



# **HATE** SPEECH

## INTERNATIONAL

INVESTIGATING EXTREMISM



# **CONTINUITY AND CHANGE**

## **THE EVOLUTION AND RESILIENCE OF**

### **AL-SHABAB'S MEDIA INSURGENCY, 2006-2016**

Christopher Anzalone

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# CONTINUITY AND CHANGE THE EVOLUTION AND RESILIENCE OF AL-SHABAB'S MEDIA INSURGENCY, 2006-2016

By examining Al-Shabab's sophisticated media campaign and identifying its intended audiences, we can better understand one of the most successful insurgent movements of the 21st century.

By Christopher Anzalone

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Somali *jihadi*-insurgent movement Al-Shabab has established itself, since emerging in 2007 after the overthrow of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) umbrella in the wake of the December 2006 Ethiopian invasion and occupation of parts of Somalia, as one of the relatively few *jihadi* organizations to succeed in the capture, control, and governance of territory for a significant period of time. When Islamic State was masquerading as a «paper state» in 2008 and 2009, Al-Shabab's leadership was busy constructing a bureaucracy of power, divided into regional and local nodes of authority, designed to implement and maintain insurgent rule over rapidly expanding territories.<sup>1</sup> In establishing itself as a self-proclaimed and seemingly viable alternative governing

authority, even if only in the short to medium term, Al-Shabab continues to present a major challenge to the internationally recognized but weak and corrupt Somali Federal Government (SFG), the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), and the international community. The Somali insurgents, in successfully implementing a form of law and order, however harsh and philistine their interpretation of Islamic law and specifically their imposition of *hudud* («set») punishments for crimes such as highway robbery, banditry, theft, *zina* (various forms of fornication), and murder, provided other Sunni *jihadi* groups with an example of how *jihadi*-insurgent governance can be enacted in practice.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Cole Bunzel, *From Paper State to Caliphate: The Ideology of the Islamic State* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2015), Analysis Paper no. 19 (March 2015), 17-24.

<sup>2</sup> The late American-Yemeni preacher Anwar al-'Awlaqi cited Al-Shabab as a shining example for other Sunni *jihadi* groups to emulate, in particular because of the group's successes despite limited human and economic resources, in a 2012 interview with the media wing of Al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula, the Al-Malahem («Epic [Battles]») Media Foundation; AQAP film, *The First Exclusive Interview with Sheikh-Missionary Preacher Anwar al-Awlaqi*, released in May 2010.

As part of its broader governing and military strategy, Al-Shabab recognized the need for a capable media operations apparatus that would let it broadcast to and interact with multiple target audiences on a domestic, regional, and transnational/global scale. Beginning in 2007 and 2008, the group slowly but steadily built up its media capabilities through the production of propaganda films, many of them aimed at recruiting new fighters and particularly foreign fighters from outside of Somalia. By 2009, the group had dramatically refined its media campaign and the quality of its audio-visual production, enabling its media apparatus to produce increasingly polished films alongside written, audio/radio, and photographic releases. These releases were either directly produced by Al-Shabab's official media branch, the Al-Kataib («Brigades») Media Foundation<sup>3</sup> and «HSM Press» (with «HSM» standing for the group's full name, Harakat Al-Shabab al-Mujahidin/«Movement of the *Mujahidin*-Youth») or by semi-official or affiliated media collectives such as the terrestrial radio stations Radio al-Furqan and Radio al-Andalus and pro-insurgent Somali-language news web sites. The establishment and continuing evolution of its media operations capabilities has proven to be a valuable tool in the insurgent group's overall strategy of territorial expansion and implementation of a form of rebel governance over areas of Somalia stretching south from the semi-autonomous region of Puntland. Al-Shabab's media became an integral part of its insurgency.

This report examines the history and evolution of the group's media operations capabilities and narrative messaging, with particular attention to their strategic use and position within the insurgents' broader strategy of territorial control, survival, and rule in light of shifts on the ground inside Somalia and, since 2012, increasingly in neighboring countries such as Kenya. Also an-

<sup>3</sup> Al-Shabab renamed its previous media outlet, then known simply as its «Media Department», to the «Al-Kataib Media Foundation» in 2010; Al-Shabab communiqué, «New: The Al-Kataib News Channel,» 27 August 2010 (Arabic).

<sup>4</sup> The group's multiple Twitter accounts were active in 2009 and 2010 before being finally shut down by Twitter administrators following the Westgate Mall attack in Nairobi, Kenya. For more on Al-Shabab's use of Twitter, see Ken Menkhaus, «Al-Shabaab and Social Media: A Double-edged Sword,» *Brown Journal of World Affairs* 20, no. 11 (2014): 309-327; Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, Shiraz Maher, and James Sheehan, *Lights, Camera, Jihad: Al-Shabaab's Western Media Strategy*, International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence report (2012); David Mair, «#Westgate: A Case Study: How al-Shabaab used Twitter during an Ongoing Attack,» *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2016); and Christopher Anzalone, «The Nairobi Attack and Al-Shabab's Media Strategy,» *CTC Sentinel* (October 2013), available at <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-nairobi-attack-and-al-shababs-media-strategy>, last accessed 17 June 2016.

alyzed are the multiple target audiences of Al-Shabab's multi-faceted media campaign; the importance of on-the-ground organization and performance of political rituals and events as an integral part of insurgent propaganda; the growing battle between the group and Islamic State and its domestic and regional sympathizers in Somalia and East Africa; and the construction of specific media operations narratives designed to attract particular target audiences—domestic, regional, and international. Understanding the ways in which Al-Shabab's sophisticated media campaign operates and identifying this multimedia output's multiple intended audiences and its ability to advance insurgent influence and power projection are key to reaching a fuller comprehension of the successes and failures of one of the most successful insurgent movements of the 21st century.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT: SOMALI ISLAMISM, MILITANT ACTIVISM, & THE ISLAMIC COURTS

Political Islam began to emerge in Somalia in the 1970s and early 1980s, with the first organized group, Al-Ittihad al-Islami (Islamic Union), coming to the forefront in the mid-1990s following the overthrow of the country's authoritarian ruler, Gen. Siyaad Barre, and the start of the country's civil war. A coalition of Somali Islamist activists and groups, many of them influenced either by the Muslim Brotherhood (*al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun*) movements in the Arab world or the emerging Salafi current inside the country, Al-Ittihad's origins dated back to the early 1980s. Among the groups that made up the Al-Ittihad umbrella were the al-Jama'a al-Islami-

yya (Islamic Group) in and around Mogadishu and the Wahdat al-Shabab al-Islamiyya (Community of Islamic Youth) based in what is now Somaliland.<sup>5</sup> Among the most prominent Al-Ittihad members was Hassan Dahir Aweys, the veteran Somali Islamist activist who later played a leading role in the Hizbul Islam clan-based rebel umbrella group and later Al-Shabab before leaving the group in 2013.

Al-Ittihad presented a challenge to the dominance of the country's powerful Sufi orders and sought to build itself up by undermining their social bases of support, alleging that some Sufi ritual practices were un-Islamic. Somali Sufis responded by accusing the Islamists of heretical innovation (*bid'a*) in religion, foreshadowing the later conflict between the Salafi puritanism of Al-Shabab and the counter-response by clan-based Sufi militias operating under the loose name «Ahl al-Sunna wa'l Jama'a» (Ahlul Sunna Waljamaaca), the «People of the Prophet's Tradition and Community,» a name commonly used by Sunni Muslims to reference themselves.<sup>6</sup>

After some initial successes in taking advantage of the chaos that followed the fall of Barre and the central government, Al-Ittihad suffered a number of significant military defeats in the south at the hands of militias loyal to Somali warlord Muhammad Farah Aidid, including the loss of the key port city of Kismaayo. The Islamist group's fledgling statelet in Luuq, which was governed by a combination of *sharia* and customary law (*xeer*), was soon beset with internal divisions when Al-Ittihad

<sup>5</sup> International Crisis Group, *Somalia's Islamists* (Brussels, 2005), *Africa Report* no. 100, 3-12; Cedric Barnes and Harun Hassan, «The Rise and Fall of Mogadishu's Islamic Courts,» in *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 1, no. 2 (2007), 152, and Abdurahman Moallim Abdullahi, *The Islamic Movement in Somalia: A Historical Evolution with a Case Study of the Islah Movement (1950-2000)*, (PhD dissertation, McGill University, 2012), chapters three to six.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>7</sup> Ken Menkhaus, «Political Islam in Somalia,» *Middle East Policy* 9, no. 1 (2002), 112-113, and Stig Jarle Hansen, *Al-Shabaab in Somalia: The History and Ideology of a Militant Islamist Group, 2005-2012* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), chapter two.

<sup>8</sup> International Crisis Group, 7.

<sup>9</sup> For an argument that Al-Ittihad and AQC established close ties, see Gregory A. Pirio, *The African Jihad: Bin Laden's Quest for the Horn of Africa* (Trenton: The Red Sea Press, 2007), 49 and 52-53. He relies partly on the unsourced account of Yossef Bodanksy. Arguments for the unclear nature of relations between the two groups can be found in Roland Marchal, «A Tentative Assessment of the Somali Harakat al-Shabaab,» in *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 3, no. 3 (2009), 387, and Menkhaus, 114. See also Clint Watts, Jacob Shapiro, and Vahid Brown, *Al-Qa'ida's (Mis)adventures in the Horn of Africa*, Combating Terrorism Center (West Point) report (2007), 34-36, and Medhane Tadesse, *Al-Ittihad: Political Islam and Black Economy in Somalia: Religion, Money, Clan and the Struggle for Supremacy over Somalia* (Addis Ababa: Meag Printing Enterprise, 2002).

became fragmented along clan and sub-clan lines, contradicting the group's call for «Islam as the only clan,» and in 1996 it was overturned by the Ethiopian military after the Islamists launched attacks inside Ethiopia.<sup>7</sup>

Before its decline, Al-Ittihad succeeded in establishing networks in Somali diaspora communities abroad, including in other East African countries as well as the Middle East, Europe, and North America, from which it drew financial support and manpower. It developed particularly strong networks inside Kenya, especially in the capital of Nairobi and along the Swahili coast in places such as the coastal city of Mombasa and the Somali-majority North Eastern Province.<sup>8</sup> The group also established some form of ties with the original Al-Qa'ida organization (hereafter referred to as Al-Qa'ida Central/AQC), though the exact relationship between the two groups remains debated. Some argue that the decentralization of Al-Ittihad in the mid-1990s following its setbacks in Luuq suggests that support for AQC likely came from some Al-Ittihad members rather than from the group as a whole and others alleging a much broader alliance.<sup>9</sup> Al-Ittihad's utilization of fundraising and recruiting networks in Somali diaspora communities and the ties between at least some of its members and the global *jihadi* current represented by AQC also foreshadowed the later strategies and ideological affinities of Al-Shabab.

Following the collapse of Al-Ittihad's governing project, the next organized forms of Somali Islamism came in



the shape of a number of experiments with governance by coalitions of local *sharia* courts that banded together in an attempt to establish environments of relative peace and stability in the midst of continuing civil war. The exact start date of the «Islamic courts» experiments are debated, though by the early 1990s there were more sustained attempts emerging, particularly in and around Mogadishu.<sup>10</sup> These experiments brought together both Sufi religious leaders and Islamist figures such as Aweys, but were usually closely tied to particular clans, demonstrating the difficulties in transcending Somali clan politics. Founding figures in Al-Shabab including Aden Hashi Farah Ayro, Ahmed Godane, and Mukhtar Robow, who had been affiliated in various capacities with Al-Ittihad, also played a role in the Islamic courts experiments of the 1990s into the early 2000s.<sup>11</sup>

The movement that would culminate in 2005-2006 as the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) began in the early 2000s as alliances between various actors in Somalia including religious scholars (*ulama*) and clan elders, including the 2003 beginnings of an umbrella of local *sharia* courts by Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed, a school-teacher in Mogadishu.<sup>12</sup> This attempt was the most successful and he was elected chairman of the new umbrella movement, bringing together a growing number of local *sharia* courts and Islamist activists of various stripes, from moderates like Sheikh Sharif and Ibrahim Addow to more Salafi-leaning figures such as Mukhtar Robow and Aweys, in central and southern Somalia. The ICU posed a major challenge to the authority and claimed legitimacy of the corrupt Transitional Federal Government (TFG) then headed by the Ethiopian-backed Abdullahi Yusuf Ahmed as well as to the array of warlords who had become used to freely extracting bribes and

extortion payments from locals. Due to its success, the ICU enjoyed widespread support from many in the Somali diaspora, including wealthy and influential business people and merchants, some of whom returned to the country to assist in its rebuilding.<sup>13</sup>

The ICU's success peaked in 2006 after defeating a loosely organized, U.S.-backed array of warlords and businessmen called the «Alliance for the Restoration of Peace and Counter-terrorism», and expanding its authority to encompass increasing amounts of territory in southern Somalia. Ironically, the ICU's chief strength, its diversity of views and members, was also its main weakness. By bringing together a wide array of voices, from Sheikh Sharif to Aweys and, through the latter, the clandestine militancy of the fledgling Al-Shabab, which was then a very small group, the ICU created a «big tent» that was later beset with internal competitions for power and contradictory voices. The presence of more militant voices within the ICU umbrella, such as Ayro, Robow, and Yusuf Muhammad Siyaad «Indha'adde» (White Eyes), alarmed neighboring countries and in late December 2006 Ethiopia invaded Somalia with a force of 10,000 soldiers and, aided by U.S. military intelligence data, was able to overthrow the ICU and bolster the waning authority of the TFG. The ICU soon disintegrated and its leaders either went into hiding or fled to neighboring countries, allowing Ethiopia to prop up the weak TFG, though it soon faced an increasingly powerful insurgency.<sup>14</sup> Support for armed attacks and resistance to Ethiopian and TFG forces grew after reports of war crimes and other repressive actions surfaced. The stage was set for the emergence of a reorganized and increasingly lethal Al-Shabab, which had previously been only a small group within the military wing of the ICU.

<sup>10</sup> Barnes and Hassan, 152; Menkhaus, 116; Marchal, 384-385

<sup>11</sup> Stig Jarle Hansen, *Al-Shabaab in Somalia*, 21-24 and chapter four.

<sup>12</sup> The Islamic courts experiments were complex and took place over a number of years, a series of processes that are beyond the scope of this report. For details, see Stig Jarle Hansen, «Somalia—Grievance, Religion, Clan, and Profit,» in *The Borders of Islam: Exploring Huntington's Faultlines from Al-Andalus to the Virtual Ummah* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), eds. Stig Jarle Hansen, Atle Mesøy, and Tuncay Kardas.

<sup>13</sup> Ken Menkhaus, «The Crisis in Somalia: Tragedy in Five Acts,» *African Affairs* 106, no. 204 (2007), 370; Aisha Ahmad, «The Security Bazaar: Business Interests and Islamist Power in Civil War Somalia,» *International Security* 39, no. 3 (Winter 2014/2015), 97-102; and the Current TV documentary, *Mogadishu Madness*, available at <https://vimeo.com/103324918>.

<sup>14</sup> David Ignatius, «Ethiopia's Iraq,» *The Washington Post*, 13 May 2007, available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/05/11/AR2007051102114.html>, last accessed on 17 June 2016; Piriou, 209; and Menkhaus, «The Crisis in Somalia,» 381.

## THE EMERGENCE & EXPANSION OF AL-SHABAB

The exact date of Al-Shabab's formation is debated, but by 2005-2006 the group's founding cadre had become identifiable among the wider ICU movement, though it remained clandestine. Many of its founders, including Ayro, Mukhtar Robow, and Ibrahim al-Afghani (Ibrahim Hajji Jama Mee'aad), had trained in AQC-operated camps in Afghanistan.<sup>15</sup> While in Afghanistan, Ayro met Osama bin Laden and he later introduced a more globalist ideological aspect to the group's outlook while also bringing in fellow Afghanistan «veterans.»<sup>16</sup> Though technically a part of the ICU's military wing, Al-Shabab essentially operated independently and was suspected of committing a rash of killings in and around Mogadishu in 2005 and 2006.<sup>17</sup>

Following the collapse of the ICU and a series of major military defeats and personnel losses, Al-Shabab used 2007 to reconstitute itself by expanding its recruitment both inside and outside of Somalia, achieving remarkable and relatively rapid success in doing so between 2007 and 2008. By 2008 Al-Shabab had become the most active and deadly part of the anti-Ethiopia and anti-TFG insurgency. Beginning in May-June 2007, but not reaching a sustained level until October-November of the same year, the group began carrying out ambushes and assassinations as well as planting IEDs targeting Ethiopian and TFG troops and officials. The

group proved to be well organized, militarily capable, and strategically adept, attracting domestic, regional, and international recruits through a sustained media operations campaign that tapped into a variety of narratives including Somali nationalism, pan-Islamic identity, and global jihadism. Though some elements of the Somali opposition, such as Sheikh Sharif, eventually agreed to join the TFG project, Al-Shabab rejected such moves and, following his election in 2009 as the new TFG president, declared him to be an «apostate» for agreeing to participate in the internationally backed «secular» regime.<sup>18</sup>

Al-Shabab's leaders were keen on establishing a movement that was relatively diverse in terms of the clan and sub-clan identities of its members, thus enabling it to operate in theory more smoothly between competing clan interests and politics in the country. The founding cadre, which included Ayro, Robow, al-Afghani, *Mu'allim* Burhan (Abd al-Hamid Hashi Olhayi), and Ahmed Abdi Godane, formed close ties during the early days of the group and possibly also during their previous sojourns in Afghanistan.<sup>19</sup> Focusing their recruitment efforts on Somalia's disenfranchised, unemployed youth, Al-Shabab's pan-clan identity and leadership widened the potential pool of recruits and other resources that it could tap into in order to support its governing project and territorial expansion. This gave it an advantage over rival Islamist insurgent groups in the country such as the Hizbul Islam coalition fronted by Aweys, which was less a unified single group than an umbrella for several anti-TFG clan-based Islamist groups—Jabhat al-Islamiyya (Islamic Front) of Sheikh Muhammad Ibra-

<sup>15</sup> The disagreement concerning the specific «founding» date has to do with the exact dating of the first network on which Al-Shabab would later be built, that is, when «Al-Shabab» as an identifiable faction or group emerged. The beginnings of the network that would, between 2005 and 2006, come to form Al-Shabab emerged as early as the 1990s, when important founding members such as Ayro traveled to AQC training camps in Afghanistan. For varying accounts, see Stig Jarle Hansen, *Al-Shabaab in Somalia*, chapter three; Menkhaus, «The Crisis in Somalia,» 365; Marchal, 383; International Crisis Group, *Somalia's Islamists*, 11; and Xan Rice, Oliver Burkeman, and Rory Carroll, «Fall of Mogadishu Leaves US Policy in Ruins,» *The Guardian* (London), June 10, 2006, available at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/jun/10/rorycarroll.oliverburkeman>, last accessed 17 June 2016.

