CONTINUITY AND CHANGE
THE EVOLUTION AND RESILIENCE OF AL-SHABAB’S MEDIA INSURGENCY, 2006-2016
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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. 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 (extreme) 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.

2 The late American-Yemeni preacher Anwar al-Awlaki 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-Quéda in the Arabian Peninsula, the Al-Malahem («Epic [Battles]») Media Foundation; AQAP film, The First Exclusive Interview with Sheikh-Missionary Preacher Anwar al-Awlaki, 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 sophisticated,深层次的 productions, including written, audio, video, and photographic releases. These releases were either directly produced by Al-Shabab's official media branch, the Al-Kataib («Brigades») Media Foundation and »HSM Press« (with »HSM« standing for the group's full name, Harakat Al-Shabab al-Mujahideen's «Movement of the Mujahideen-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 its 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 analyzed 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. Siyad 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-İkhwân al-Muslimûn) movements in the Arab world or the emerging Salafi current inside the country, Al-Shabab's origins date back to the early 1980s. Among the groups that made up the Al-Shabab umbrella were the al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya (Islamic Group) in and around Mogadishu and the Wahdat al-Shabab al-Islamiyya (Community of Islamic Youth) based in what is now Somalia. 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 «Al-Sunna wa'jama'a» (Ahlu Sunna Waljamaaca), the «People of the Prophet's Tradition and Community,» a name commonly used by Sunni Muslims to reference themselves. 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 Al-Shabab warlord Muhammad Farah Aidid, including the loss of the key port city of Kismayo. The Islamist group's fledging steady in Luq, which was governed by a combination of sharia and customary law (xekt), was soon beset with internal divisions when Al-Ittihad became fragmented along clan and sub-clan lines, contradicting the group's call for islam as the only clan, and in 1996 it was overthrown by the Ethiopian military after the Islamists launched attacks inside Ethiopia.

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. The group also established some form of ties with the original Al-Qa'ida organization (hereafter referred to as Al-Qa'ida Central/AQOC, 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 Luq suggests that support for AQOC likely came from some Al-Ittihad members rather than from the group as a whole and others arguing a much broader alliance. 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 AQOC 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 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.13 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 Awdow 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 Abdiweli Mohamed Ali, and was suspected of committing a rash of killings in an effort to operate in theory more smoothly between competing clan interests and politics in the country. The founding cadre, which included Awdow, Robow, Al-Shabab, Mu’alim Burhan (Abd al-Hamid Hashi Olhayi), and Ahmed Abd Godane, formed close ties during the early days of the group and possibly also during their previous sojourns in Afghanistan.14 Focusing their recruitment efforts on Somalia’s disenchanted, 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 Hobyo Mudar Muxuu Sheekh Yurac and the Isalmiysa Insightists, which was less a unified single group than an umbrella for several anti-TFG clan-based Islamist groups—Jabhat al-Islamiyah (Islamic Front) of Sheikh Muhammad Ibra-
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. 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 afled 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-Utra (Army of Hardship/Diﬃculty), and police force, the Jaysh al-Hidra (Army of Veriﬁcation), and an oﬃcial media department and semi-oﬃcial media outlets.20


Al-Shabab’s media operations 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 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-Jihadi l-l’I’am), a unit of the Global Islamic Media Front (GIMF), a shadowy network of media producers and operatives who collectively produce translations of media releases by jihadi groups ranging from AQIC and its regional aﬃliates to the former united Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan as well as original media materials.21 The GIMF continued to coordinate the distribution of Al-Shabab’s media releases even after the Somali insurgent movement formalized its aﬃliation with AQIC. Al-Shabab also made some early forays into establishing its own web sites in Somalia, though these were largely abandoned after being shut down after problems arose with Internet hosting companies. Its supporters, some living outside 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 AQIC 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 AQIC sharia oﬃcial and ideologue, though this stopped just short of directly aﬃliating AQIC with Al-Shabab.22

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 department (Qism al-I’am) or the “Media of the Mujahideen in Somalia” (Islanka Muyaahidiinta 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. These 2008 and 2009 ﬁlms were focused on “exposing” the “apostate,” internationally and “Cusadeen”-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 Bard of Somalia, foot- age of insurgents training and launching attacks is set to a soundtrack of Arabic jihadi nashids (melodic recita- tions of poetry in Arabic, in this context, to songs) and audio


24 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 suppress 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 (mutasik) and thus initially had strong economic connotations. Contemporary Islamist movements, including shahid groups, have expanded the meaning of ‘hisba’ to include moral policing as well as market and trade regulation.

