likely, however, is a middle road: the TFG will fend off the worst of the insurgency, but not defeat it, and the TFG will fail to use the added security space to negotiate an inclusive political system. This unfortunate scenario is the dominant trend in Somalia's civil war: a seesawing military stalemate, clan-based leadership rivalries, and too little investment in building the capacities of an administration that can govern with legitimacy. In the meantime, Somalis continue to suffer one of the world's worst humanitarian crises, and al-Qaeda-associated militants use the country to plan further attacks.

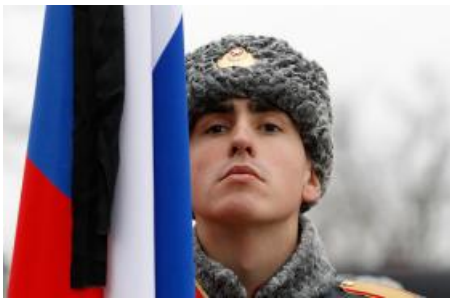
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