<sup>16</sup> A posthumous hagiographical biography of Ayro was published in an Al-Shabab e-magazine, «Light and Fire: Biography of the Martyr-Sheikh Adan Hashi Farah Ayro (Abu Muhsin al-Ansari),» in *Millat Ibrahim* 1 (2008), 13-14 (Arabic).

<sup>17</sup> Burkeman, Carroll, Marchal, 388, and Xan Rize, Oliver Burkeman, and Rory Carroll, «Fall of Mogadishu Leaves US Policy in Ruins,» *The Guardian*, 9 June 2006, accessed at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/jun/10/rorycarroll.oliverburkeman>, last accessed 21 September 2016.

<sup>18</sup> Al-Shabab communiqué, «Reception of the apostate Sheikh Sharif Ahmed with a mortar at the Mogadishu International Airport,» (n.p.), 8 August 2009 (Arabic).

<sup>19</sup> Their exact relations while in Afghanistan are unclear. See Hansen, *Al-Shabaab in Somalia*, 19-22 and 27-28.



him Hayle, the Anole group (also known as Al-Furqan) of Muhammad Mire, the Ras Kambooni group then led by Hassan al-Turki, and a Harti/Darod group led by Sheikh Abdullahi Ali Hashi.<sup>20</sup> Shifting internal alliances and competitions for power also further weakened Hizbul Islam.<sup>21</sup>

Al-Shabab rapidly expanded its territorial holdings between 2008 and 2009, eventually pushing back the TFG and AMISOM to increasingly small parts of the country, including inside Mogadishu. The insurgents' growing power and expansion benefited significantly from the Ethiopian withdrawal from the county in January 2009.<sup>22</sup> Riding a wave of Somali nationalism and hostility toward the Ethiopian occupation, Al-Shabab capitalized on such sentiments and expanded its financial and recruitment base, establishing networks in diaspora communities from the Horn of Africa and the Middle East to further afield in Western Europe, Australia, and North America. The capture of more and more territory presented Al-Shabab's leadership and commanders with the twin challenges of how to rule and how to continue expanding their control. In addition to its battlefield activities and strategy, the insurgents also sought to establish and evolve their multimedia capabilities in order to develop a media operations strategy to complement its military maneuvering and implementation of governing control through the strategic use of coercive violence. Al-Shabab leaders addressed these needs by establishing a form of bureaucratic-yet-flexible governance implemented through a combination of

regional governors and offices to handle political, economic, religious, judicial, and military affairs, the formation of a frontline fighting force, the *Jaysh al-Usra* (Army of Hardship/Difficulty), and «police» force, the *Jaysh al-Hisba* (Army of Verification), and an official media department and semi-official media outlets.<sup>23</sup>

## THE BEGINNINGS OF AL-SHABAB'S MEDIA OPERATIONS: FRAMING 'JIHAD' & PITCHING RECRUITMENT, 2006-2009

Al-Shabab's media operations campaign began in late 2006 and early 2007 with the production of mainly written statements, communiqués, and brief military reports that were posted online at *jihadi* Internet web sites and discussion forums and released to various news media outlets. The majority of this early written output focused on reporting insurgent military operations such as ambushes, the planting of improvised explosive devices (IEDs), targeted assassinations of Somali government, Ethiopian, and AMISOM soldiers, police, officers, and officials, and mortar, grenade, and other types of attacks on their bases, checkpoints, and buildings. Much of this early media output was aimed

at external audiences and was produced in Arabic. Its distribution online was coordinated and facilitated by the Echo of Jihad Center for Media (*Markaz Sada al-Jihad li-l'I'lam*), a sub-unit of the Global Islamic Media Front (GIMF), a shadowy network of online media producers and operatives who collectively produce translations of media releases by *jihadi* groups ranging from AQC and its regional affiliates to the former unified Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan movement as well as original media materials.<sup>24</sup> The GIMF continued to coordinate the distribution of Al-Shabab's media releases even after the Somali insurgent movement formalized its affiliation with AQC.<sup>25</sup> Al-Shabab also made some early forays into establishing its own web sites in Somali, though these were largely abandoned after being shut down after problems arose with Internet hosting companies. Its supporters, some living outside of the country, also set up web sites and Internet forums, such as the al-Qimma al-Islamiyya (Summit/Peak of Islam) forum, or sub-sections of forums, for example on the now-defunct Ansar al-Mujahideen forum, to support the group. Though Osama bin Laden and other AQC leaders stopped short of endorsing Al-Shabab by name, the Somali insurgent group did get a bit more direct support from Abu Yahya al-Libi, a major AQC sharia official and ideologue, though this stopped just short of directly affiliating AQC with Al-Shabab.<sup>26</sup>

The earliest film production produced by Somali insurgents following the Ethiopian invasion of the country was released in December 2006 and early 2007. Attributed simply to the producer's «media



Abu Yahya al-Libi, a senior al-Qaeda Central leader and sharia official, was one of the earliest supporters of Al-Shabab.

AL-QAEDA CENTRAL FILM, TO THE ARMY OF HARDSHIP IN SOMALIA (2007)

department» (*Qism al-I'lam*) or the «Media of the *Mujahideen* in Somalia» (*Iclaanka Mujaahidiinta Somalia*), it is unclear whether these early media productions were produced by Al-Shabab or another group, but their narrative structure and elements closely resemble future Al-Shabab materials with regard to the use of local, regional, and transnational/global thematic messaging. Regardless of whether the group produced the 2006 film, Al-Shabab's media capabilities did not visibly develop into an increasingly polished machine capable of producing longer and more substantive propaganda films until 2008-2009. Many of these 2008 and 2009 films were focused on «exposing» the «apostate,» internationally and «Crusader»-backed Somali federal government and attracting foreign fighters to the country to bolster Al-Shabab's domestic fighters.

In the 2006 film, *[The Battle of] Badr of Somalia*, footage of insurgents training and launching attacks is set to a soundtrack of Arabic *jihadi* nashids (melodic recitations of poetry akin, in this context, to songs) and audio

<sup>20</sup> United Nations Monitoring Group on Somalia, «Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia pursuant to Security Council resolution 1853 (2008),» 6 and 11, and Reuters, «Factbox—Who are Hizbul Islam?,» 2 May 2010, available at <http://in.reuters.com/article/idINIndia-48165720100502>, last accessed 17 June 2016.

<sup>21</sup> Stig Jarle Hansen, «Faction Fluctuation: The Shifting Allegiances within Hizbul Islam,» *Jane's Intelligence Review* 22, no. 11 (2010).

<sup>22</sup> Mohamed Ibrahim and Jeffrey Gettleman, «Ethiopians Withdraw from Key Bases,» *The New York Times*, 13 January 2009, accessed at [http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/14/world/africa/14somalia.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/14/world/africa/14somalia.html?_r=0), last accessed 1 October 2016, and Xan Rice, «Ethiopia Ends Somalia Occupation,» *The Guardian*, 26 January 2009, accessed at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/jan/26/ethiopia-ends-somalia-occupation>, last accessed 1 October 2016.

<sup>23</sup> For more on Al-Shabab's governing strategy and structures, see Stig Jarle Hansen, chapter six, and «Shabab Central: Africa's 'Taliban' Grows More Unified,» *Jane's Intelligence Review*, 16 July 2010, and Christopher Anzalone, «The Rise and Decline of Al-Shabab in Somalia,» *Turkish Review* 4, no. 4 (2014), 388-390.

The name «Army of Hardship» is drawn from a name reportedly given to an army organized by the Prophet Muhammad, which proved particularly difficult to put together, in 630 CE for an expedition to Tabuk. The Arabic term *hisba*, in the Islamic context, refers to the general duty of Muslims to «promote the good and forbid the wrong/evil» (*al-amr bi'l ma'ruf wa'l nahi 'an al-munkar*). Historically, it was also used to refer to the activities of a marketplace regulator (*muhtasib*) and thus initially had strong economic connotations. Contemporary Islamist movements, including *jihadi* groups, have expanded the meaning of «*hisba*» to include moral policing as well as market and trade regulation.

<sup>24</sup> The GIMF began distributing the TTP's media materials in July 2011. See Christopher Anzalone, «The Pakistani Taliban's Media Jihad,» 17 June 2011, *Foreign Policy—The South Asia Channel*, available at [http://foreignpolicy.com/2011/06/17/the-pakistani-talibans-media-jihad/?wp\\_login\\_redirect=0](http://foreignpolicy.com/2011/06/17/the-pakistani-talibans-media-jihad/?wp_login_redirect=0), last accessed 15 June 2016, and «Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan's Umar Studio & the Global Islamic Media Front: Mapping the Distribution Network,» *Al-Wasat* blog, 21 July 2011, available at <https://thewasat.wordpress.com/2011/07/21/tehr-i-taliban-pakistans-umar-studio-the-global-islamic-media-front/>, last accessed 15 June 2016.

The GIMF produces translations of *jihadi* primary materials mainly into European languages (chief among them English, French, German, and Spanish) but also into other languages such as Urdu, Indonesian, Hausa, Pashto, and Turkish.

<sup>25</sup> Al-Shabab thus became the only official AQC affiliate whose media releases were not distributed through the *Fajr* («Dawn») Media Center (*Markaz al-Fajr li-l'I'lam*), another shadowy online network of media operatives, this one responsible for coordinating the online release of official media from AQC, Al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), Al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the Islamic State of Iraq (before its falling out with AQC in 2013-2014), in addition to the production of original material.

<sup>26</sup> Abu Yahya al-Libi, *To the Army of Hardship/Difficulty in Somalia*, Al-Qa'ida Central film (March 2007). Captured documents from bin Laden's compound in Abbottabad show that the AQC leader was critical of Al-Shabab's governance decisions and wary of directly affiliating with them. See SOCOM-2012-0000005 and SOCOM-2012-0000006 from the documents cache.



clips of AQC founding leaders Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri as well as the late *jihadi* religious scholar and ideologue Abdullah Azzam.<sup>27</sup> Largely in Somali, the film also includes a few Arabic subtitles as well as Arabic audio of the aforementioned *jihadi* ideologues. Frequent references are made to members of the Somali TFG as being «agents of the Crusaders» and «apostates» as well as to the duty of Muslims to fight them. Footage of public demonstrations against them is interspersed with footage of insurgent attacks, including night operations, military training, and vehicles and weapons captured as spoils of war (*ghanima*) from government, Ethiopian, and AMISOM forces. The film begins by borrowing an animated introduction featuring an audio recitation from an animated opening Quran sitting on a traditional Quran stand that is taken from the AQC film series *The Wind of Paradise (Rih al-Janna)*, demonstrating the early influence of global *jihadi* media on the evolution of Somali *jihadis'* own media operations narratives and productions.<sup>28</sup>









Beginning in 2007 and continuing into 2008, Al-Shabab began producing and releasing films with increasingly directed narrative messaging, such as the hostility of the Christian West to Islam and Muslims, and recruitment pitches. In a series of films featuring the last wills and testaments of some of its martyrs, Al-Shabab's media department wove together footage of the «martyr's will and testament» (*wasiya al-shahid*) with military footage, including the driving of vehicles packed with explosives towards TFG, Ethiopian, or AMISOM targets. These «martyr will» videos featured clips, audio

or audiovisual, from major global jihadi figures, such as bin Laden and Azzam, and *jihadi*-Salafi religious scholars, such as the imprisoned Saudi Salafi preacher Khalid al-Rashed.<sup>29</sup>

These films, which featured parts in multiple languages including Arabic, English, Somali, and, in a translated follow-up, French, referenced a number of themes frequently used in AQC and other global *jihadi* media. These included praising the concept of the «victorious group» (*al-ta'ifat al-mansura*) by which *jihadis* self-identify, the oppression and insults of Western countries toward Islam and Muslims as exemplified by the publication of derogatory cartoons and other depictions of the Prophet Muhammad, a global «Crusader» conspiracy made up of regional (in the form of AMISOM) and domestic (in the form of the Somali TFG) forces backed by international powers such as the United States, and the corruption of the supposedly «Islamic» TFG, whose soldiers are shown looting the Bakaara Market in Mogadishu.<sup>30</sup> Like AQ-produced media, Al-Shabab's films highlight the underlining narrative that peaceful negotiations and rapprochement with these «Crusader» and «apostate» forces are not possible because of their inherent hostility toward Islam and Muslims, whom they seek only to oppress and whose resources they seek to loot. Therefore, violence in the form of «fire, sword, and bombs» is the only path to success and victory for Muslims. The narratives in Al-Shabab's films also promote the notion of an idyllic «Islamic» polity capable of representing and defending the interests of Muslims domestically, regionally and globally.<sup>31</sup>

Recruitment and military training have been two other central themes in Al-Shabab's films, from the formative days of its media operations campaign and continuing until today. One of the group's earliest major recruitment-themed films was released in September 2008, *Preparations for the 'No Peace Except [by] Islam' Campaign*. Opening with a partial Quranic citation from Surah al-Anfal that instructs the early Muslims to «terrorize the enemies of God,»<sup>32</sup> the film promotes the narrow *jihadi* interpretation of the verse, which is meant to legitimize militancy and acts of terrorism targeting enemy and «apostate» non-combatants. *Jihadis*, including Al-Shabab, consider their acts of «terror» to be «Islamic» and permissible based on this verse, which they interpret as a Quranic injunction to fight the «enemies of God» wherever they may be. Al-Shabab later launched a military campaign dubbed the «Our Terrorism is Blessed» campaign (*Irhabuna Mahmoud*) in the spring and summer of 2008.

The 40-minute film features a diverse array of Al-Shabab fighters speaking numerous languages including Arabic, English, Swahili, and Urdu. Footage of military training, including martial arts and weapons exercises and preparation is filmed at a training camp

Al-Shabab Media		
Al-Kataib Media Foundation & Al-Kataib News Channel		«The Brigades» Media Foundation and its sister media brand, which is portrayed as an alternative source for «reliable» news from the battlefield in Somalia, upgraded Al-Shabab's earlier media department branding, which was dubbed simply as its «media department.» Al-Kataib produces the bulk of the group's audiovisual media aimed primarily at external audiences outside of Somalia, though it also produces Somali language films.
Radio al-Andalus		One of Al-Shabab's terrestrial radio stations that operates on the ground inside Somalia.
Al-Furqan Radio & Media		One of Al-Shabab's terrestrial radio stations and media networks inside Somalia that portrays itself as an «independent» media outlet in a manner similar to the Amaq News Agency does with Islamic State. The Al-Furqan network produces radio broadcasts as well as short video news reports from inside insurgent-controlled areas.
Global Islamic Media Front/ Echo of Jihad Media Center		Online distribution network of Al-Shabab media materials.
Shahada News Agency		Online media network that issues short written reports on Al-Shabab military operations and attacks.
Pro-insurgent online news media networks		Al-Shabab's media umbrella includes pro-insurgent news media networks such as Somali MeMo and Calamada.
HSM Press Twitter accounts		Al-Shabab's media network operated a number of Twitter accounts between 2009 and 2013 that it used to report its own spin on current events in Somalia and on its own military and political operations. The insurgents used Twitter to «live tweet» their attack on Westgate Mall in Nairobi, Kenya in September 2013.
Al-Muhajiroun in East Africa & Al-Hijra/Muslim Youth Centre		Al-Shabab East African (Kenyan) affiliate groups that operate their own media networks that augment Al-Shabab's own official and semi-official media outlets.

named after «the Martyr Adan Hashi Farah Ayro.» At that time he had just been killed in a U.S. military strike in May 2008 and is featured alongside frequent audio and audiovisual clips extolling military *jihad*, preparation, and sacrifice via excerpted messages from many global *jihadi* ideologues and leading figures including bin Laden, al-Zawahiri, Abu Yahya al-Libi (killed in 2012), AQC East Africa operative Saleh al-Nabhani (killed in 2009), the Egyptian «Blind Sheikh» Umar Abd al-Rahman (imprisoned for his role in the 1993 World Trade Center bombing), and the Saudi Salafi preachers Khalid al-Rashed and Hafiz al-Dawsari.<sup>33</sup> These excerpts were taken from existing videos and audio recordings from other groups by Al-Shabab media operatives.

<sup>32</sup> Quran 8:60.

<sup>27</sup> Film *Badr al-Sumal (Badr of Somalia)*, attributed simply to the «mujahidin in Somalia» but likely produced by an early incarnation of Al-Shabab's media apparatus.

The film's name is a reference to the Battle of Badr, a confrontation between the early Muslims led by the Prophet Muhammad and the forces of the pagan leaders of the Quraysh tribe based in Mecca in 624 CE in which the former were victorious. This battle is heralded by Muslims generally and is considered to be one of the first signs of the divine nature of Muhammad's message, in particular since the Muslims, according to the traditional accounts, were greatly outnumbered and aided by angels sent by God. For contemporary jihadi groups the battle is emblematic of the conflict between Muslims and non-Muslims as well as of the victories possible with divine guidance and support even against seemingly insurmountable odds.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Al-Shabab films, *The Ninth Martyrdom Operation in Somalia: Will of the Martyr Abd al-Aziz Sa'd*, released in October 2008 and *The Seventh Martyrdom Operation in Somalia: Will of the Martyr Abu Bakr Sa'id Hiri*, released in June 2008. Earlier films in this series are difficult to find, but the series seems to have begun in 2007, though the author has been unable to locate the earlier installments.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. and Al-Shabab film, *Holocaust of the Crusaders in Somalia*, released in 2008.