25 Abu Yahya al-Libi, To the Army of Hardship/Diﬃculty in Somalia, Al-Qa’ida film (March 2007). Captured documents from bin Laden’s compound in Abbottabad show that the AQIC leader was critical of Al-Shabab’s governance decisions and wary of directly aﬃliating with them. See SOCOM-2012-000005 and SOCOM-2012-000006 from the documents cache.
clips of AQG founding leaders Osaama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri as well as the late jihadi religious scholar and ideologue Abdullah Azzam.27 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 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). Beginning in 2007 and continuing into 2008, Al-Shabab began producing and releasing films with increasingly directed narrative messages, 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 testaments (wasiya al-shahid) with military footage, including the driving of vehicles packed with explosives towards TFG, Ethiopian, or AMISOM targets. These martyr wills feature 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.28

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’at al-imsarusa) by which jihadi 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, toward Islam and Muslims, whom they seek only to oppress and whose resources they seek to loot. Therefore, in violence in the form of fire, sword, and bomb, 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.29

Oil and gas, exploitation of natural resources, environmental degradation, and «apostate» non-combatants. Jihadis, including Al-Shabab, consider their acts of «terror to be «Islamically» and permissible based on this verse, which they interpret as a Quranic injunction to fight the «enemies of God» whoever and wherever they may be. Al-Shabab later launched a military campaign dubbed the «Our Terrorism is Blessed» campaign (Ihrabuna 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 named after «the Martyr Adan Hashi Farah Ayo.» 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), AQG East Africa operative Saleh al-Nabhan (killed in 2009), the Egyptian «Blind Sheikh» Omar Abdul al-Rahman (imprisoned for his role in the 1993 World Trade Center bombing), and the Saudi Salafi preacher Khalid al-Rashed and Hafiz al-Dawsari.30 These excerpts were taken from videos and audio recordings from other groups by Al-Shabab media operatives.
The narrative structuring of Al-Shabab’s films clearly demonstrated the group’s ideological affinity with the transnational/global jihadi current represented by AQCG and select dissident ulama voices in countries such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt, who are much heralded by jihadi as authoritative backers of jihadi «activism» and struggle.34

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.35 Al-Shabab’s amir, Ahmed «Mukhtar Abu al-Zubayr» Godane, makes a similar pitch, combining Quranic and hadith citations with a reference to the legal opinions of 18th century Najdi Safi 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.36

Recruitment pitches characterized much of Al-Shabab’s early film productions. Although these never ceased 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.37 By producing multiple recruitment films in an array of languages, Al-Shabab increased 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 disenfranchised 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.38 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.39

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...
of how to implement insurgent governance and sub-
sequently profit from the institution of a form of law
and order, however harsh, over these territories. The
benefits of broadcasting carefully narrated and orga-
nized images of its rule over expanding areas included
increasing its stock within the global jihadist 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 Kismayo 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 interpre-
tation and implementation of the hudud punishments
for specific crimes such as theft, highway robbery
(firqa), murder, rape, and moral infractions such as var-
ious forms of fomication (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 religious rituals in the
form of public declarations in the centers of newly
captured cities, towns, and villages and the public
broadcasting of hudud punishments applied by Al-
Shabab’s courts.40 These ritual performances were the
local face of Al-Shabab’s new domestic order.

The group’s leadership, however, also sought and
continued to seek to promote images of the group as a
capable, vigilant, and just ruler. In order to project im-
ages 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 high-
lighting aspects of the insurgent rule. These included
public, communal prayers marking the end of Ramadan
in 2009, competitions for children concerning the rec-
tation and memorization of the Quran during Rama-
dan, 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.41 Domestically Al-Shabab and affiliated or
sympathetic media outlets also reported on construc-
tion projects such as the building of small bridges and
irrigation channels for local farmers in a bid to high-
light the group’s interest in local governance as well as
presenting itself as a viable alternative in contrast to the
inert TFG.42 This media output was aimed at multiple
audiences including externally at Somali diaspora
communities, locally through the insurgents’ domestic
Somali-language outlets, regionally at East African Mus-
lims, and globally at potential foreign fighters, fellow
jihadis, and financial backers as well as perceived ene-
mies 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 par-
ticularly powerful symbolic act because it is tradition-
ally 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 (jumu’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 portion 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 international-
ly-recognized government’s weakness.