The narrative structuring of Al-Shabab's films clearly demonstrated the group's ideological affinity with the transnational/global *jihadi* current represented by AQC and select dissident ulama voices in countries such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt, who are much heralded by jihadis as authoritative backers of *jihadi* «activism» and struggle.<sup>34</sup>

Foreign fighters featured in the film make explicit calls for Muslims to emigrate to Somalia in order to participate in «*jihad*» against the «new Crusaders» and aid their «Muslim brothers» inside Somalia, selectively invoking the Quran and *hadith* (reports of the Prophet Muhammad's sayings and actions) as well as the concept of «migration» (*hijra*) from the lands of unbelief to the land of Islam, which taps into powerful symbolic themes from Islamic sacred history.<sup>35</sup> Al-Shabab's *amir*, Ahmed «Mukhtar Abu al-Zubayr» Godane, makes a similar pitch, combining Quaranic and *hadith* citations with a reference to the juridical opinions of 18th century Najdi Salafi preacher Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, whose writings Al-Shabab utilizes both in its own ideological training of members and which are also utilized, republished, and distributed with commentary by Islamic State (IS) and its regional affiliates.<sup>36</sup>

Recruitment pitches characterized much of Al-Shabab's early film productions. Although these never ceased



An Urdu-speaking foreign fighter from a 2008 Al-Shabab recruitment film.  
AL-SHABAB FILM, PREPARATIONS FOR THE 'NO PEACE EXCEPT WITH ISLAM' CAMPAIGN (2008)

entirely, they were reintroduced with renewed vigor beginning in late 2010 when the insurgents began to face increasing battlefield and political setbacks, demonstrating how recruitment as a theme is most frequently used in the group's media output during times of uncertainty and pressure, particularly during the periods of initial expansion followed by gradual decline due to battlefield losses and economic pressure. Recruitment drives were not only aimed at non-Somali foreign fighters and Somalis from the diaspora but also domestically in Somali-language releases, some of which also featured segments or subtitles in other languages such as Arabic or English.<sup>37</sup> By producing multiple recruitment films in an array of languages, Al-Shabab increased



An early Al-Shabab film showing military operations in 2008.  
AL-SHABAB FILM, GLORY AND HONOR: THE BLESSED DINSUR CAMPAIGN (2008)

the potential audiences for its media productions and appeals for support made in individual films, which often included audio and written components in several languages simultaneously and separately, for example with audio in Somali or Arabic subtitled in the other or a third language.

The group's media wing cast a wide net for potential recruits from around East Africa as well as further afield in Western and Northern Europe and North America by producing films that featured an ethnically and linguistically diverse group of foreign fighters. This foreign fighter recruitment drive complemented Al-Shabab's recruitment of disenchanted Somalis domestically and from Somali-majority regions of East Africa including in Kenya and Ethiopia. The group has always needed to augment its limited numbers, which probably have never much exceeded 10-12,000, with foreign fighters

from abroad.<sup>38</sup> Thus, the development of a capable media wing was a strategic necessity both in order to place Al-Shabab within the broader transnational/global *jihadi* current and to better place it in the public eye to attract potential financial and media support, as well as to provide a means for making recruitment pitches to increase its manpower. It was also in the field of media that Al-Shabab was able to significantly outpace and outperform its domestic insurgent competitors, chiefly Hizbul Islam and the Ras Kamboni militia. Unlike the latter two, it developed a sustained and increasingly sophisticated external media apparatus capable of attracting relatively significant forms of support from non-Somali audiences. The development of a formidable media apparatus also enabled Al-Shabab to pitch narratives and pitches for financial and manpower support to multiple audiences, including supporters of «global *jihad*,» thus allowing the group to partially transcend, at least in its media output, a Somalia-centric audience as well as clan-based approach to recruitment while still maintaining a Somalia-centric media operations campaign.<sup>39</sup>

## MEDIA OPERATIONS & INSURGENT RULE, 2009-2011

The acquisition of increasing amounts of territory between 2009 and 2010, combined with Al-Shabab's shift from representing itself mainly as a rebel/insurgent force to promoting a self-image of an Islamic statelet, presented the group's leaders with the twin challenges

<sup>33</sup> Al-Shabab film, *Preparations for the 'No Peace Except [by] Islam' Campaign*, released in September 2008.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* and Al-Shabab films *The Ninth Martyrdom Operation*, *The Seventh Martyrdom Operation*, *Holocaust of the Crusaders*, and *The Blessed Campaign of Dinsur*, released in May 2008.

<sup>35</sup> Al-Shabab and other *jihadi* groups utilize a strategic vocabulary that taps into key ideas, events, and personalities from Islamic sacred history as part of their attempt to demonstrate their religious and historical legitimacy in the eyes of members and supporters as well as potential supporters. Other examples of this include the use of terms such as «*ghazwa*» (plural: *ghazawat*; «campaign,» «battle,» or «[military] expedition»), which is how the Prophet Muhammad's battles and military campaigns are usually referred to, and «*ribat*,» referring to the garrisoning of troops, who are referred to as «those who are in *ribat*» (*murabitun*) on the frontiers between lands held by Muslims and their opponents. For more details on the historical and modern usage of *ribat* and *murabit*, see Mark Long, «*Ribat*, al-Qa'ida, and the Challenge for U.S. Foreign Policy,» *The Middle East Journal* 63, no. 1 (2009), 31-47; Michael Bonner, «Some Observations Concerning the Early Development of Jihad on the Arab-Byzantine Frontier,» *Studia Islamica* 75 (1992), 5-31; and Michael Bonner, *Jihad in Islamic History: Doctrines and Practice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), chapter seven.

<sup>36</sup> Al-Shabab film, *Preparations for the 'No Peace Except [by] Islam' Campaign*.

<sup>37</sup> Al-Shabab film, *The Al-Furqan Campaign*, released in June 2009. The title refers to the Islamic concept of «*furqan*,» the determining and separation of good and evil.

<sup>38</sup> The exact number of Al-Shabab numbers is unclear due to the lack of verifiable evidence but is usually estimated to have varied, at different times, from a low of around 3-5,000 to a median of 9-10,000 and a high estimate of 14-15,000. The high estimate, however, relies on dubious, unverifiable figures.

<sup>39</sup> Aisha Ahmad, «Going Global: Islamist Competition in Contemporary Civil Wars,» *Security Studies* 25, no. 2 (2016), 353-384, and Peter Chonka, «Spies, Stonework, and the Suuq: Somali Nationalism and the Narrative Politics of pro-Harakat Al Shabaab Al Mujaahidiin Online Propaganda,» *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 10, no. 2 (2016), 247-265. Al-Shabab's media output, both domestically and externally aimed, is not only distributed online but is also selectively utilized on the ground at insurgent-organized events and distributed on discs to local populations. This domestic distribution and utilization of media is not unique to Al-Shabab and is also practiced by an array of other *jihadi* groups including the competing factions of the post-Hakimullah Mehsud Tehrik-i Taliban Pakistan, Islamic State, and AQAP and Ansar al-Sharia in Yemen.

of how to implement insurgent governance and subsequently profit from the institution of a form of law and order, however harsh, over these territories. The benefits of broadcasting carefully narrated and organized images of its rule over expanding areas included increasing its stock within the global *jihadi* current as well as within segments of the Somali diaspora. Al-Shabab, in short, sought to portray itself as a viable and more capable and religiously legitimate alternative to the internationally recognized TFG.

Upon capturing new territories and particularly urban economic hubs such as Baidoa and Kismaayo in 2008, Al-Shabab publicly announced the implementation of a philistine interpretation of *sharia*, one in which Islamic law was largely reduced to a black-and-white interpretation and implementation of the «set» *hudud* punishments for specific crimes such as theft, highway robbery (*hiraba*), murder, rape, and moral infractions such as various forms of fornication (*zina*) and *shirk* (polytheism), such as the practice of magic or worship at local Sufi shrines and other holy places. The announcement of the new implementation of Al-Shabab's *sharia* penal codes was made through the performance of highly symbolic and organized public political rituals in the form of public declarations in the centers of newly captured cities, towns, and villages and the public implementation of *hudud* punishments applied by Al-

Shabab's courts.<sup>40</sup> These ritual performances were the local face of Al-Shabab's new domestic order.

The group's leadership, however, also sought and continues to seek to promote images of the group as a capable, vigilant, and just ruler. In order to project images of its «Islamic» governance beyond the domestic sphere, Al-Shabab's media department and affiliated outlets began in the autumn of 2009 to produce films, audio recordings, photography, and other media highlighting aspects of the insurgent rule. These included public, communal prayers marking the end of Ramadan in 2009, competitions for children concerning the recitation and memorization of the Quran during Ramadan, the organizing of choreographed rallies and other public events, the collection and distribution of charity (*zakat*) and other forms of aid, and the public conviction and execution of individuals accused of spying and providing weapons and information to the TFG and AMISOM.<sup>41</sup> Domestically Al-Shabab and affiliated or sympathetic media outlets also reported on construction projects such as the building of small bridges and irrigation channels for local farmers in a bid to highlight the group's interest in local governance as well as presenting itself as a viable alternative in contrast to the inept TFG.<sup>42</sup> This media output was aimed at multiple audiences including externally at Somali diaspora communities, locally through the insurgents' domestic

<sup>40</sup> Al-Shabab communiqué, «The Announcement of the Implementation of the Law of Islam (*shari'at al-Islam*) in the city of Marka in front of a large group of Muslims,» (n.p.), 13 November 2008 (Arabic), and «The General Leadership [of Al-Shabab] mobilizes the Jaysh al-Hisba for the implementation of the call to God [*da'wa ila Allah*] in the liberated cities and villages,» (n.p.), 5 August 2008 (Arabic).

<sup>41</sup> Al-Shabab films, Implementation of the Hadd («set») Punishment on Two Spies in Mogadishu, the Islamic Province of Banaadir, released in October 2009; Breezes from the Winds of Victory, released in November 2009; and Demonstrations against the Burning of the Qur'an, released in November 2010. Representative Somali-language reports by Al-Shabab-affiliated or pro-insurgent domestic media (these sources are no longer available online but are saved in the author's archives) include Radio al-Furqan, «The Islamic province of Lower Shabelle begins the distribution of Zakat,» 17 December 2011; Somali MeMo, «The Islamic province of Lower Shabelle makes repairs to a bridge in Afgooye,» 3 March 2012; Somali MeMo, «Conclusion of a Qur'an Recitation Event during Eid al-Fitr in Diinsoor,» 1 August 2013; Radio al-Furqan, «Mujahidin officials and thousands of people gather for Eid in Baraawe,» 15 October 2013; Radio al-Andalus, «The governor of Hiraan, reported by the enemy to have been killed, spoke to hundreds of people,» 10 March 2016; and Radio al-Andalus, «Photographs of Eid al-Adha celebrations in El-Dher (Ceeldheer),» 26 September 2015.

<sup>42</sup> The domestic trajectory of Al-Shabab's media campaigns and an overview of Somali-language media is discussed in Chonka, «Spies, Stoenetwork, and the Suuq,» and Mohamed Husein Gaas, Stig Jarle Hansen, and David Berry, Mapping the Somali Media: An Overview, Department of International Environment and Development Studies, Noragric, Norwegian University of Life Sciences, Report no. 65 (March 2012). The highlighting of issues aimed at garnering support from segments of the nationalist diaspora such as economic independence and resistance to foreign political and economic meddling is an important part of Al-Shabab's domestic media messaging but it is also present in the group's externally aimed media productions.

Somali-language outlets, regionally at East African Muslims, and globally at potential foreign fighters, fellow *jihadis*, and financial backers as well as perceived enemies such as AMISOM, countries contributing troops to AMISOM, the United States, the European Union, and the United Nations.

The public performance of communal prayer is a particularly powerful symbolic act because it is traditionally the legitimate authority that organizes communal prayer at the end of Ramadan (*Eid al-Fitr*) and at the close of the annual *Hajj* pilgrimage (*Eid al-Adha*) as well as the weekly Friday prayer (*salat al-jum'a*). By organizing and hosting these religiously mandated public prayers, Al-Shabab leaders were unmistakably asserting their group's claim to represent the legitimate Islamic political and religious authority in Somalia. In contrast, the internationally-backed TFG, which in 2009 was largely confined to a small part of Mogadishu and completely dependent on thousands of AMISOM troops, was portrayed as illegitimate religiously as well as politically, with the insurgents' ability to hold mass public events boldly highlighting the internationally-recognized government's weakness.

Al-Shabab has released few videos, in contrast to other *jihadi* groups such as Islamic State and Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan groups, of its actual public implementation and ritual performance of the *hudud*, though it frequently reports on such performances of

<sup>43</sup> Representative examples include Somali MeMo, «Two suspected Kenyan spies killed in Jilib in the Middle Juba region,» 11 June 2016; Somali MeMo, «Execution of a sorcerer in Kurtun-waareey town in Lower Shabelle,» 20 January 2016; and Somali Memo, «A group of spies for the U.S. and SFG executed in the Lower Juba region,» 31 December 2015.

<sup>44</sup> Al-Maqdisi, whose real name was Abd al-Latif Musa, had then only recently been killed in a violent standoff between HAMAS security forces and the small *jihadi*-Salafi group Jund Ansar Allah in and around the Mosque of Ibn Taymiyya in the southern Gazan city of Rafah in early August 2009. He and the other members of Jund Ansar Allah were widely eulogized by global *jihadi* groups including AQC and its regional affiliates as well as the GIMF media network and Al-Shabab. Despite his previously marginal status even among global *jihadis*, al-Maqdisi became a heralded example of the «mujahid-scholar» who sacrificed himself for Islam. For details, see BBC News, «Gaza Islamist Leader Dies in Raid,» 15 August 2009, available at [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/8202746.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/8202746.stm), last accessed 17 June 2016; Scott Sanford, «Jihadi Salafi but Not al-Qaida,» Jihadica blog, 25 August 2009, available at <http://www.jihadica.com/jihadi-salafi-but-not-al-qaida/>, last accessed 17 June 2016; and Christopher Anzalone, «Islamist-Nationalism vs. Transnational Salafi Jihadism in Gaza,» Views from the Occident blog, 19 August 2009, available at <http://occident.blogspot.ca/2009/08/islamist-nationalism-vs-transnational.html>, last accessed 17 June 2016, and «Anti-HAMAS 'Information' Campaign Launched by Transnational Jihadi Media Outlets,» Views from the Occident blog, 8 October 2009, available at <http://occident.blogspot.ca/2009/10/anti-hamas-information-campaign.html>, last accessed 17 June 2016.

political violence and projections of power through domestically aimed Somali-language media.<sup>43</sup> In one of the few films produced by its official external media department, footage of the firing squad execution of two Somali men accused of spying and otherwise supporting the TFG and AMISOM is accompanied by lengthy citations from various contemporary *jihadi* and historical Sunni juridical texts including writings by AQC ideologue Abu Yahya al-Libi, the fourteenth century exegete and jurist Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyya, the seventh-century founder of the Maliki legal school Anas bin Malik, the influential Saudi Salafi jurist Muhammad al-Uthaymin, and a lecture by the late Palestinian *jihadi*-Salafi preacher Abu al-Nur al-Maqdisi on their legal opinions regarding the *sharia* punishment for spying, which is execution.<sup>44</sup>

The public ritual performance of the *hudud* and the organization of communal prayers and social events, such as Quran memorization and recitation competitions and festivals marking *Eid al-Fitr* and *Eid al-Adha*, are integral parts of both the domestic performance of political power and the media narrative promoted by Al-Shabab. The group's media wing, together with affiliated media outlets, capture and promote these events to external audiences via the production and release of propaganda films, radio and other audio broadcasts, graphic designs, written communiqués and reports, and photography. Photography in particular is a vital part of Al-Shabab's wider media operations campaign and it became increasingly important and strate-





gically useful when the insurgents began to be pushed back territorially in 2011 and 2012 because it allowed them to continue promoting an image of strength and influence despite military and political setbacks.<sup>45</sup>

The implementation of the *hudud*, as determined by its *sharia* courts, in territories that it controls is also a key component of Al-Shabab's performance of political ritual and demonstration of its ability to selectively implement violence strategically.<sup>46</sup> The insurgent group seeks to bolster its claim to be the legitimate governing authority, in contrast to the weak yet internationally recognized Somali federal government, by overseeing the imposition of a rough form of law and order after decades of wanton predation and unrest. By instituting a form of insurgent «justice,» however philistine and harsh, the group is making a bid for local support or, at the very least, acquiescence to continued rule as opposed to civil or armed resistance.<sup>47</sup> The public implementation (political performance and spectacle) of «justice» in the form of the *hudud* is a highly symbolic claim to political legitimacy as well as a projection of insurgent power. Images of insurgent strength and claims of legitimacy are contrasted in Al-Shabab's media discourse with the corruption of the SFG and



Al-Shabab Eid al-Adha prayer and celebrations organized in October 2013 in the coastal town of Baraawe, which served as the insurgents' de facto hub in 2013 until its capture by AMISOM and Somali government forces in early October 2014.

PHOTOGRAPH RELEASED BY AL-FURQAN MEDIA (2014)

the federal police and army forces. The SFG and its security forces are beset with a number of serious problems including clan rivalries and divisions, nepotism and corruption regarding the selection of individuals for important positions in the government and security forces, and the failure to consistently pay police and other security forces personnel, all of which significantly impacts the government's ability to tackle Al-Shabab and other domestic challengers.<sup>48</sup>

As its territorial control grew, Al-Shabab began to issue and implement edicts through its various offices that sought to regulate both local economies, implementation of law, taxation, military affairs, and foreign NGOs operating in Somalia.<sup>49</sup> The group also moved to impose its writ over local economies and markets while promoting itself as a «just» and capable governing force, going so far as to seize and destroy rotten food and crack down on dishonest merchants and traders as well to organize *sharia* lessons for business people.<sup>50</sup> The insurgent leadership and bureaucracy targeted Christian NGOs and the World Food Program in particular, accusing the former of attempting to spread Christianity in Somalia and the latter of undercutting local produce and livestock markets and the work of Somali farmers by importing massive amounts of cheap food as well as distributing spoiled and rotten foodstuffs.<sup>51</sup> Regarding the latter allegations, Al-Shabab was addressing real criticisms of the WFP's operations inside Somalia that were being made both by local farmers as well as by other U.N. bodies.<sup>52</sup>

Al-Shabab's media apparatus also continued to tap into the central theme of the hostility of Western countries toward Islam and Muslims, both militarily and religiously, as exemplified, according to *jihadi* media operatives, by incidents such as the 2005 publication by the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* of controversial illustrations

of the Prophet Muhammad and threats to burn copies of the Quran by American Evangelical preachers such as the self-promoting Terry Jones in Florida in 2010. Because these events were exhaustively covered in the international news media and widely condemned by many Muslims and not only fringe elements, Al-Shabab sought to tap into a broader audience and the widespread anger of many Muslims globally. Insurgent leaders did this by organizing domestic demonstrations condemning the cartoons and the threats of Jones and other Evangelical Christians as well as by weaving footage of these demonstrations together with public statements by Al-Shabab leaders, including spokesman Ali Rage (also known as Ali Dheere).<sup>53</sup> Threats from American Evangelical Christians such as Jones are portrayed in Al-Shabab's media narratives as being yet another example of the role of the United States as the «head of disbelief (*kufur*)» in a coalition that includes the Somali federal government and AMISOM.<sup>54</sup>

While it was solidifying its territorial control, Al-Shabab continued to try to recruit foreign fighters in order to bolster its ranks. Though the majority of international attention has been paid to foreign fighters from Western Europe, North America and Australia, the group has probably recruited far more foreign fighters from around the Horn of Africa and in neighboring Yemen, where there is a large Somali refugee population as

<sup>45</sup> Photography is an important aspect of the media campaigns of many jihadi organizations including Al-Shabab and Islamic State. The latter, since May/June 2014, has released scores of thousands of photographs both individually and in thematic sets highlighting different aspects of its military operations and governance and projection of power.

<sup>46</sup> Representative Al-Shabab communiqués, «Jaysh al-Hisba kills and crucifies two highway bandits in the province of Juba in southern Somalia,» 10 August 2008 (Arabic); «Juba Guided by the Sharia and Jaysh al-Hisba continues its suppression of highway bandits and missionary work (da'wa),» 13 August 2008 (Arabic); «Judiciary in the province of Juba delivers a ruling of stoning on a woman for zina,» 28 October 2008 (Arabic); «Implementing the ruling of stoning on a young man for raping a young woman and killing her in the suburbs of the city of Wanlaweyn,» 30 June 2009 (Arabic); «Implementing the hadd punishment for highway banditry (hiraba) on four young men who stole money from the Muslims,» 24 June 2009 (Arabic); «The ruling of execution upon two men by firing squad,» 25 November 2010 (Arabic); and «Implementation of the hadd punishment for zina on a rapist of a young woman in the Islamic province of Gedo,» 25 September 2011 (Arabic).

<sup>47</sup> Local populations have several options regarding insurgent rule, which are similar to the options they have vis-à-vis the government. These include active or passive support, acquiescence or indifference, and active resistance, either civilly or militarily. Al-Shabab, even at the height of its power in 2009-2011, did not face overwhelming local armed resistance despite the growing unpopularity (there were, of course, some exceptions). This suggests that the group's leaders were at least partially successful in establishing some form of communication and negotiation with powerful local notables, such as some clan elders and wealthy businessmen. For more on the importance and influence of business support for different forms of Somali Islamism, see Aisha Ahmad, «The Security Bazaar.»

<sup>48</sup> IRIN News, «Shortages, Clan Rivalries Weaken Somalia's New Army,» 28 May 2014, accessed at <http://www.irinnews.org/report/100141/shortages-clan-rivalries-weaken-somalias-new-army>, last accessed 1 October 2016; Lucas Mahlasela, «Understanding Civil Militia Groups in Somalia,» Conflict Trends, no. 2 (2016): 36-44; Mohamad Mubarak, «Somali military has more problems than lack of guns,» African Arguments, 26 February 2014, accessed at <http://africanarguments.org/2014/02/26/somali-military-has-more-problems-than-lack-of-guns-by-mohamed-mubarak/>, last accessed 1 October 2016; and Isaac Mugabi, «Somalia needs substantial funding to strengthen security,» Deutsche Welle, 29 February 2016, accessed at <http://www.dw.com/en/somalia-needs-substantial-funding-to-strengthen-security/a-19083234>, last accessed 5 October 2016.

<sup>49</sup> Representative Al-Shabab communiqués are «Press Release issued by the Office of Political Affairs and the Regional Administrations of Harakat al-Shabab al-Mujahidin concerning NGOs and foreign agencies operating in the administrative districts of Somalia,» 20 July 2009 (Arabic); «Closure of Christian organizations operating inside Somalia,» 8 August 2010; and «WFP (World Food Program) must terminate all its operations inside Somalia,» 27 February 2010.

<sup>50</sup> Al-Shabab communiqués, «Jaysh al-Hisba confiscates rotten food in the Bakaara Market in Mogadishu,» 29 June 2009 (Arabic); «Implementation of the Hadd punishment for theft by cutting the hand of a convicted man in the Shalambod region,» 3 July 2009 (Arabic); «Burning of rotten food from the International Committee of the Red Cross,» 6 December 2011 (Arabic); and «Closing of a sharia course for gold merchants in the Islamic province of Banaadir,» 20 August 2011 (Arabic).

<sup>51</sup> Al-Shabab communiqués «Closure of Christian organizations operating inside Somalia» and Al-Shabab film, *Harvest of the Sharia: Part 1*, released in April 2011.

<sup>52</sup> United Nations Monitoring Group on Somalia, Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia pursuant to Security Council resolution 1853 (2008); Jeffrey Gettleman and Neil MacFarquhar, «Somalia Food Aid Bypasses Needy, U.N. Study Says,» The New York Times, 9 March 2010, accessed at <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/10/world/africa/10somalia.html>, last accessed 1 October 2016; and Jason McLure, «The U.N. Food Programme's Rampant Corruption,» Newsweek, 23 March 2010, accessed at <http://www.newsweek.com/un-food-programmes-rampant-corruption-69491>, last accessed 1 October 2016.

<sup>53</sup> Al-Shabab films *Demonstrations against the Burning of the Quran and The Ninth Martyrdom Operation*.

<sup>54</sup> Al-Shabab films *The Ninth Martyrdom Operation, We at Your Service, O' Osama*, released in September 2009; *The African Crusaders: Fighting the West's War*, released in June 2010; and *Mogadishu, Crusaders' Graveyard*, released in July 2010.



Al-Shabab spokesman Ali Rage holds up a rosary at a public display of scores of bodies of Burundian AMISOM soldiers killed in a major ambush by insurgents in Dayniile in October 2011.

PHOTOGRAPH RELEASED BY AL-FURQAN MEDIA (2011)

well as Yemenis of mixed ethnic heritage. The importance of East African foreign fighters to Al-Shabab and the group's regional media strategies will be examined in a following section.

In March 2009, Al-Shabab's media department released a new recruitment film and fully unveiled an American foreign fighter who would become, in many respects, its public face internationally, Omar Hammami, who went by the *nom-de-guerre* of «Abu Mansur al-Amriki,» «the American.»<sup>55</sup> He had previously been featured in an Al-Jazeera Arabic interview wearing a scarf over his face in October 2007. In the 31-minute 2009 film, Hammami speaks, primarily in English with some Arabic citations of *hadith*, with a group of Al-Shabab fighters before a July 2008 ambush on Ethiopian forces in the Bay region of western Somalia and is also shown con-

sulting with a senior founding group member Mukhtar «Abu Mansur» Robow. Hammami encourages the fighters to be vigilant and extols the value of military *jihād* through invocations of selected *hadith* about *ribat* (garrisoning on the frontiers of Muslim lands) and *jihād*.<sup>56</sup> The film also features a testimonial and recruitment pitch from a second, unidentified foreign fighter, who also speaks in English, as well as a video clip of Osama bin Laden extolling battlefield martyrdom taken from the AQC film series *The Wind of Paradise*, which is dedicated to AQC martyrs killed in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The second foreign fighter delivers a romanticized account of the life of a «*mujahid*,» detailing what he claims is the abundance of food, mentioning specifically goat meat and milk.<sup>57</sup> It was in *Ambush at Bardale* that Hammami introduced his soon-to-become much maligned rapping abilities, delivering lines praising the *mujahidin* and castigating their opponents.<sup>58</sup> He would continue recording independently released *jihadi* rap songs as well as recorded lectures on issues such as the concept of the caliphate until his death in 2013, which were not released by Al-Shabab's official media channels.<sup>59</sup>

Traveling to Somalia from Egypt in November 2006, Hammami originally joined the military wing of the ICU, though he later wrote in an unfinished memoir that the grassroots umbrella movement ultimately failed because of its «tribal» mindset and political and military hubris in trying to incorporate too much territory, too rapidly.<sup>60</sup> Originally training with a group of fighters loyal to Hassan al-Turki, Hammami eventually moved over to the growing Al-Shabab movement.<sup>61</sup> His career in Al-Shabab, which started out promisingly for him,



Al-Shabab media personality and field commander Omar Hammami (right), known by the *nom de guerre* «Abu Mansur al-Amriki» (the American), planning an ambush on Ethiopian forces near Bardale, Somalia, with Mukhar Robow, a founding member of Al-Shabab, in 2008. A video of the ambush and preparations for it was released in March 2009.

AL-SHABAB FILM, AMBUSH AT BARDALE (2009)

would end in his dramatic fall from grace, a public split with the Godane-led faction of Al-Shabab, and, ultimately, his summary execution by Godane loyalists in September 2013 following a ruthless crackdown by the group's *Amniyat* security network.<sup>62</sup>

Hammami's exact role in the group was never clear and his role was probably exaggerated by many in the Western news media because he spoke in English and was a poster boy for the handsome young Western «boy next door» gone bad.<sup>63</sup> In Al-Shabab media he

was referred to both by the honorific title «*sheikh*,» referring generally to a leader, though this does not equate with a specific «rank» and is often used quite liberally by *jihadis*, and as a «field commander» (*al-qa'id al-maydani*). He was accused by the U.S. government of planning an October 2008 suicide bombing carried out by fellow American foreign fighter Shirwa Ahmed in Puntland and of being a «military tactician, recruitment strategist and financial manager» for Al-Shabab, though the evidence for this was not provided.<sup>64</sup> Despite the international hype around Hammami, he only appeared in three official Al-Shabab films and was mentioned by name only a few times in written insurgent communiqués. He also appeared at some public events organized by the group and was covered by semi-official and pro-insurgent news media such as Radio al-Andalus and Radio al-Furqan; the most notable of these public events was a May 2011 event eulogizing and extolling the recently slain Osama bin Laden.<sup>65</sup>

In September 2009, Al-Shabab's media department released a highly polished, HD film (the largest version of which was 1 GB, a new high for the group's media production capabilities), *We Are at Your Service, O' Osama (Labbayk, Ya Usama)*, in which the group's amir, Ahmed Godane, declared, in Arabic, his loyalty to the AQC leader, who had praised the «*mujahidin* in Somalia» generally and without specifically identifying Al-Shabab in a March 2009 audio message.<sup>66</sup> The

<sup>62</sup> Internal divisions within Al-Shabab in 2013 resulted in a number of high-profile defections by senior figures including Robow and Aweys as well as the execution, in late June 2013, of founding members Ibrahim al-Afghani and Mu'allim Burhan by the *Amniyat*. For an overview of the struggle between Hammami, backed by the anti-Godane faction within Al-Shabab, and Godane and his loyalists, see Stig Jarle Hansen, «An In-depth Look at Al-Shabab's Internal Divisions,» CTC Sentinel (February 2014), available at <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/an-in-depth-look-at-al-shababs-internal-divisions>, last accessed 17 June 2016, and Christopher Anzalone, «The Life and Death of Al-Shabab Leader Ahmed Godane,» CTC Sentinel (September 2014), available at <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-life-and-death-of-al-shabab-leader-ahmed-godane>, last accessed 17 June 2016.

<sup>63</sup> For further details on Hammami's life and path to Al-Shabab, see Andrea Elliott, «The Jihadist Next Door,» *The New York Times*, 27 January 2010, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/31/magazine/31Jihadist-t.html?hp=&pagewanted=all&r=0>, last accessed 16 May 2016, and Christopher Anzalone, «The End of a Romance? The Rise and Fall of an American Jihadi: Omar Hammami's Relationship with Somalia's Al-Shabab,» Al-Wasat blog, 17 March 2012, available at <https://thewasat.wordpress.com/2012/03/17/the-end-of-a-romance-omar-hammamis-relationship-with-somalias-al-shabab/>, last accessed 18 May 2016, and «The Evolution of an American Jihadi.»

<sup>64</sup> See the July 29, 2011 press release from the U.S. Department of the Treasury on Hammami at [https://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/Programs/Documents/20110729\\_Somalia.pdf](https://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/Programs/Documents/20110729_Somalia.pdf), last accessed 17 June 2016.

<sup>65</sup> Christopher Anzalone, «Harakat al-Shabab in Somalia Hold Conference to Eulogize Osama bin Laden, American Member Omar Hammami Present,» Views from the Occident blog, 11 May 2011, available at <http://occident.blogspot.ca/2011/05/harakat-al-shabab-in-somalia-hold.html>, last accessed 17 June 2016.

<sup>55</sup> Al-Shabab film, *Ambush at Bardale*, released March 2009.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> These independently released materials include four monographs in which Hammami discussed his strategic and ideological views and a series of audio lectures on the future of the *jihadi* current («*Lessons Learned*,» released in October 2011) and the concept of the caliphate («*In the Defense of the Khilaafa*,» four parts, released in May 2012). The four books, all written under the pen name «Abu Jihad al-Shami,» are *An Islaamic Guide to Strategy* (2010), *The Vision of the Jihadi Movement & the Strategy for the Current Stage* (2010), and *A Strategy for Syria* (2011). For analysis of his writings, see Christopher Anzalone, «The Evolution of an American Jihadi: The Case of Omar Hammami,» CTC Sentinel (June 2012), available at <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-evolution-of-an-american-jihadi-the-case-of-omar-hammami>, last accessed 18 May 2016.

<sup>60</sup> Omar Hammami (as «Abu Mansur al-Amriki»), *The Story of an American Jihadi: Part 1* (n.p., May 2016), 58.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 94-98.

nearly 50-minute-long film, which is subtitled in English, weaves together a visual, audio, and print narrative of «Crusader» oppression in the form of U.S.-backed AMISOM and Somali government forces, showing dead and wounded Somalis and livestock, the casualties of alleged indiscriminate shelling. Video and audio clips from speeches by bin Laden, Afghanistan Taliban and TTP-affiliated *jihadi* religious scholar and preacher *Ustadh* Muhammad Yasir, and the late Abdullah Azzam are used to highlight Western hypocrisy on the issues of warfare and terrorism, demonstrated by the latter's labeling of any form of resistance to its hegemony as «terrorism» while excusing its own violence. In the film, through a video clip of Azzam, Al-Shabab once again accepted the label of «terrorist,» though not in the meaning of its enemies but in what its members interpreted as the Quranic injunction to defend Islam and Muslims, which for the *jihadis* refers to what they see as legitimate armed resistance to Western colonialism and imperialism.<sup>67</sup> The «apostate» Somali government is criticized heavily in the film for its failure to implement Islamic law and reliance on AMISOM, the United States, and other external forces.<sup>68</sup> This provides the narrative transition to extensive footage of Al-Shabab military training, parades, and battlefield operations against the Somali government and AMISOM.<sup>69</sup>

Despite the clear desire of Godane to formalize Al-Shabab's relationship with AQC and the exchange of private letters between the two, bin Laden appears to have continued to have doubts and misgivings about the political and governance strategy being pursued by the insurgent group in Somalia and also expressed concern that a public formalization of ties would increase

<sup>67</sup> Al-Shabab film, *We Are at Your Service, O' Osama*.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> From the Abbottabad documents captured at bin Laden's compound and available through West Point's Combating Terrorism Center, see SOCOM-2012-0000005 and SOCOM-2012-0000006.

<sup>71</sup> Osama bin Laden, «Letter to Mukhtar Abu al-Zubayr (Godane),» 7 August 2010, available at <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/letter-from-osama-bin-laden-to-mukhtar-abu-al-zubayr-original-language-2>, last accessed 17 June 2016, and Nelly Lahoud, Stuart Caudill, Liam Collins, Gabriel Koehler-Derrick, Don Rassler, and Muhammad al-Ubaydi, *Letters from Abbottabad: Bin Laden Sidelined?* (West Point: Combating Terrorism Center, 2012), available at [https://www.ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/CTC\\_LtrsFromAbbottabad\\_WEB\\_v2.pdf](https://www.ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/CTC_LtrsFromAbbottabad_WEB_v2.pdf), last accessed 17 June 2016.

<sup>72</sup> AQAP film, *The First Exclusive Interview with the Sheikh-Missionary Preacher Anwar al-Awlaqi*.



Adan Hashi Farah Ayro, one of the founding members of Al-Shabab, acted as the group's public face until his death in U.S. airstrike in May 2008.

AL-SHABAB FILM, PROFITING FROM THE EXCHANGE: ABU MUHSIN, THE MARTYR-LEADER ADAN AYRO (2008)

international pressure on Godane's group.<sup>70</sup> The AQC leader, who advised Godane not to publicly declare a state in Somalia, also expressed concerns in communications with the Al-Shabab leader and other AQC figures about the insurgents' harsh interpretation and implementation of Islamic law and, in his view, failure to satisfactorily improve local economies on the ground inside Somalia.<sup>71</sup> His views stood in contrast to those expressed publicly by AQAP ideologue Anwar al-Awlaqi in 2010 during an internal interview with AQAP's media wing in which the American-Yemeni preacher declares Al-Shabab to be a shining example of how *jihadi* groups should operate, going as far as to say that other groups should dispatch emissaries to Somalia in order to learn first-hand how to establish a true statelet despite «limited resources» and manpower.<sup>72</sup>

## MASKING SETBACKS: AL-SHABAB'S MEDIA DURING PERIODS OF DECLINE, 2011-2016

In February 2011, AMISOM and Somali government forces, together with allied anti-Shabab clan-based militias, began a new series of offensives against Al-Shabab, seeking first to drive the insurgents out of Mogadishu before launching new pushes outside of the capital. Though beset with delays and logistical, strategic, and battlefield setbacks during different phases, this new series of offensives succeeded, by the autumn of 2012, in pushing Al-Shabab out of almost all of the major urban and economic hubs under its control, including Mogadishu and the cities and towns of Baidoa, Kismaayo, and Marka. In October 2014, the insurgent group withdrew from the coastal town of Baraawe, its last major holding on the Somali coast that had served since the fall of Kismaayo in 2012 as the centerpiece of its continuing projection of governing legitimacy and military force, and a center for the performance of political rituals, such as the hosting of communal events and prayers. Al-Shabab's enemies took advantage of the



Al-Shabab fighters carry out an ambush of AMISOM troops in Af-maadow in Somalia's Middle Juba region.