Al-Shabab has released few videos, in contrast to
other jihadi groups such as Islamic State and Tahrir-
I-Sunnah Pakistan groups, of its actual public im-
plementation and ritual performance of the hudud,
though it frequently reports on such performances of
political violence and projections of power through
domestically aimed Somali-language media.43 In one
of the few films produced by its official external me-
dia 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 AQG 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 Mu-
hammad al-Uthaymin, and a lecture by the late Pales-
tinian jihadi-Salafi preacher Abu al-Nur al-Maqdisi
on their legal opinions regarding the hudud for
spying, which is execution.44

The public ritual performance of the hudud and the
organization of communal prayers and social events,
such as Quran memorization and recitation competi-
tions 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 cam-
paign and it became increasingly important and strate-

large group of Muslims,» (n.p.), 13 November 2008 (Arabic); and «The General Leadership of Al-Shabab mobilizes the Jazhe al-Habba for the
implementation of the call to God (da’wa & Allah) in the liberated cities and villages,» (n.p.), 5 August 2008 (Arabic).
41 Al-Shabab films, Implementation of the Hadd («set») Punishment on Two Spies in Mogadishu, the Islamic Province of Banaadir, released in
October 2009; Brews 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 online but are available 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 Afgoye,» 3
March 2012; Somali MeMo, «Conclusion of a Qur’an Recitation Event during Eid al-Fitr in Damasor,» 1 August 2013; Radio al-Furqan, «Mujahidin
officials and thousands of people gather for Eid in Barawe,» 15 October 2013; Radio al-Andalus, «The Governor ofHideen, 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-Dheer (Cirebon),» 26 September 2015.
42 The domestic trajectory of Al-Shabab’s media campaigns and an overview of Somali-language media is discussed in Chonka, «Spies, Sto-
neways, and the Susuy» 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 and externalizing 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.
43 Representative examples include Somali MeMo, «Two suspected Kenyan spies killed in Jilib in the Middle Juba region,» 11 June 2016; So-
ni 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.
44 Al-Maqdisi, whose real name was Abd al-Latif Musa, had then only recently been killed in a violent shootout 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 Au-
gust 2009. He and the other members of Jund Ansar Allah were widely eulogized by global jihadi groups including AQCG and its regional affilia-
tions as well as the QMIF media network and Al-Shabab. Despite his previously marginal status even among global jihadi, al-Maqdisi became a
heralded example of the mujahid-Salafis who sacrificed himself for Islam. For details, see BBC News, «Gaza Islamic Leader Dies in Raid,» 15
Christopher Anzalone, «Islamist-Nationalism vs. Transnational Salafi Jihadism in Gaza,» Views from the Occident blog, 19 August 2009, available
at https://occident.blogspot.ca/2009/08/islamist-nationalism-vs-transnational.html, last accessed 17 June 2016; and «Anti-HAMAS Information
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.

The implementation, by its sharia courts, in territories that it controls is also a key component of Al-Shaabab’s performance of political ritual and demonstration of its ability to selectively implement violence strategically.45 The insurgent group seeks to bolster its claim to be the legitimate governing authority in its new state. 

45 The policy of implementation of hudud (Đa’wa), for example, was implemented in the weak yet internationally recognized Somali federal government, over 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.46 The public implementation (political performance and spectacle) of hudud 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 claims to law and security leadership are contrasted in Al-Shabab’s media discourse with the corruption of the SFG and 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 and the failure to consistently pay police and security forces personnel, all of which significantly impacts the government’s ability to tackle Al-Shabab and other domestic challengers.