AL-SHABAB FILM, FROM THE FRONTIERS OF GLORY 4: FROM GOLIS TO LAMU (2016)

<sup>73</sup> Representative Al-Shabab films include *El Wak-Repelling the Kenyan Proxies*, released in February 2012; the film series *Disperse Them so as to Strike Fear in Those Who Follow* (which takes its title from Quran 8:57), which currently includes 12 installments released between April 2013 and July 2015; the film series *From the Frontiers of Glory*, which currently includes three installments released between February and November 2015; *The Hayyo Raid*, released 30 August 2012; the film series *They are Enemies so Beware of Them* (which takes its title from Qur'an 63:4), which currently includes six installments released between January 2012 and March 2015; and *The Burundian Bloodbath: Battle of Dayniile*, released in November 2010.

group's significant casualties during its 2010 «Ramadan offensive» inside Mogadishu as well as growing internal discord between rival factions within the insurgent group itself. Kenya's military intervention in southern Somalia and the re-entrance of Ethiopian troops to western Somalia in October and November 2011 further tipped the military scales against the insurgents.

Al-Shabab leaders and commanders, recognizing that the strategic environment was shifting, began in August 2011 to move back to the group's insurgent roots by returning to a focus on asymmetric warfare against more numerous and better-equipped AMISOM and Somali government forces with their militia allies. Rather than fight hopeless battles against overwhelming odds, the group more frequently opted for strategic withdrawals from major urban centers. It also maintained networks within many of the «liberated» areas, including Mogadishu and Kismaayo, where insurgents continue to carry out attacks of various types.

The insurgent group's media output provides insight into this shift in military tactics as official films began to frequently feature hit-and-run-style attacks, including pinpoint mass assaults on isolated AMISOM, Somali government, and Kenyan or Ethiopian-aligned Somali militia positions, checkpoints, and columns.<sup>73</sup> Al-Shabab's print military reports also demonstrate the importance of asymmetric warfare to the group, highlighting the most frequent types of tactics and attacks it has carried out for the past several years.

These include the use of IEDs, hit-and-run ambushes on convoys and checkpoints, targeted assassinations with firearms and car bombs, mortar fire and the use of grenades against enemy positions, and highly coordinated attacks on «soft targets» such as hotels and restaurants,



particularly those popular with Somali government, AMISOM, and international figures in Mogadishu and other major urban centers.<sup>74</sup>

The pace of insurgent media production has slowed periodically since battlefield setbacks began to mount in late 2011 into 2012, but Al-Shabab's media apparatus continues to be able to produce highly polished, HD propaganda films, some of which are intended to resemble documentaries in order to give them an added allure of truthfulness and reliability. The most noticeable change in the group's media output has been in the timing of the release of its military reports and statements. There were releases almost daily between 2009 and February 2013 but since then they have been reduced to monthly reports organized according to the Islamic lunar calendar. The method for the online distribution of its media materials, both visual and print, has also shifted since 2013-2014 from *jihadi* Internet discussion forums, many of which are now either password-protected with closed registrations or shut down, to distribution via free posting and file-sharing web sites.

Al-Shabab media operatives spearheaded, in 2010 and 2011, *jihadi* use of Twitter as a «real time» platform for delivering the insurgent spin on current events, making

particularly adept use of the micro-blogging platform during its September 2013 attack on the Westgate Mall in Nairobi, Kenya.<sup>75</sup> During the days-long attack and siege, Al-Shabab's «HSM Press» Twitter accounts constantly cast doubt on the confused and often contradictory responses from various parts of the Kenyan government about details and updates concerning the ongoing attack and possible identities of the attackers, attracting a great deal of media attention.<sup>76</sup> Though the group eventually shifted away from Twitter after the increasingly rapid closing down of its accounts by site administrators, Al-Shabab was one of the groups that opened the door to jihadi use of the social media platform and demonstrated its usefulness as a propaganda tool, something that Islamic State has subsequently taken to new heights.<sup>77</sup> Al-Shabab, through its use of Twitter, was able to influence news coverage of Somalia and the ongoing conflict there in real time, particularly during periods of crisis, and successfully manipulate the media environment. Recognizing the increasing importance of micro-blogging, Al-Shabab's media operatives were *jihadi* pioneers in social media. However, social media has also hurt the insurgents by allowing dissenters and critics from within the *jihadi* current, such as Omar Hammami and other defected foreign fighters and Somali members, to publicly goad Al-Shabab's leaders, members, and supporters into bitter and embarrassing public feuds as well as leaving the insurgents open to new forms of attack by their en-

emies. The emergence of new social media platforms and their capabilities, in short, have been a «double-edged sword» for the group.<sup>78</sup>

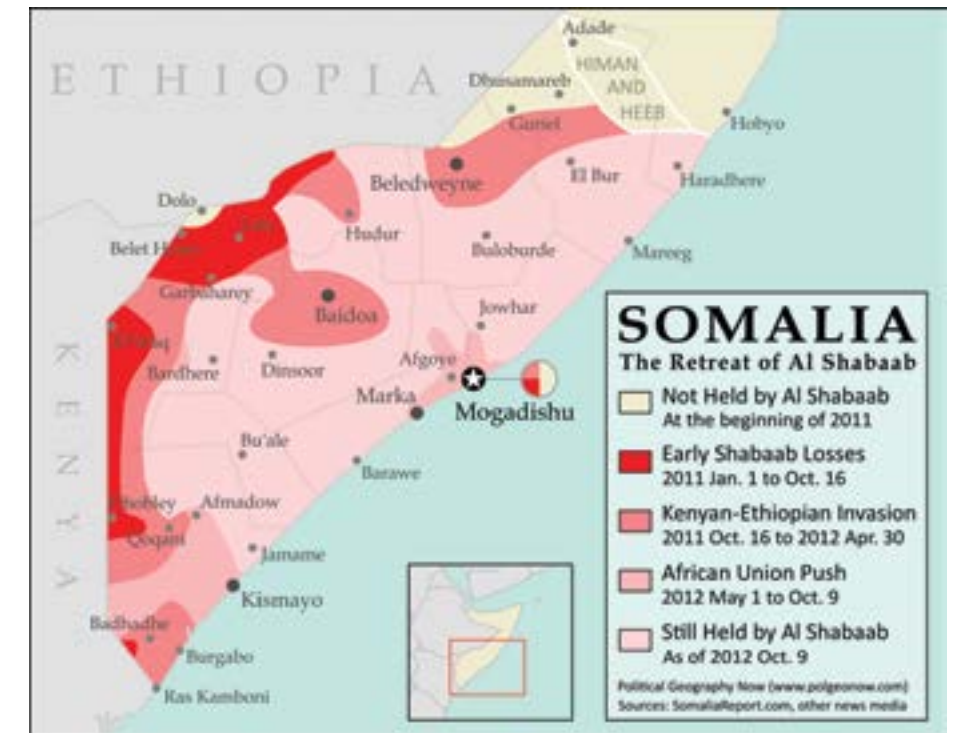
As the amount of territory controlled by Al-Shabab began to shrink in 2011 and 2012, the group's media apparatus produced a series of releases issued via multiple official, semi-official, and affiliated outlets promoting a positive image of insurgent rule, complete with testimonials from locals praising the group.<sup>79</sup>

The insurgent group's leadership and media operatives also promoted and highlighted Al-Shabab's attempts to address the 2011 East Africa famine and continuing food shortages in 2012. These included the construction of temporary internal refugee camps and continuing the distribution of foodstuffs, livestock, medicines, financial assistance and other humanitarian aid collected and distributed as religiously required charitable taxes (*zakat*) by the group's offices and units.<sup>80</sup> During periods when it faced mounting battlefield setbacks, territorial losses, and the famine, it was all the more imperative for Al-Shabab's leaders to promote a positive image of their group's humanitarian aid campaign, in large part because it was Al-Shabab's obstructionist policies that heightened the suffering of many Somalis.<sup>81</sup>

<sup>79</sup> Al-Shabab films, *Under the Shade of Sharia*, released in July 2012 and three installments of the film series *Harvest of the Sharia* released between 2011 and 2014.

<sup>80</sup> Al-Shabab communiqués, «Distribution of food aid to 200 disabled people in the province of Juba,» 27 April 2012 (Arabic); «Distribution of aid to more than 1,900 families in the city of Hin Diri,» 12 March 2012 (Arabic); and «Distribution of seeds to farmers in the Janaale district,» 28 April 2012 (Arabic). In addition, Al-Shabab film series, *Harvest of the Sharia*, which currently numbers three installments released between April 2011 and December 2014. For further details of Al-Shabab's promotion of a highly idealized image of its governance, see Christopher Anzalone, «Al-Shabab's Setbacks in Somalia,» CTC Sentinel (October 2011), available at <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/al-shabab%E2%80%99s-setbacks-in-somalia>, last accessed 17 June 2016, and «Al-Shabab's Tactical and Media Strategies in the Wake of Its Battlefield Setbacks,» CTC Sentinel (March 2013), available at <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/al-shababs-tactical-and-media-strategies-in-the-wake-of-its-battlefield-setbacks>, last accessed 17 June 2016.

<sup>81</sup> Ken Menkhaus, «No Access: Critical Bottlenecks in the 2011 Somali Famine,» *Global Food Security* 1, no. 1 (2012), 29-35.



MAP BY EVAN CENTANNI, POLGEONOW (WWW.POLGEONOW.COM), WITH ERIC GABA AND THEMIRR (CREATIVE COMMONS BY-SA)



Al-Shabab live Tweeted the Westgate Mall attack via its HSM Press Twitter accounts and released audio recordings from the attackers inside the mall in a lengthy February 2015 propaganda film released in Arabic and English, and later Somali, documenting the operation. AL-SHABAB FILM, THE WESTGATE SIEGE: RETRIBUTIVE JUSTICE (2015)

## EAST AFRICAN RECRUITMENT AND AL-SHABAB'S MEDIA

Al-Shabab draws upon three main groups in populating its ranks: first, domestic recruits from inside Somalia; second, ethnic Somali recruits living in diaspora communities; and third, non-Somali foreign fighters from outside the country. The third group, the foreign fighters, can be divided into Somalis living outside of the

<sup>82</sup> Al-Shabab films, *Message to the Ummah: And Inspire the Believers*, released in November 2010; *The Path to Paradise: From the Twin Cities to the Land of Two Migrations*, released in August 2013; and the film series *Mujahidin Moments*, which currently includes 10 installments released between February 2013 and May 2016.

<sup>83</sup> David Shinn, «Al Shabaab's Foreign Threat to Somalia», *Orbis* 55, no. 2 (2011), 209-210.

<sup>84</sup> At a conference held in September 2010, Terrence Ford, then the director of intelligence and knowledge development for the U.S. Africa Command, estimated Al-Shabab's foreign fighters as numbering around 1,000, including 200 to 300 non-Somalis. See video of his remarks at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CTNvXZl0bjw>, last accessed 17 June 2016.

<sup>85</sup> Christopher Anzalone, «Kenya's Muslim Youth Center and Al-Shabab's East African Recruitment», *CTC Sentinel* 5, no. 10 (2012): 9-13, Fredrick Nzes, «Al-Hijra: Al-Shabab's Affiliate in Kenya», *CTC Sentinel* 7, no. 5 (2014): 24-36, and Andre LeSage, «The Rising Terrorist Threat in Tanzania: Domestic Islamist Militancy and Regional Threats», *Institute for National Strategic Studies (INSS) Strategic Forum*, September 2014, available at <http://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/stratforum/SF-288.pdf>.

<sup>86</sup> That being said, Swahili-speaking recruits have always been a part of Al-Shabab's media operations, appearing in some of the group's earliest films. Al-Shabab supporters in Kenya published seven issues of a glossy Swahili-language e-magazine, *Gaidi Mtaani* («Local/Neighborhood/Street Terrorism» in Swahili), between April 2012 and February 2015.

country in neighboring countries around the Horn of Africa and the Arab world, Somalis living in diaspora communities further afield in countries in Western Europe, North America, and Australia, and non-Somalis both from inside and outside of East Africa.<sup>83</sup> The non-Somalis can further be divided into a group that is recruited regionally and another group originating from outside of the Horn of Africa. Although the total number and exact makeup of Al-Shabab's foreign fighter contingent is not known with any certainty, recruits from around and adjacent to East Africa likely make up the largest single group.<sup>84</sup> There is ample and growing evidence in Al-Shabab's media operations campaign that regional recruits, mostly composed of disaffected Swahili-speaking Muslim youth from neighboring countries such as Kenya and Tanzania, account for an increasingly high percentage of both the group's overall frontline fighting force and its foreign fighters as a whole.<sup>85</sup>

The insurgents' media operations are aimed at multiple audiences, often simultaneously. These include local, regional, and global audiences of potential supporters as well as the group's enemies including the United States, AMISOM, Britain, Kenya, and Ethiopia. Since 2012, Al-Shabab's media apparatus has steadily increased the number of productions – film, audio recordings, and written statements and publications – aimed at a Swahili-speaking audience. The number of Swahili-speaking foreign fighters, most of them Kenyan, featured in Al-Shabab's propaganda films, for example, has noticeably risen since the autumn of 2010.<sup>86</sup> Al-Shabab's official media organs and affiliated Swa-

hili-language jihadi media outlets also began publishing weapons instruction manuals and ideological and creedal tracts for Kenyan supporters and members.<sup>87</sup>

In November 2010, Al-Kata'ib Media released a 35-minute recruitment film urging the world's Muslims to come to Somalia and join Al-Shabab.<sup>88</sup> Subtitled in English and Swahili, the film featured nine foreign fighters who were identified by their *noms de guerre*, six of whom were from East Africa or environs: three from Kenya, one from Ethiopia, one from Tanzania, and one from Sudan. Al-Shabab's official spokesman, Ali Rage, delivered a recruitment pitch, heavy on Quranic citations, in both Arabic and Swahili.<sup>89</sup> An increasing number of Swahili-speaking foreign fighters, most of them from Kenya, have appeared in subsequent insurgent film releases, particularly those dedicated to the recruitment of new foreign fighters.<sup>90</sup> Swahili speakers, who number an estimated 35 million people around the Horn of Africa, have also appeared at major Al-Shabab-organized public events such as celebrations marking the formalization of the group's affiliation with AQC in the spring of 2012, further demonstrating the growing importance of the insurgents' regional foreign fighter contingent, particularly from Kenya.<sup>91</sup>

<sup>87</sup> Al-Shabab weapons manual, *Preparation for Jihad: AK-47*, released September 2014 (Swahili); Swahili jihadi nashid album released in October 2014 by the Swahili jihadi media outlet *Sauti Ribaati* («Voices from the frontier», referring to those stationed in *ribat*, meaning garrisoned on the frontiers to fight enemies of Islam); and Ahmad Iman Ali, *The Book of Fasting*, a series of Swahili audio lectures on fasting during Ramadan, released in June 2016.

<sup>88</sup> Al-Shabab film, *Message to the Ummah: And Inspire the Believers*.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>90</sup> See, for example, the Al-Shabab film series *Mujahidin Moments*.

<sup>91</sup> Al-Shabab film, *The Year of Unity*, 1433 [Hijri], released in April 2012.

<sup>92</sup> For the sake of clarity and simplicity, the group will be referred to here as the Muslim Youth Centre (MYC), though it later adopted the name Al-Hijra, referencing the migration of the early Muslims from Mecca (non-Muslim land) to Medina (Muslim land).

<sup>93</sup> U.N. Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea, «Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea submitted in accordance with Resolution 1916», (2010), 140-142.

<sup>94</sup> Rogo was gunned down on August 27, 2012, in what is suspected of being an extrajudicial killing carried out by the anti-terrorist unit of the Kenyan police. He is one of a growing number of controversial Kenyan Muslim clerics to have been mysteriously killed. Others include Samir «Abu Nuseyba» Khan (who was abducted and later found murdered in April 2012) and Abubakar Sharif Ahmed «Makaburi» (who was gunned down in April 2014 outside of the Shanzu Courts building in Mombasa).

<sup>95</sup> U.N. Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea, 2010 Report, 141.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>97</sup> Al-Shabab film, *But If They Seek Help from You in Matters of Religion, It Is Your Duty to Help Them*, released in January 2012. The title is taken from Quran 8:72. The MYC announced Ahmad Iman Ali's role as amir of its Somalia branch in a January 11, 2012, statement, «Ahmad Iman Ali appointed supreme amir for Kenya.»

At the forefront of Al-Shabab's East African recruitment drive is a charismatic religious preacher, Ahmad Iman Ali, the founder and head of a group calling itself the Muslim Youth Centre (MYC) and later Al-Hijra.<sup>92</sup> Formally coalescing between 2006 and 2008, the MYC originally operated as a communal organization for poor, disenfranchised Kenyan Muslim youth in the Majengo district of the capital city, Nairobi. The group later expanded to the cities of Mombasa and Garissa, home to large Muslim communities.<sup>93</sup> Guided religiously by Aboud Rogo, a charismatic preacher known for his fiery sermons, the MYC initially self-funded through membership dues, which it used to run lectures and other group events for local Muslim youth.<sup>94</sup> An avowed and vocal supporter of Al-Shabab, Rogo reportedly traveled to Somalia prior to 2010, and the MYC reciprocated by hosting visiting insurgent operatives.<sup>95</sup> Kenyans affiliated with the Pumwani Muslim Youth, a precursor organization to the MYC, also began traveling to Somalia by 2006-2007 in order to fight.<sup>96</sup>

Ahmad Iman Ali, who was named by the MYC as its amir, was introduced by Al-Shabab's media department in January 2012 with the release of a video in which the Kenyan preacher addresses the camera alone and in Swahili.<sup>97</sup> Speaking for close to an hour, Ali presented



a narrative in which the Kenyan government, because of its outward hostility and discrimination toward its Muslims and those in neighboring Somalia, opened its country up as a legitimate «field of jihad» in the form of operations carried out by the «mujahidin.» Kenya's status as an enemy of Muslims is exemplified, he argued, by its alliances with the United States, AMISOM, Israel, and Ethiopia as well as the «apostate» Somali federal government.<sup>98</sup> Iman Ali also continued Al-Shabab's claim of the «terrorist» label as one of honor, arguing that the term is used by the Muslims' enemies and oppressors simply as a justification for their war against Islam and Muslims.<sup>99</sup> Militants' actions against Kenya are, he said, a form of defensive jihad and only a response to ongoing aggressions started by the «forces of unbelief» (*kufri*).<sup>100</sup> In closing, and continuing in subsequently released videos released by Al-Kataib through late 2015, the Kenyan preacher urged Muslims, particularly those in Kenya, to join the fight against their oppressors as part of Al-Shabab's ranks, citing both religious justifications such as what he sees as the continual struggle between Islam and unbelief as well as domestic issues specific to the injustices, real and perceived, toward Kenyan Muslims inside Kenya.<sup>101</sup>

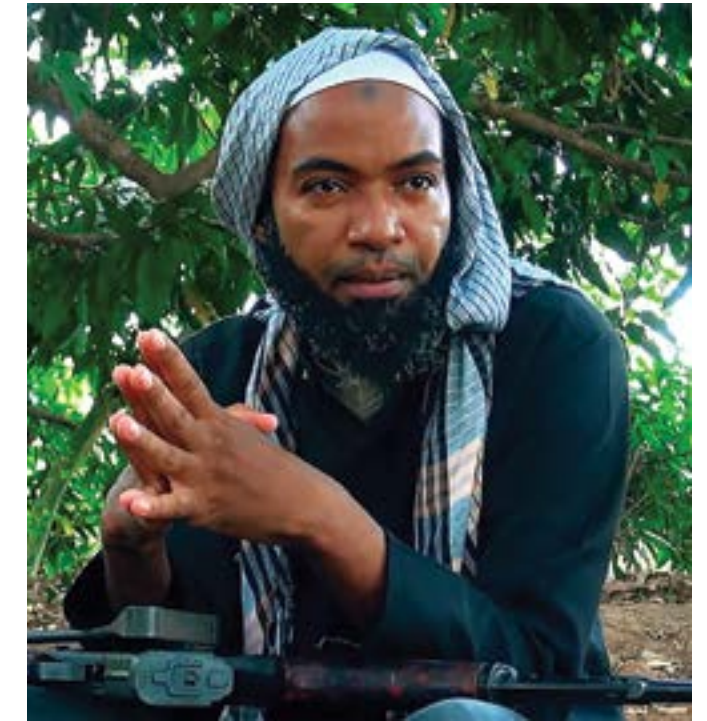
Official Al-Shabab media materials directed at East African audiences are further supplemented by the media campaigns and productions of a number of other regional jihadi groups affiliated or allied to the Somali insurgents, including Al-Muhajiroun in East Africa, and online media networks such as the Shahada («martyrdom» or «witnessing») News Agency.<sup>102</sup> Between April

2012 and February 2015, Swahili-speaking Al-Shabab supporters, probably in Kenya, produced and published online a pro-insurgent jihadi magazine, *Gaidi Mtaani* (roughly translating to «terrorism street» or «terrorist on the street»). Though not branded officially as an Al-Shabab production, its producers clearly stated their support for the Somali insurgents. Featuring articles in both Swahili and English, *Gaidi Mtaani* seeks both to bolster support for Al-Shabab and its Kenyan jihadi allies and affiliates among Swahili-speaking and specifically Kenyan audiences and to engage with their enemies, such as the U.S. and Kenyan governments. Kenyan Muslims are urged to «stand with the *mujahidin*» and warned against backbiting or spreading negative rumors and news about them and thereby aiding the «enemies of Islam and the Muslims.»<sup>103</sup> Readers are also instructed as to how they could recognize government spies and protect themselves from being targeted as «intelligence assets.»<sup>104</sup>

Attention is given to the history of British colonialism in East Africa and the role of the British in dividing Somali regions from Somalia, such as the Ogaden region in Ethiopia and the North Eastern Province in Kenya. The British government, the magazine's writers warn, is seeking to create a regional East African proxy along the lines of Israel, a proxy state through which it can continue to rule indirectly and subjugate Muslim populations.<sup>105</sup> How ironic, they argue, that the «colonial masters of yesterday,» today joined by the United States, are still exercising political and economic control over their weak and willing local proxies such

as the Kenyan and Somali governments, just as they did during the 19th and early 20th centuries during the height of European imperialism.<sup>106</sup> The real reasons that Kenya, Burundi, Uganda, and Ethiopia, all of which contribute significant numbers of troops to the AMISOM force inside Somalia, are actively attempting to meddle in Somalia are, the writers allege, economic; they are attempting to relieve economic pressures at home and, in the case of Kenya, attempting to «mimic» the United States in claiming to desire a «security buffer zone» in southern Somalia.<sup>107</sup>

Kenya's invasion of southern Somalia, far from being a negative event, is a blessed opportunity according to the producers of *Gaidi Mtaani* in that it enables Kenyan Muslims to now engage in warfare styled as «jihad» inside of their home country.<sup>108</sup> The invasion and the increasing number of abuses against Somali and Kenyan Muslims both at home and abroad will further expand the potential base of recruits for the jihadis by bringing out Kenyan Christians' (the majority) «hatred towards Muslims,» a development which in turn will lead to the radicalization of formerly «moderate Muslims» who will now seek to defend their fundamental religious beliefs and identities.<sup>109</sup> This ideological transformation and move toward a purity and strength of belief is the main source of the jihadis' strength, which is not based on geographical areas but rather on the strength of their ideological commitments.<sup>110</sup>



Ahmad Iman Ali, a key ideologue and leader of Kenyan foreign fighters aligned with Al-Shabab in Somalia.

AL-SHABAB FILM, AWAIT THEN FOR WE ARE WAITING WITH YOU (2016)

*Gaidi Mtaani* and other media materials produced by Kenyan jihadi groups, including newsletters and magazines published by a group allied to Al-Shabab, Al-Muhajiroun («emigrants») in East Africa, clearly illustrate the importance of charismatic religious preachers such as Rogo, Samir Khan, Abubakar Makaburi, and Ibrahim Omar, all of whom have been murdered under suspicious circumstances between 2012 and 2014.<sup>111</sup> Ken-

<sup>98</sup> Al-Shabab film, *But If They Seek Help from You in Matters of Religion*.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.* and Al-Shabab film, *The Killing and Persecution of Muslims in Kenya*, released in June 2012 (Swahili).

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.* and Al-Shabab films, *So Lose Not Heart nor Fall into Despair*, released in December 2014 (Swahili); *Democracy is Unbelief*, released in March 2013 (Swahili); *O' Muslim, Fight*, released in October 2012 (Swahili); *Concerning the Bay'a of the Mujahidin*, released in April 2012 (Swahili with English subtitles); *O' Believers, Depart for Hijra*, released in August 2015 (Swahili with English subtitles); and *How Often a Small Group Overcame a Mighty Host by God's Leave*, released October 2015 (Swahili with English subtitles; the title is taken from Quran 2:249).

<sup>102</sup> Al-Muhajiroun in East Africa, which is affiliated with the Muslim Youth Centre but appears to be a separate group, has published a magazine, *Amka*, and publishes a newsletter for women, *Al-Ghurabaa* («The Strangers,» which references hadith in which the Prophet Muhammad is reported to have said that Islam will once again become something «strange» and true Muslims «strangers» amidst a sea of unbelief and falsity).

<sup>103</sup> «Kuwalinda Mujahidin na Kusimama Pamoja» and «Kupiga Vita Uongo Khabari za Magharibi,» (Swahili), *Gaidi Mtaani*, no. 1 (April 2012), 3.

<sup>104</sup> «10 Namna ya Kumjua Jasusi,» (Swahili), *Gaidi Mtaani*, no. 1 (April 2012), 9-10.

<sup>105</sup> «Usaliti wa Uingereza Kwa Wasislamu,» (Swahili), *Gaidi Mtaani*, no. 1 (April 2012), 4-5.

<sup>106</sup> «The Long Road to Kismayu,» *Gaidi Mtaani*, no. 2 (July 2012), 7-16, and «Operation Linda UKAFIRI (sic),» *Gaidi Mtaani*, no. 2, 21-25.

<sup>107</sup> «Leveling the Scales,» *Gaidi Mtaani*, no. 1 (April 2012), 13-14.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.* and «East Africa: Jihad's Homecoming,» *Amka*, no. 2 (July 2015), 15-16.

<sup>110</sup> «The Long Road to Kismayu.»

<sup>111</sup> Ludovica Iaccino, «Kenyan Al-Shabab Supporter Shot Dead: Who was Sheikh Makaburi?», *International Business Times*, 3 April 2014, accessed at <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/kenyan-al-shabab-supporter-shot-dead-who-was-sheikh-makaburi-1443297>, last accessed 5 October 2016; BBC News, «Ibrahim 'Rogo' Omar: Kenyan Cleric Shot Dead in Mombasa,» 4 October 2013, accessed at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-24395723>, last accessed 5 October 2016; Maureen Mudi and Raphael Mwadine, «Two Terror Suspects Found Murdered in Mombasa,» *The Star* (Kenya), 13 April 2012, accessed at <http://allafrica.com/stories/201204140310.html>, last accessed 1 October 2016; Calvin Onsarigo, «List of Muslim Clerics Killed in Two Years,» *The Star* (Kenya), 11 June 2014, accessed at <http://allafrica.com/stories/201406110917.html>, last accessed 5 October 2016; Leela Jacinto, «Kenya's Mysteriously Disappeared Islamic Clerics,» *France24*, accessed at <http://www.france24.com/en/20120905-kenya-mysteriously-killed-disappeared-islamic-clerics-mombasa-rogo-kassim-shabaab>, last accessed 5 October 2016; Margot Kiser, «Death Squads in Kenya's Shadow War on Shabaab Sympathizers,» *The Daily Beast*, 6 April 2014, accessed at <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/04/06/death-squads-in-kenya-s-shadow-war-on-shabaab-sympathizers.html>, last accessed 5 October 2016; and IRIN News,

ya's anti-terrorism police units are suspected by many of committing the killings<sup>112</sup> The preachers are cited in both Kenyan *jihadi* publications and by Kenyan Al-Shabab fighters as examples to follow and the desire to avenge their deaths is invoked as one of the reasons for engagement in a war against the Kenyan state.<sup>113</sup>

In January 2016, Al-Shabab launched a surprise coordinated mass assault on a Kenyan military base at El-Adde in Somalia's Gedo region, killing as many as 141 Kenyan troops and capturing others alive.<sup>114</sup> The Kenyan government publicly acknowledged only a fraction of these casualties, though reporting by CNN later revealed evidence of a cover-up to hide the embarrassing unpreparedness of Kenyan forces for such an attack by an estimated 150-300 insurgents operating as highly mobile infantry supported by strategically deployed «technical» (vehicles mounted with heavy machine guns and

recoilless rifles) and a suicide bomber, who opened the attack on the base.<sup>115</sup> Following the attack, Al-Shabab released three versions of a high-definition, slickly produced film documenting the successful overrunning of the base by an insurgent special unit, the Commander Saleh al-Nabhani Battalion, named after a slain AQC East African operative attached to Al-Shabab.<sup>116</sup> Open-



**Al-Shabab fighters in Lamu county, Kenya.**  
AL-SHABAB FILM, FROM THE FRONTIERS OF GLORY 4: FROM GOLIS TO LAMU (2016)

ing with scenes of the arrest and harassment of Kenyan Muslims by the government with audio excerpts from a sermon by Aboud Rogo, the film shows the assault and statements by captured and wounded Kenyan soldiers after the battle. This footage is interspersed liberally with excerpts from media releases by other *jihadi* organizations and charismatic ideological figures, including Abu Yahya al-Libi, Rogo, and AQAP ideologue Khubayb al-Sudani.<sup>117</sup>

In a separate film, Ahmad Iman Ali directly addresses the Kenyan public.<sup>118</sup> Promising further attacks so long as the Kenyan government maintains its military presence inside Somalia and continues to persecute its Muslim citizens, he cites kidnappings, rape, and extrajudicial killings allegedly carried out by Kenyan security forces as justifications.<sup>119</sup> Calling into question the honesty of Kenyan officials, who he says only continue to lie to their citizens about growing numbers of casualties and economic losses inside Somalia, the MYC/Al-Hijra leader advises Kenyans to directly contact the «*mujahidin*» with questions about the fate of their loved ones captured or killed at El-Adde, saying that the Kenyan government will only mislead and lie to them.<sup>120</sup> This mirrors a media operations strategy the group has used since at least 2010, which will be discussed in more detail in the next section. The insurgents' media apparatus also published a statement and scores of high quality photographs of the dead and captured military equipment in El-Adde.<sup>121</sup>

East Africa continues to be a major focus of Al-Shabab's media operations for several reasons. First, the group relies on Kenyan and other regional recruits to bolster its domestic fighting force, particularly during its present period of territorial decline in the face of mounting international and regional pressures. Second, the heavy involvement of Kenya, Ethiopia, Burundi, Uganda, Djibouti, and other regional countries has led the insurgents to increase attacks outside of Somalia, especially in Kenya, in order to influence public opinion in these countries against the continued cooperation of their governments with AMISOM and the Somali federal government. Despite the group's claim to elevate «Islamic» identity over ethnicity and nationality, a significant part of Al-Shabab's media narrative on Somalia, Kenya and other East African countries utilizes appeals to overlapping identities that include religious, ethnic, clan/tribal, and nationalist sentiments. For example, the separation from Somalia (by European colonial powers like Britain) of historically Somali-majority regions such as the Ogaden region in modern day Ethiopia and the North West Frontier Province in modern Kenya and discrimination against Somalis living in Kenya are highlighted not only as «Islamic» issues but also «Somali» ones.<sup>122</sup> Thus, the invocation of the 1984 Wagalla Massacre of as many as 5,000 Kenyan Somalis in and around the town of Wajir is meant not only to stir up Somali nationalist sentiments but as an example of «Christian» Kenyan persecution of Muslim Kenyans.<sup>123</sup> Al-Shabab's combination of multiple identities and re-tooling of nationalist and clanist identities

strategically deployed suicide bombers to open up new offensives. An alliance of Syrian and other Islamist rebel groups, including Nusra and the East Turkestan Islamic Party, are currently utilizing suicide bombers to open up renewed pushes against pro-Assad, Iran-backed Iraqi Shi'ite militias in towns and villages in southern Aleppo governorate.

<sup>116</sup> Al-Nabhani, who served as an Al-Shabab military instructor and commander, was killed by U.S. special operations forces on September 14, 2009, in southern Somalia. He was eulogized by Al-Shabab in a statement, «Blood for the Islamic Umma: Tidings of the Martyrdom of the Sheikh-Commander Abu Yusuf al-Nabhani,» 15 September 2009 (Arabic).

<sup>117</sup> Al-Shabab film, El-Adde: Expedition of Abu Yahya al-Libi.

<sup>118</sup> Al-Shabab film, Evil Will be the Morning for Those Warned, released in February 2016 (Swahili). The title is taken from Quran 37:177.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Al-Shabab communiqués, «100 Kenyan Invaders Massacred, Others Captured Alive,» 17 January 2016 (released in English and Swahili versions), and «In Pictures: 100 Kenyan Invaders Massacred,» 20 January 2016.

<sup>122</sup> Al-Shabab film, The Westgate Siege: Retributive Justice, released in February 2015.

<sup>123</sup> Al-Shabab film, El-Adde: Expedition of Abu Yahya al-Libi and Al-Jazeera English, «Kenya's Wagalla Massacre 30 Years Later,» 27 February 2014, accessed at <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2014/02/kenya-wagalla-massacre-30-years-later-201422682831165619.html>, last accessed 23 September 2016.

«Gunned Down in Mombasa—the Clerics That Have Died,» 28 July 2014, accessed at <http://www.irinnews.org/report/100412/gunned-down-mombasa-%E2%80%93-clerics-have-died>, last accessed 1 October 2016.

<sup>112</sup> Al-Jazeera, Al-Jazeera Investigates: Inside Kenya's Death Squads, 7 December 2014, accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IUjOdjdH8Uk>; Killing Kenya, 23 September 2015, accessed at <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/peopleandpower/2015/09/killing-kenya-150923092758366.html>; Amnesty International, «Kenya: Set up Judicial Inquiry into Hundreds of Enforced Disappearances and Killings,» 30 August 2016, accessed at <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2016/08/kenya-set-up-judicial-inquiry-into-hundreds-of-enforced-disappearances-and-killings/>; and Human Rights Watch, «Deaths and Disappearances: Abuses in Counterterrorism Operations in Nairobi and in Northeastern Kenya,» 19 July 2016, accessed at <https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/07/19/deaths-and-disappearances/abuses-counterterrorism-operations-nairobi-and>.

<sup>113</sup> «Sheikh Aboud Rogo: Chanzo cha Mabadiliko» (Swahili), Gaidi Mtaani, no. 3 (March 2013), 24-27; a closing feature on Abubakar Makaburi in Gaidi Mtaani, no. 6 (dated August/September 2014), 58; Al-Shabab communiqué, «Sheikh Aboud Rogo's Death: A Catalyst for Change,» 27 August 2012; Muslim Youth Centre, «Sheikh Aboud Rogo's Death: Embrace Change, Mujahidin,» 28 August 2012; Muslim Youth Centre, «Defend Our Sheikh's Honour: Humiliation of Sheikh Aboud Rogo's Family,» 14 November 2012; «Defying the Kuffar: Sheikh Makaburi,» Amka, no. 2 (July 2015), 5-6; a feature eulogizing the murdered Kenyan preachers in Amka, no. 2, 28; Aboud Rogo, «Message to the Ummah of East Africa,» Amka, no. 1 (February 2015), 13-14; and Al-Shabab films, From the Frontiers of Glory 4: From Golis to Lamu, released in July 2016, and Abu Ubayda Ahmad Umar, Sharia or Martyrdom, released in July 2016.