As its territorial control grew, Al-Shabab began to issue and implement edicts through its various offices that sought to regulate both local economies, implementa- tion of law, taxation, military affairs, and foreign NGOs operating in Somalia.47 The group also moved to impose its will 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.48 The insurgent leadership and bureaucracy targeted Christian NGOs and the World Food Program in partic- ular, accusing the former of attempting to spread Chris- tianity in Somalia and the latter of under-cutting 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.49 Regarding the latter allegations, Al-Shabab was ad- 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.50

46 Photography is an important aspect of the media campaigns of many jihadist 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.

47 Representative Al-Shabab communiqués, ‘Jaysh al-Hisba kills and crucifies two highway bandits in the province of Juba in southern Soma- lia,’ 10 August 2008 (Arabic); ‘Juba Guided by the Sharia and Jaysh al-Hisba continues its suppression of highway bandits and missionary work (Đa’wa),’ 13 August 2008 (Arabic); ‘Justice in the province of Juba delivers a ruling of stoning on a woman for zina,’ 28 October 2008 (Arabic); ‘Implementation of the hudud (Đa’wa),’ 10 August 2008 (Arabic); ‘Implementation of hudud punishment for a young man for raping a young woman and killing her in the suburbs of the city of Wabeno,’ 30 June 2009 (Arabic); ‘Implementation of hudud punishment for highway banditry (Đa’wa) 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 hudud for a rapist of a young woman in the Islamic province of Gedo,’ 25 September 2011 (Arabic).

48 Local populations have several options according 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 clan elders and wealthy businessmen. For more on the importance and influence of business support for different forms of Somali Islamism, see Asra Ahmad, ‘The Security Bazaar,’ Reprieve, 25 May 2014, accessed at http://www.reprieve.org.uk/100141/short- eges-clan-rivalries-weakens-Somalia’s-new-army, last accessed 1 October 2016; and Michael Wahab, ‘Understanding Civil Military Groups in Somalia,’ Conflict Trends, no. 2 (2016): 36-44.

49 Al-Shabab 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 jihadist media operatives, by incidents such as the 2005 publication by the Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten of controversy 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 spokes- man Ali Rage (also known as Ali Dheere).51 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 (Kufr) in a coalition that includes the Somali federal government and AMISOM.’

50 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 undoubtedly recruited more foreign fighters from around the Horn of Africa and in neighboring Yemen, where there is a large Somali refugee population as

47 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,’ 25 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.

48 Al-Shabab communiqués, ‘Jaysh al-Hisba confiscates rotten food in the Bakaara Market in Mogadishu,’ 29 June 2009 (Arabic); «Implementation of the Hudud punishment for a woman who was guilty of zina,’ 28 October 2008 (Arabic); and «WFP (World Food Program) must terminate all its operations inside Somalia,’ 27 February 2010.


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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 «Abu Mansur al-Amriki,» or «the American.» By then, he had been featured in an Al Jazeera Arabic interview wearing a scarf over his face in October 2007. In the 31-minute 2009 film, Hammami introduced his soon-to-become much maligned rapping abilities, delivering lines praising the mujahidin and castigating their opponents. 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.

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. Originally training with a group of fighters loyal to Hassan al-Turki, Hammami eventually moved over to the growing Al-Shabab movement. His career in Al-Shabab, which started out promisingly for him, 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.

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 «by next door gone bad.» In Al-Shabab media he was referred to 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 jihadi, as well as a «field commander» (al-qā‘id al-maydān). He was accused by the U.S. government of planning an October 2008 suicide bombing carried out by fellow American foreign fighter Shiwaa 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. 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 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.

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’ Osman (Labbayk, Ya Usama), in which the group’s amir, Ahmed Godane, declared, in Arabic, his loyalty to the AQGC leader, who had praised the «mujahidin in Somalia» generally and without specifically identifying Al-Shabab in a March 2009 audio message. The evidence for this was not provided.

56 Ibid.
57 Ibid.
58 Ibid.
59 Ibid.
60 Ibid.
61 Ibid.
62 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 (The Defense of the Khilafah’s four parts, released in May 2012). The four books, all written under the pen name «Abu Jihad al-Shami,» are An Islamic 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.
nearly 50-minute-long film, which is subtitled in English, weaves together a visual, audio, and print narrative of «Cruiser» 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 Yaseen, 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. 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. This provides the narrative transition to extensive footage of Al-Shabab military training, parades, and battlefield operations against the Somali government and AMISOM.