<sup>114</sup> Al-Shabab film, El-Adde: Expedition of Abu Yahya al-Libi: Storming the Kenyan Crusader Army Base, released in April 2016 in Arabic, English, and Swahili versions.

<sup>115</sup> Robyn Kriel and Briana Duggan, «Kenya Covers Up Military Massacre,» CNN, 31 May 2016, available at <http://www.cnn.com/2016/05/31/africa/kenya-soldiers-el-adde-massacre/>, last accessed 17 June 2016.

Syrian Islamist rebel groups such as Ahrar al-Sham and the Jaysh al-Fath umbrella group as well as Jabhat al-Nusra and Islamic State also use

and sentiments is not surprising since insurgent leaders have always combined domestic, regional, and transnational/globalist rhetoric and ideological narratives and political outlooks in a bid to further expand their potential target audiences. This combination of different types of arguments is also tied to Al-Shabab's operating environment and strategy, which is firmly grounded in domestic and regional politics despite the influence on the group's leadership of transnational and puritan religious currents such as Salafism and the AQC-style of global jihadism.<sup>124</sup>

## EXPLOITING THE MEDIA ENVIRONMENT: AL-SHABAB'S JIHADI 'JOURNALISM' FROM WESTGATE TO WOOLWICH & BEYOND

The main goal of Al-Shabab's multifaceted media operations campaign is to infiltrate and influence the media and information environment surrounding the struggle for power on the ground inside Somalia. Keenly aware of the importance of media and information operations to the group's broader political and military goals, the insurgents' media apparatus has, since 2010, sought to establish itself as a counter to the international news media and the official media organs of its enemies, from AMISOM and the Somali federal government to the U.S. and Western European governments. It has done this in part by rebranding segments of its media apparatus as journalistic outlets reporting the «truth»

from inside Somalia and other arenas of battle, such as Kenya, which the group says governments and «complicit» international news media organizations are trying to conceal.

In the summer of 2010 Al-Shabab rebranded its official media wing, previously known simply as its Media Department, as the Al-Kataib Media Foundation and Al-Kataib News Channel.<sup>125</sup> The logo and presentation style of this revamped media production department was designed to mimic actual satellite TV news channels such as Al-Jazeera and CNN. In its announcement of the rebranding, the insurgents noted that, «The media battle waged by the mujahidin is one of the hardest and most important in our war against the Zionist-Crusader unbelievers, which made us, as the caretakers of the media jihad in our beloved battle front of Somalia, strive harder to develop methods for media warfare and to advance the weapon of *jihadi* media in order to report the truth to the people from the battlefields.»<sup>126</sup> The target audience for insurgent media was not only current and potential supporters and members but also the insurgents' enemies and the citizens of countries involved militarily inside Somalia such as Kenya, the United States, Ethiopia, Burundi, and Uganda. In addition to distributing material online, the insurgents also launched terrestrially broadcast television and radio programs.<sup>127</sup>

In 2010 insurgent «jihadi journalism» began to produce films, like those after the El-Adde attack, designed to call into question the claims made by AMISOM and other enemy forces in reporting events inside Somalia. In the summer of 2010, Al-Kataib released two films

aimed directly at Burundian and Ugandan audiences, warning them both to pressure their respective governments to withdraw military forces and support from AMISOM. If not, they would face the consequences and their «sons will continue to die in the streets of Mogadishu.»<sup>128</sup> The films are narrated in English by a British foreign fighter whose face is covered almost entirely with a scarf and who is not even identified by a *nom de guerre*. The same narrator has been featured in every subsequent Al-Shabab film and audio release that is either narrated or audio dubbed in English. Long before «Jihadi John» Muhammad Emwazi, this masked Al-Shabab media figure was an active participant in a *jihadi* media campaign aimed primarily toward a Western and specifically English-speaking audience.

In the first film, *The African Crusaders*, released in June 2010, he warns the Ugandan and Burundian public to get their respective governments to withdraw from Somalia, warning them that they would be responsible for the consequences if they failed to do so.<sup>129</sup> At that time, AMISOM was composed almost entirely of Ugandan and Burundian troops, and Al-Shabab hoped that if they were withdrawn, the weak Somali federal government would collapse and easily be overrun by insurgent forces. In the second film, *Mogadishu: Crusaders' Graveyard*, a follow-up released one month after the first, the same English-speaking narrator, now shown acting as a «reporter» for the Al-Kataib News Channel, details battles with AMISOM forces in Mogadishu's streets and tours the battlefield. A segment of the film shows insurgents destroying a tank, followed by footage of an AMISOM spokesman claiming that that tank



Al-Shabab's external media apparatus, the Al-Kataib Media Foundation, in 2010 after its rebranding as a «news channel» delivering reliable and «unbiased» reporting from the «battlefields of jihad» in Somalia, in contrast to the slanted Western and «Crusader» media. Al-Kataib's central propaganda role is stated clearly here as a channel seeking to «inspire/incite jihad.»

AL-SHABAB FILM, MOGADISHU: THE CRUSADERS' GRAVEYARD (2010)

had simply «run into a ditch and caught fire» and then flippantly dismissing casualties, stating, «And if you lose one soldier, so what?»<sup>130</sup> The insurgents' media operations message is clear: AMISOM is untruthful and is actively covering up its actual casualties inside Somalia and does not care about the lives of its rank-and-file men. In contrast, Al-Shabab presents its «news» media as being the only reliable and truthful actor on the ground. Furthermore, Al-Shabab messaging targeting the populations of AMISOM-involved countries highlights the failure of their respective governments to pay their soldiers regularly or even care about their lives and safety.<sup>131</sup>

Al-Shabab continued this narrative of «honest reporting versus enemy deception and cover-up» in October

<sup>128</sup> Al-Shabab films, *The African Crusaders and Mogadishu: Crusaders' Graveyard*.

<sup>129</sup> Al-Shabab film, *The African Crusaders*.

<sup>130</sup> Al-Shabab film, *Mogadishu: Crusaders' Graveyard*.

<sup>131</sup> Al-Shabab films, *El-Adde: Expedition of Abu Yahya al-Libi; An Urgent Plea: Message from the Ugandan POW: Masassa M. Y.; An Urgent Plea: Message from the Kenyan POW: Leonard Maingi Kiiyo; and An Urgent Plea: Message from the Kenyan POW: David Ngugi Wataari, the last three all released in September 2016. For more on AMISOM's internal problems, see Catherine Byaruhanga, "Africa Union Troops in Somalia not Paid for Six Months," BBC News, 27 June 2016, accessed at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-36624520>, last accessed 21 September 2016, and Aggrey Mutambo, "War on Shabaab Dented as EU Reduces AMISOM Funds," Daily Nation (Kenya), 21 February 2016, accessed at <http://www.nation.co.ke/news/africa/War-on-Shabaab-dented-as-EU-reduces-Amisom-funds/1066-3086120-4eixjh/index.html>, last accessed 16 September 2016. For details on internal discord within and problems facing AMISOM, see Joshua Meservey and Kelsey Lilley, "Is the Coalition Fighting Al-Shabaab Falling Apart?," War on the Rocks, 26 October 2015, accessed at <http://warontherocks.com/2016/10/is-the-coalition-fighting-al-shabaab-falling-apart/>, last accessed 26 October 2016.*



2011 after a deadly assault on Burundian AMISOM forces in Dayniile outside of Mogadishu. Although Burundian and AMISOM officials only admitted to losing 10 men, the insurgents claimed to have killed over 100 and quickly published photographs of dozens of corpses in Burundian AMISOM uniforms together with pictures of Burundian soldiers' ID cards and a propaganda film documenting its attack.<sup>132</sup> Though the exact number of dead was unclear, interviews with locals confirmed that AMISOM forces had lost significantly more than 10 men, probably numbering between 60 and 80, casting further doubts on the reliability and truthfulness of AMISOM officials about the realities of the war inside Somalia.<sup>133</sup>

The insurgent group continued to exploit the information environment in September 2013 during an attack and subsequent siege at the Westgate Mall in Nairobi and then again following the El-Adde attack in January 2016. During the former, Al-Shabab media operatives utilized Twitter heavily to disseminate their narrative and messaging to a frenzied international press corps.<sup>134</sup> They were aided significantly by the slow, confused, and often contradictory public statements made by different Kenyan government officials and competition between different branches of government, including the police and military. Insurgent media operations also showed how unreliable official Kenyan government claims were, including government claims that the siege was over when explosions, fires, and gunfire were still ongoing and official claims that there were «10 to 15» attackers when in actuality the number was much smaller.

The «real time» nature of these reports led to their eager consumption by the international press corps and consumers of news, particularly on Twitter. In effect, Al-Shabab seized control of the narrative and repeatedly humiliated the Kenyan government, which continued to blunder as it attempted to get control of the situation. Al-Shabab put itself forward as a more reliable source of news than Kenya's official spokespeople, a claim given increased validity by the reliance of mainstream news organizations on its tweets.<sup>135</sup> Understanding the value of captivated audiences, Al-Shabab repeated its earlier warnings to the Kenyan people that their country's involvement in Somalia was a key factor raising insecurity inside Kenya.<sup>136</sup> By exploiting the international thirst for news from inside the mall, even if it was highly propagandistic, Al-Shabab succeeded in both humiliating the Kenyan government and returning itself triumphantly to the headlines after more than two years of negative coverage as it was pushed back militarily from much of the territory it had once controlled, including Mogadishu.

In February 2015, Al-Shabab released a 76-minute film in English and Arabic versions documenting the Westgate Mall attack. The first 31 minutes of the film are presented as a documentary in which the Kenyan government's persecution of Somalis and of its own Muslim citizens is exhaustively discussed and documented.<sup>137</sup> The guiding theme of the film is that of justifiable revenge for injustices and oppression, something that other *jihadi* groups, including IS and AQC, also invoke through the Islamic legal concept of «*qisas*» or retributive punishment (roughly, «an eye for an eye»).

<sup>132</sup> Al-Shabab film, *The Burundian Bloodbath: Battle of Dayniile*, released in November 2011, and Christopher Anzalone, «Harakat al-Shabab al-Mujahidin Releases Statement & Information on Burundian AMISOM Soldiers Slain at Battle of Dayniile», *Al-Wasat* blog, 12 December 2011, available at <https://thewasat.wordpress.com/2011/12/12/harakat-al-shabab-al-mujahidin-releases-statement-information-on-burundian-amisom-soldiers-slain-at-battle-of-dayniile/>, last accessed 17 June 2016.

<sup>133</sup> Josh Kron and Mohamed Ibrahim, «African Union Peacekeepers Killed in Somalia Battle», *The New York Times*, 21 October 2011, available at [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/22/world/africa/african-union-takes-casualties-in-somalia-but-numbers-vary.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/22/world/africa/african-union-takes-casualties-in-somalia-but-numbers-vary.html?_r=0), last accessed 17 June 2016.

<sup>134</sup> Christopher Anzalone, «The Nairobi Attack and Al-Shabab's Media Strategy.»

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>136</sup> Al-Shabab film, *Video Message from One of the Kenyan Prisoners*, released in February 2012.

<sup>137</sup> Al-Shabab film, *The Westgate Siege*. Al-Kataib later released a Somali-language version of the film.

Highlighting the colonial roots of the division, by the British, of historically Somali-majority regions now a part of Kenya, the film accuses the Kenyan government of a number of offenses. These include reigniting Somali clan conflicts by patronizing certain clans to act as its proxies, causing high numbers of Somali civilian casualties in military operations inside Somalia, and having a long history of anti-Somali repression, as represented in the Kenyan government's suppression and alleged «ethnic cleansing» of Somalis in the early 1980s following protests and other unrest by Somali protest movements, culminating in the 1984 Wagalla Massacre of thousands of Kenyan Somalis.<sup>138</sup> The narrative then transitions to the Kenyan government's discrimination against its non-Somali Muslim citizens that is ongoing today and features video clips of Aboud Rogo and Sheikh Abubakar «Makaburi» detailing the actions of the Kenyan anti-terrorism police and other government agencies in persecuting Kenyan Muslims.<sup>139</sup> Geographically, the film focuses on the North Eastern Province and Swahili coast, homes to large Muslim populations, as well as the Somali district of Eastleigh in Nairobi.<sup>140</sup>

The film, through footage of a sermon by Rogo, continues Al-Shabab's redefinition of the term «terrorism» and highlighting of what it sees as the hypocrisy of its enemies in labeling the «*mujahidin*» as «terrorists» when it is they (Kenya, the United States, etc.) that are perpetrating acts of terror against Muslims in the form of extrajudicial killings, torture, and aerial bombardment.<sup>141</sup> Insurgent media continues highlighting the theme that governments such as Kenya's are infected with a «colonial (colonized) mentality» as demonstrated by their willingness to act as proxies for the United

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.* and Al-Shabab film series, *No Safety except [with] Faith or Security*, which is currently made up of six installments released between March 2015 and January 2016.

<sup>145</sup> Al-Shabab film, *Woolwich Attack: It's an Eye for an Eye*, released in October 2013. The film was released in English and Arabic language versions.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*

States and Western European powers.<sup>142</sup> The film closes with the same British English-speaking narrator first featured in the 2010 films discussed previously, now urging Western Muslims, if they are unable to travel to Somalia, to carry out «lone wolf» attacks in their home countries, arguing that the success of the Westgate Mall siege clearly shows the effectiveness of such attacks, when well planned, in inflicting heavy economic, human, and media/information operations losses on the enemy.<sup>143</sup> Such attacks will continue, the film makes clear, as long as the enemy remains militarily involved inside Somalia and is persecuting its own Muslims at home.<sup>144</sup>

Al-Shabab media continued the «lone wolf» theme in a film released after the murder of off-duty British soldier Lee Rigby on May 22, 2013, in Woolwich in southeast London by Michael Adebolajo and Michael Adebowale, who claimed to be acting to «avenge» Muslims killed and oppressed by British and other Western forces around the world. In the October 2013 film, *Woolwich Attack: It's an Eye for an Eye*, the concept of *qisas* is once again prominently invoked.<sup>145</sup> Narrated by the same British person featured in the previous English-language Al-Shabab films, *Woolwich Attack* justifies Rigby's killing by citing Britain's role in the «global war against Muslims» and urges British Muslims to carry out similar «lone wolf» attacks at home, using either firearms or, as in the Woolwich murder, easily accessible knives.<sup>146</sup> Britain's hostility toward Muslims, the film argues, is evidenced both by British military activities abroad and by the rise of far-right, racist and bigoted anti-Muslim organizations domestically.<sup>147</sup> In response, mainstream British Muslim organizations, such as the



Muslim Council of Britain, are failing to stand up for their constituents and are instead promoting a «diluted form of Islam» characterized by a failure to meet the requirements of upholding the «pure» form of the faith.<sup>148</sup>

The call for «lone wolf» attacks in this film once again attracted significant news media attention. This happened again in February 2015 with the release of *The Westgate Siege* propaganda film, which concluded with a call, amounting to less than two of the film's 76 minutes, for similar attacks on «Jewish-owned malls» in the West, with the masked narrator identifying several specific malls by name.<sup>149</sup> These calls are used to attract attention and keep the insurgent group at the forefront of the minds of Western populations and governments, Muslims, and the press corps. By keeping itself relevant to the news cycle in this way, Al-Shabab and other *jihadi* groups that follow similar media strategies attempt to mask and shift coverage away from their territorial losses and military, political, and economic declines by projecting an exaggerated image of influence and power.<sup>150</sup> It is a media tactic continually proven effective. The mention, however brief, of potential major Western targets also succeeded in capturing the attention of major world news outlets, which unintentionally enhanced Al-Shabab's ability to project an image of power globally during a time when it was in territorial decline.

Al-Shabab's calls for action are presented in concert with emotional narratives of Muslim suffering around the world in places such as Syria, East Turkestan (China's Xinjiang Province), Myanmar, the Central African Republic, and the Palestinian Territories.<sup>151</sup> The narrative of global Muslim suffering caused by the «unbe-

lievers» is central to the group's media narratives, as it is to the media narratives of all *jihadi* groups. However, Al-Shabab's media campaign includes distinctly Somali- and East African-centered themes as well as transnational/globalist ones. Scenes of massacres, the grievously wounded, and crying women, children, and elderly people are connected to the *jihadis'* call to battle, whether in Somalia and East Africa or in Syria and the Rakhine region of Myanmar. It is only through the force of arms, they say, that the oppression of Muslims will be stopped and their suffering alleviated. Furthermore, the Quran, *hadith* and *sunna* (traditions and practice) of the Prophet Muhammad and historical Muslim religious scholars have sanctified the path of military *jihad* as a legitimate means to confound and defeat the «unbelievers» and their «apostate» Muslim clients.<sup>152</sup>

## COUNTERING INTERNAL DISSENT: AL-SHABAB'S MEDIA & THE CHALLENGE FROM ISLAMIC STATE

The rise of IS as a major territorial player between 2012 and 2015, together with demands from the group's leadership for all Muslims, and specifically all Sunni *jihadis*, to pledge their allegiance to «caliph» Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, presented a major challenge to AQC, Al-Shabab, and other AQ regional affiliates and allies. The attractiveness of the IS «caliphate,» which in 2013-2014 rapidly conquered large swaths of Syria and Iraq, including the major cities of Raqqa and Mosul, grew as the international perception of its ideological and military prowess grew, thanks in part, and in no

small degree, to the attention of the international news media and analysts.

Pro-IS agitators inside Al-Shabab also took advantage of internal divisions and struggles for power within the insurgent group, which between 2012 and 2013 underwent major unrest that pit Godane and his loyalists, including the *Amniyat* security network, against segments critical of Godane's leadership. The latter included prominent insurgent media personality Omar Hammami together with other foreign fighters and several founding Al-Shabab leaders, including Mukhtar Robow, Ibrahim al-Afghani, and *Mu'allim* Burhan, along with veteran Somali Islamist voice Hassan Dahir Aweys.<sup>153</sup> Although Godane's faction ultimately won out, resulting in the capture and executions of Hammami, al-Afghani, and Burhan and the exiting from the group of Robow and Aweys, internal discord remained in certain segments of the group. For these segments, the rise and expansion of Islamic State and the demand of its leadership for global allegiance provided a new outlet for expression.<sup>154</sup>

Beginning in May 2015, IS's multi-tiered media machine started producing a series of films calling on Al-Shabab's leaders or, at the very least, disgruntled



The formalization of Al-Shabab's affiliation with al-Qaeda was overseen by the former's amir, Ahmed Godane, and Usama bin Laden's successor and longtime deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri. Godane's successor, Abu Ubayda Ahmed Umar, has re-affirmed Al-Shabab's loyalty to AQC and rejected demands from Islamic State for a pledge of allegiance (*bay'a*) to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

AL-SHABAB FILM, FROM THE FRONTIERS OF GLORY 4: FROM GOLIS TO LAMU (2016)

members of the group to pledge allegiance (*bay'a*) to IS amir Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Usually featuring multilingual *bay'a* pitches from IS foreign fighters, including a number of Somalis, these films urged members of the Somali insurgent group to join IS's project of rebuilding «the caliphate upon the Prophet Muhammad's methodology» (*al-khilafa ala minhaj al-nubuwwa*).<sup>155</sup> Official IS calls for Al-Shabab members to defect to al-Baghdadi's organization were further bolstered by a spate of written and film releases in Arabic, Somali, and English produced by pro-IS jihadi media organizations.<sup>156</sup>

<sup>153</sup> Anzalone, "The Life and Death of Al-Shabab Leader Ahmed Godane."

<sup>154</sup> Similar pre-existing divisions were also present in the Afghanistan-Pakistan theater within the *Tehrik-i Taliban* Pakistan umbrella, which also led to the formation of a number of different groups, one of which, *Wilayat* (Province of) *Khurasan*, declared its allegiance and affiliation with Islamic State in October 2014, formalized in January 2015.

<sup>155</sup> Islamic State films, *A Message to the Muslims in Somalia*, released in May 2015; *O' Mujahid in Somalia, Unity be upon You*, released in October 2015; *A Message to the Mujahidin in the Land of Somalia*, released in October 2015; *A Message to Our Brothers in Somalia*, released in January 2016; *A Message from the Mujahidin in West Africa to the Mujahidin of Somalia*, released in October 2015; *Join the Caravan*, released in October 2015; *From the Land of Syria to the Mujahidin in Somalia*, released in October 2015; and *From Sinai to Somalia*, released in October 2015.

<sup>156</sup> A representative sample includes Abu Maysara al-Shami, "Hooy-Yaay Tan Waa Shirqoolki Madaxda AlShabaab," East Africa Media Foundation, released 8 January 2016; Umm Safiyya al-Muhajir, "Al-Shabab's Mujahidin between Action and Inaction," released 1 October 2015; Abu Qatada al-Hadrami, "If Not Now, When?" released 29 September 2015; Al-Sawirti Media, "A Message to the Mujahidin in Somalia," released 2 October 2015; Gharib al-Suriyya, "Somalia: The Realization of Hopes concerning the Bay'a of the Mujahidin," released 3 October 2015; Abu al-Bara bin Malik, "The Islamic State in Somalia: A Story from the Heart," released 3 October 2015; and Abdullah al-Najdi, "O' Harakat al-Shabab, this is the Consequence of Fighting the Caliphate," released on 11 December 2015.

Among the pro-IS online media outlets that emerged in the autumn of 2015 was the *Habasha Media Foundation*, which took its name from the Arabic name for lands in the Horn of Africa that include modern day Ethiopia. Announcing itself via Somali, Arabic, and English-language Twitter accounts in October, *Habasha* was short-lived, with its accounts quickly shut down.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>149</sup> Al-Shabab film, *The Westgate Siege*.

<sup>150</sup> Islamic State did this, too, in October 2016 by launching military operations inside Kirkuk city and the town of Rutba in western Anbar Province in Iraq in order to deflect attention away from its territorial losses around the city of Mosul. Islamic State communiqués (Arabic) "Attack by the Caliphate's Soldiers on Kirkuk city and Control over Many of the City's Neighborhoods," 21 October 2016, and, via the Amaq News Agency, "The Islamic State Penetrates Kirkuk city and has Control over Half of Its Neighborhoods," 21 October 2016, and "Martyrdom Car Bomb Attack Strikes a Group of Security Forces near a Government Building in Kirkuk city," 21 October 2016.

<sup>151</sup> Al-Shabab film, *Woolwich Attack and Muslims of Bangui and Mombasa: A Tale of Tragedy*, released in May 2014.

<sup>152</sup> Al-Shabab film, *Whoever Changes His Religion, Kill Him*, released in June 2016 simultaneously in Arabic and Somali language versions.

The most prominent defector thus far from within Al-Shabab to IS has been *Sheikh Abd al-Qadir Mu'min*, a well known Somali Salafi religious scholar and preacher long aligned with Al-Shabab, and a small group of his followers in the Golis Mountains of northern Somalia.<sup>157</sup> Previously, he was prominent in the group's outreach to Somalia's clans for support in 2011 and was a featured speaker at the official Al-Shabab public ceremony marking its formalized relationship with AQC in Lafoole in May 2012. Mu'min also recorded a number of audio and video messages and lectures on religious topics, including a partial oral tafsir (exegesis) of the Quran, broadcast and otherwise distributed by Al-Shabab and affiliated media outlets such as Radio al-Furqan and Radio al-Andalus.<sup>158</sup> Although other small groups of fighters have defected since Mu'min, the overall number of defections seems to have remained quite low. Many defectors have also either had to flee the country for IS-controlled areas in other countries, such as Libya, or been arrested or killed by the Amniyat internal security network.<sup>159</sup> In a short film released by one of IS's media appendages, Furat Media, in mid-April 2016, Mu'min reappeared with a small group of fighters in a barren desert training «camp,» though the location looks more like an open plain than an actual camp.<sup>160</sup> Defections and crackdowns on suspected IS sympathizers have occurred throughout Al-Shabab-controlled territory, including the Lower and Middle Juba and Lower Shabelle regions as well as in and around the Golis Mountains

**Sheikh Abd al-Qadir Mu'min, the highest-ranking defector from Al-Shabab to Islamic State.**

AL-SHABAB FILM, RAMADAN SERMONS BY SHEIKH ABD AL-QADIR MU'MIN: #2 (2015)



and Galgala hills in Puntland.<sup>161</sup> Mu'min's defectors still seem to number only a few dozen, though there is a possibility that other disaffected members of Al-Shabab will attempt to join him.<sup>162</sup>

The official reaction from Al-Shabab's leadership and media apparatus has been relatively low-key. This follows a pattern established during the 2012-2013 internal fitna (discord) between the pro- and anti-Godane factions of the group following public criticisms of the Al-Shabab *amir* by Hammami, Aweys, Robow, al-Afghani, and Burhan. Rather than engage in a tit-for-tat debate with Hammami, whose online

<sup>157</sup> Abd al-Qadir Mu'min, *Bay'a of Sheih Abd al-Qadir Mu'min and a Group of Mujahidin in Somalia to the Caliph of the Muslims, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, may God protect him, no media outlet specified, released in October 2015.*

<sup>158</sup> Christopher Anzalone, "From Al-Shabab to the Islamic State: The Bay'a of 'Abd al-Qadir Mu'min and Its Implications," *Jihadology blog*, 29 October 2015, available at <http://jihadology.net/2015/10/29/guest-post-from-al-shabab-to-the-islamic-state-the-baya-of-abd-al-qadir-mumin-and-its-implications/>, last accessed 17 June 2016.

<sup>159</sup> Harun Maruf, "Al-Qaida or Islamic State? Issue Simmers within Al-Shabab," *Voice of America*, 30 September 2015, available at <http://www.voanews.com/content/africa-al-shabab-decides-al-qaida-or-islamic-state/2986035.html>, last accessed 1 June 2016; *Voice of America*, "Suspected Leader of Pro-IS Al-Shabab Faction Reported Killed," 22 November 2015, available at <http://m.voanews.com/a/somalia-suspected-leader-of-pro-islamic-state-al-shabab-faction-reported-killed/3069114.html>, last accessed 18 May 2016; and Associated Press, "Tensions Rise as Al-Shabaab Foreign Fighters Consider Supporting ISIS," 8 December 2015, available at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/dec/08/american-us-resident-islamic-extremists-defect-somalia-al-shabab>, last accessed 17 April 2016.

<sup>160</sup> Furat Media, *Shaykh Abu Nu'man Military Camp*, released in April 2016. The camp is probably named after another Al-Shabab defector, Abu Nu'man al-Yentari, who was killed by the Amniyat network in the suppression of his small group of pro-IS fellow defectors in the autumn of 2015.

<sup>161</sup> Christopher Anzalone, "The Resilience of al-Shabaab," *CTC Sentinel* 9, no. 4 (April 2016), available at <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-resilience-of-al-shabaab>, last accessed 21 June 2016.

<sup>162</sup> Mu'min was shown with a few dozen fighters in a September 2016 film released by one of Islamic State's media organs, *Furat Media: Eid on the Frontiers of Somalia* (Arabic and Somali).

torrent of criticism against Godane and Al-Shabab was continuous, particularly on Twitter, the insurgent group largely ignored the American foreign fighter and other dissidents, issuing only a single official statement refuting his allegations in late 2012.<sup>163</sup> This strategy may have been designed to avoid fanning the flames of internal discord while enabling the Amniyat network to ruthlessly and efficiently crack down on dissenters and IS sympathizers. Thus far Al-Shabab's public acknowledgement of the potential dangers IS poses to its unity has been limited, at least in official and affiliated media channels, to a statement by spokesman Ali Rage in early November 2015. He warned against attempts to «divide the Muslims and mujahidin» and said that any moves to do so will not be tolerated.<sup>164</sup>

Al-Shabab's *amir*, Abu Ubayda Ahmad Umar, Kenyan preacher Ahmad Iman Ali, and Shabab-affiliate group Al-Muhajiroun have also reaffirmed their loyalty to AQC *amir* al-Zawahiri, symbolically rejecting al-Baghdadi's claims to legitimacy as the new «caliph,» while also condemning internal discord and defections.<sup>165</sup> Al-Shabab further contested Islamic State's claims to be a «caliphate» during the summer of 2015 by eulogizing Afghanistan Taliban chief *Mullah* Muhammad Umar as the «commander of the believers» (*amir al-mu'minin*), thus indirectly rejecting al-Baghdadi's claim to hold the same position, one historically reserved by Sunnis for the legitimate ruler and caliph. This was a simple but symbolically important rejection of Islamic State expansionism on the part of Al-Shabab.

## CONCLUSION

Despite suffering significant territorial and battlefield losses since 2011, which have sometimes affected its ability to produce and distribute media at the same rate as during its heyday between 2009 and 2010, Al-

Shabab has maintained a robust and multi-faceted media operations campaign. Though it has reorganized how it releases some of its media, the insurgent group notably continues to demonstrate its ability to produce highly polished, slickly presented HD propaganda films in multiple languages. As in 2007 and 2008, when Al-Shabab reconstituted itself from the ashes of the ICU, information and media operations remain an integral part of its broader political and military strategy, much as they do for nation-states. Media releases and productions are designed to complement political and military strategies, exponentially enhancing and magnifying the influence and power, both real and perceived, of a relatively limited number of insurgents.h

Through the power of new media technologies, production software, and tools, combined with their increasing widespread availability and ease of use, Al-Shabab has succeeded in disseminating its narratives into the domestic, regional, and transnational/global information and media space. The group's official and affiliated media outlets, such as the Al-Kataib Media Foundation and Radio al-Furqan and Radio al-Andalus, present themselves as reliable alternatives to the media organs of their enemies as well as the «biased» international news media, which the insurgents allege is characterized by hostility to Islam and Muslims. Promoting a set of regular themes, including recruitment calls for foreign and domestic fighters and the notion of a global war targeting Muslims that legitimizes and requires a violent, armed response, Al-Shabab's media apparatus continues to evolve into an ever more capable propaganda machine.

In spite of the relatively small number of insurgents and the increasingly restricted economic pressures on

<sup>163</sup> Al-Shabab communiqué, "Abu Mansur al-Amriki: A Candid Clarification," 18 December 2012.

For details about Hammami's anti-Shabab Twitter campaign, see J. M. Berger, "Omar and Me: My Strange, Frustrating Relationship with an American Terrorist," 17 September 2013, available at <http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/09/17/omar-and-me/>, last accessed 21 June 2016.

<sup>164</sup> Radio al-Furqan, "Dhagheyso Dhuuxa Wareysiyada Oo Lagu Soo Qaatay Kalimad Dheer Oo Uu Jeediyay Sh/Cali Dheere," 3 November 2015.

<sup>165</sup> Al-Muhajiroun statement, "Hold Fast, Altogether," 24 October 2015; Al-Shabab film, *How Often a Small Group Overcame a Mighty Host by God's Leave*; and Al-Shabab communiqué, "And the Honorable Journey Continues: Message of congratulations to the Islamic Umma for Eid al-Fitr 1437," 16 July 2015, and "Profit of the Exchange [Martyrdom], Abu al-Zubayr: Congratulations and condolences to the Islamic Umma for the martyrdom of the *amir* of Harakat al-Shabab al-Mujahidin, Sheikh Mukhtar Abu al-Zubayr, may God have mercy on him," 6 September 2014.



**NUMBER OF ATTACKS CLAIMED BY AL-SHABAB**

Geographical Region/Location	Number of Attacks
Mogadishu/Banaadir	61
Lower Shabelle	55+
Bay & Bakool	38+
Kenya	14
Juba	17
Hiraan	12+
Middle Shabelle	6
Galguduud	8
Gedo	7
Mudug	3
Puntland	2

**AL-SHABAB MILITARY OPERATIONS DURING RAMADAN, SHAWWAL, AND DHU AL-QI'DA 1437**

Type of Operation	Geographical Region(s) and # of Attacks
Attacks on checkpoints/barracks of the Somali Federal Government, AMISOM, and foreign/international forces or allied militias	Lower Shabelle (21+*); Bay & Bakool (7); Kenya (6); Mogadishu/Banaadir (5); Middle Shabelle (3); Juba (3)
Mortar & artillery attacks	Bay & Bakool (5); Mogadishu/Banaadir (5); Galguduud (1); Hiraan (2+*); Lower Shabelle (3); Kenya (1);
Repelling Somali Federal Government, AMISOM, or allied militia attack	Bay & Bakool (6); Gedo (1); Lower Shabelle (1); Juba (2); Middle Shabelle (1); Hiraan (1)
Ambushes on Somali Federal Government, AMISOM, and foreign/international forces or allied militias	Lower Shabelle (3); Juba (5); Bay & Bakool (6+*); Kenya (3); Gedo (2); Mogadishu/Banaadir (2)
Targeted assassinations & assassination attempts	Mogadishu/Banaadir (26); Hiraan (4); Juba (2); Middle Shabelle (2); Bay & Bakool (4);
IED & bomb attacks, including car bombs	Mogadishu/Banaadir (9); Lower Shabelle (14); Bay & Bakool (9); Galguduud (2); Kenya (4); Hiraan (1); Gedo (2); Juba (1); Puntland (2);
Grenade attacks	Lower Shabelle (5); Gedo (1); Mogadishu/Banaadir (8+*); Juba (2)
«Martyrdom»/Suicide attacks	Mudug (2); Mogadishu/Banaadir (6); Lower Shabelle (1); Hiraan (1)
Surveillance drone shot down	Lower Shabelle (2)

*The three Islamic lunar months of Ramadan, Shawwal, & Dhu al-Qi'da (Dhu al-Qa'da) 1437 (the Hijri year) correspond approximately to June 6-September 1/2, 2016.*  
 \*=*Al-Shabab reported multiple attacks (more than 2) in some of its daily report tallies but did not provide a specific number.*

**CONTINUITY AND CHANGE: THE EVOLUTION AND RESILIENCE OF AL-SHABAB'S MEDIA INSURGENCY, 2006-2016**

A report by Hate Speech International  
Published November 2016

Editor-in-Chief/Executive Director:  
**Kjetil Stormark**

Project Manager for the report:  
**Karin Abraham**

Collage:  
**Scanpix/Superpop**

Maps:  
**Political Geography Now** ([www.PolGeoNow.com](http://www.PolGeoNow.com))

Layout:  
**Superpop as** ([www.superpop.no](http://www.superpop.no))

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Al-Shabab following its loss of urban centers such as Kismaayo and Baraawe, the group maintains a formidable media jihad capability. It remains both capable and adept at running a multi-faceted media and information operations campaign capable of influencing and even controlling at key moments the international media narrative of events inside Somalia and around East Africa, as evidenced by the media circus surrounding the Westgate Mall siege and the El-Adde base attack. The group has also harnessed its media apparatus in the competition with Islamic State and its domestic and regional sympathizers in Somalia and East Africa, an effort that augments the work of the Amniyat network in discouraging and cracking down on dissidents. Working with limited resources, the insurgent group's military forces, political bureaucracy, and media teams continue to exploit the missteps of their enemies, from the Somali and Kenyan governments to the United States, the EU, and AMISOM forces, using its opponents' mistakes to the group's benefit. Al-Shabab, as



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the continuing robustness of its media machine shows, is both remarkably resilient and adaptable in the face of territorial decline and mounting political, military, and economic pressures.



Christopher Anzalone is a Research Fellow with the International Security Program at the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs in Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government and a PhD candidate (ABD) in the Institute of Islamic Studies at McGill University. His main research areas are political Islam, with a focus on militancy and political violence, jihadi groups, Shi'ism, and Islamic visual cultures and narratives of martyrdom and self-sacrifice.



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Hate Speech International (HSI) is an independent network of journalists and researchers employing cooperative models of cross-border research into extremism, hate speech and hate crimes.

Our vision is to elevate the public understanding of extremism as a phenomenon and to increase the overall ability, knowledge and will of media organizations to report on such matters.