Despite the clear desire of Godane to formalize Al-Shabab’s relationship with AQGC 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 international pressure on Godane’s group. The AQGC leader, who advised Godane not to publicly declare a state in Somalia, also expressed concerns in communications with the Al-Shabab leader and other AQGC 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. His views stood in contrast to those expressed publicly by AQAP ideologue Anwar al-Awlqi 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.

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, Kismayo, and Marka. In October 2014, the insurgent group withdrew from the coastal town of Barawe, its last major holding on the Somali coast that had served since the fall of Kismayo 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 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 overwhelm- ing 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 Kismayo, 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. 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.

67 Al-Shabab film, We Are at Your Service, O’ Osama.
68 Ibid.
69 Ibid.
70 From the Abbottabad documents captured at bin Laden’s compound and available through West Point’s Combating Terrorism Center, see "SOCOM-2012-0000005 and SOCM-2012-0000006." 69 Osama bin Laden, "Letter to Mufti Har Abul Al-Zubayr (Godane)," 7 August 2010, available at https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/letter-from-u-sama-bin-laden-to-mufti-har-abul-al-zubayr-original-language-2.txt, last accessed 17 June 2016. 70 Al-Shabab fighters carry out an ambush of AMISOM troops in Af-

maswkal in Somalia’s Middle Juba region.

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

71 Representaive Al-Shabab films include El Walk-Reaping the Kenya 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 Hayar Reid, released 30 August 2012; the film series They Are Enemies so Beware of Them (which takes its title from Qur’an 62:4), which currently includes six installments released between January 2012 and March 2015; and The Burundian Bloodbath: Battle of Daynile, released in November 2010.

72 AQAP film, The First Exclusive Interview with the Sheik-Missionary Preacher Anwar al-Awlqi.

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particularly those popular with Somali government, AMISOM, and international figures in Mogadishu and other major urban centers.

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. During the days-long attack and siege, Al-Shabab’s ‘HMS 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. 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. 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 enemies.

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. 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, medical, financial assistance and other humanitarian aid collected and distributed as religiously required charitable taxes (zakat) by the group’s offices and units. 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.

Al-Shabab and AQC for failing to be truly global in their programs of action. The emergence of new social media platforms and their capabilities, in short, have been a ‘double-edged sword’ for the group. 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. During the days-long attack and siege, Al-Shabab’s ‘HMS 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. 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. 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 enemies.

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Al-Shabab and AQC for failing to be truly global in their programs of action.
The official media productions by Al-Shabab’s Al-Kataba Media Foundation since November 2010 have included a large number of recruitment-themed films in multiple languages aimed regionally, particularly at Swahili-speakers, and further afield at the Arab world, Europe, and North America. These films feature the continued use of themes present in the group’s earliest productions, which include references to the publication of cartoons insulting Muslims and the Prophet Muhammad, continued U.S.-supported “Crusader” oppression of Muslims, and the promotion of military jihad, battlefield martyrdom, and the heroic image of the mujahid who stands against the seemingly overwhelming power of the enemies of God. Many of these films were multilingual, with parts variously in Arabic, Swahili, Somali, English, Norwegian, Swedish, and Urdu. Mounting battlefield casualties and defections in 2012 and 2013 put even more strains on the insurgent group’s already limited human resources, necessitating a renewed drive to recruit foreign fighters from outside of Somalia.

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 Somali migrants living outside of the 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. 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. 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.

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. Al-Shabab’s official media organs and affiliated Swahili-language jihadi media outlets also began publishing weapons instruction manuals and ideological and creedal tracts for Kenyan supporters and members.

In November 2010, Al-Kataba Media released a 35-minute recruitment film urging the world’s Muslims to come to Somalia and join Al-Shabab. Substituted 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. 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. 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 AQ in the spring of 2012, further demonstrating the growing importance of the insurgents’ regional foreign fighter contingent, particularly from 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. 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. 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. 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. 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.

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. 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 mujahedin. Kenyan intellectuals retell the story of the struggle between Islam and unbelief as well as the oppression of Muslims and their oppressors as part of Al-Shabab’s ranks, citing particularly those in Kenya, to join the fight against Islam’s enemies, such as the U.S. and Kenyan governments. Kenyan Muslims are urged to «extend with the mujahedin» and warned against backbiting or spreading negative rumors and news about them and thereby aiding «the enemies of Islam and the Muslims.» Researchers are also instructed as to how they could recognize government spies and protect themselves from being targeted as «intelligence agents.»

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 Northern East 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. 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. 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 argue, economic; they are attempting to relieve economic pressures at home and, in the case of Kenya, attempting to «mitigate» the United States in claiming to desire a «security buffer zone» in southern Somalia.

Kenya’s invasion of southern Somalia, far from being a negative event, is a blessed opportunity according to the producers of Gaidi Mtaani, since the enemies of Islam will now engage in warfare styled as «jihad» inside of their home country. 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 jihads by bringing out Kenyan Christians’ (the majority) hatred towards Muslims and their 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 «extend with the mujahedin» and warn against backbiting or spreading negative rumors and news about them and thereby aiding «the enemies of Islam and the Muslims.»

In closing, and continuing to meddle in Somalia are, the writers allege, economic; and moving toward a purity and strength of belief is the main source of the jihads’ strength, which is not based on geographical areas but rather on the strength of their ideological commitments.


72.Abdulahi, Ayele Adam, «Usaliti wa Uingereza Kwa Wasislamu,» (Swahili), Gaidi Mtaani, no. 1 (April 2012), 4-5.

73.Abdulahi, Ayele Adam, «Usaliti wa Uingereza Kwa Wasislamu,» (Swahili), Gaidi Mtaani, no. 1 (April 2012), 4-5.

74.«Usaliti wa Uingereza Kwa Wasislamu,» (Swahili), Gaidi Mtaani, no. 1 (April 2012), 4-5.

75.«Usaliti wa Uingereza Kwa Wasislamu,» (Swahili), Gaidi Mtaani, no. 1 (April 2012), 4-5.

76.«Usaliti wa Uingereza Kwa Wasislamu,» (Swahili), Gaidi Mtaani, no. 1 (April 2012), 4-5.

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78.«Usaliti wa Uingereza Kwa Wasislamu,» (Swahili), Gaidi Mtaani, no. 1 (April 2012), 4-5.

79.«Usaliti wa Uingereza Kwa Wasislamu,» (Swahili), Gaidi Mtaani, no. 1 (April 2012), 4-5.

80.«Usaliti wa Uingereza Kwa Wasislamu,» (Swahili), Gaidi Mtaani, no. 1 (April 2012), 4-5.

81.«Usaliti wa Uingereza Kwa Wasislamu,» (Swahili), Gaidi Mtaani, no. 1 (April 2012), 4-5.

82.Abdulahi, Ayele Adam, «Usaliti wa Uingereza Kwa Wasislamu,» (Swahili), Gaidi Mtaani, no. 1 (April 2012), 4-5.
In January 2016, Al-Shabab launched a surprise coordinated mass assault on a Kenyan military base at Al-Addde in Somalia’s Gede region, killing as many as 141 Kenyan troops and capturing others alive. 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 unpreparadness of Kenyan forces for such an attack by an estimated 150-300 insurgents operating as highly mobile infantry supported by strategically deployed ‘techni-cals’ (vehicles mounted with heavy machine guns and recoilless rifles) and a suicide bomber, who opened the attack on the base.117 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 AQIC East African operative attached to Al-Shabab.118 Opening 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 Khu-bayb al-Sudani.119

In a separate film, Ahmad Iman Ali directly addresses the Kenyan public.120 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 extra-judicial killings allegedly carried out by Kenyan security forces as justifications.121 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 ‘mujahid-in-din’ with questions about the fate of their loved ones captured or killed at Al-Addde, saying that the Kenyan government will only mislead and lie to them.122 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 Al-Addde.123

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/triibal, 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 Northwest Frontier Province in modern day and discrimination against Somali living in Kenya are highlighted not only as ‘Islamic’ issues but also as Somali ones.124 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.125 Al-Shabab’s combination of multiple identities and re-tooling of nationalist and clan identities strategically deployed suicide bombers to open up new offensives. An alliance of Syrian and other jihadi rebel groups, including Nuara and the East Turkistan 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.

112 Al-Shabab film, Evil Will be the Morning for Those Warned, released in February 2016 (Swahili). The title is taken from Quran 37:177.
113 Ibid.
118 Al-Shabab film, Evil Will be the Morning for Those Warned, released in February 2016 (Swahili).
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 AQIC-style of global jihadism.

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 “collusive” 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. The logo and presentation style of this revamped media production department was designed to mimic actual satellite TV 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 jihadi in our beloved front battle 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.”

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.

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.” 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. 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, Mugadishu: 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 had simply run into a ditch and caught fire, and then flippanly dismissing casualties, stating, “And if you lose one soldier, so what?” The insurgents’ media operations message is clear: AMISOM is untrueful 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 that targets 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.

Al-Shabab continued this narrative of honest reporting versus enemy deception and cover-ups in October
and gunfire were still ongoing and official claims that media operations also showed how unreliable official government, including the police and military. Insurgent and competition between different branches of government 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. Under 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. 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.

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. 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. 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. 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. The guiding theme of the film is that of justifiable revenge for injustices and oppression, something that other jihad groups, including IS and AQI, also invoke through the Islamic legal concept of qisas or retributive punishment (roughly, ‘an eye for an eye’).

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. 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 States and Western European powers.

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. 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.

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. 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. 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. In response, mainstream British Muslim organizations, such as the

135 Ibid.
136 Al-Shabab film, Video Message from One of the Kenyan Prisoners, released in February 2012.
138 Ibid.
139 Ibid.
140 Ibid.
141 Ibid.
142 Ibid.
143 Ibid.
144 Ibid. and Al-Shabab film series, No Safety except Faith! Faith or Security, which is currently made up of six installments released between March 2015 and January 2016.
145 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.
146 Ibid.
147 Ibid.
The call for ‘lone wolf’ attacks in this film once again attracted significant 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.146 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.147 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 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.148

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 jihadi, to pledge their allegiance to “caliph” Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, presented a major challenge to AQG, Al-Shabab, and other AQ regional affiliates and allies. The attractiveness of the IS “caliphate,” which in 2013-2014 rapidly conquered large swathes 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.150 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 of Islamic State and the demand of its leadership for global allegiance provided a new outlet for expression.151

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 members of the group to pledge allegiance (bay’a) to IS amir Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Usually featuring multi-lingual 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 meth-odo-logy (“al-khilafa ala minhaj al-nubuwwa”).152 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.153

146 Ibid.
147 Al-Shabab film, The Westgate Siege.
148 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 communicators (Ikhbarīyāt “Attacks by the Caliphate’s Soldiers on Kirkuk city and Control over Many of the City’s Neighborhoods,” 21 October 2016, and, via the Amaj News Agency, “The Islamic State Penetrates Kirkuk city and has Control over Half of its Neighborhoods,” 21 October 2016, and “Martyred Car Bomb Attack Strikes Group of Security Forces near a Government Building in Kirkuk city,” 21 October 2016).
150 Anzalone, “The Life and Death of Al-Shabab Leader Ahmed Godane.”
151 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.
152 Islamic State film, A Message to the Muslims in Somalia, released in May 2015; O’ Harakat al-Shabab, this is the Consequence of Fighting the Caliphate,” released on 11 December 2015.
153 Al-Shabab, film, Whoever Changes His Religion, Kill Him, released in June 2016 simultaneously in Arabic and Somali language versions.
154 Al-Shabab film, From the Land of Syria to the Mujahidin in Somalia, released in October 2015; A Message to Our Brothers in Somalia, released in October 2015; From the Land of Syria to the Mujahidin in Somalia, released in October 2015; From Sinai to Somalia, released in October 2015.
156 Al-Shabab film, From the Frontiers of Glory 4: From Golis to Land of Tunis, released in October 2015.

The formalization of Al-Shabab’s affiliation with al-Qaeda was over- seen by the former’s amir, Ahmed Godane, and Usama bin Laden’s successor and long-time deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri. Godane’s successor, Abu Ubayda Ahmed al-’Umar, has reaffirmed Al-Shabab’s loyalty to AQG and rejected demands from Islamic State for a pledge of allegiance (bay’a) to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.
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. 157 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 AQ in Lajolo 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, the broadcast and otherwise distributed by Al-Shabab and affiliated media outlets such as Radio al-Furqan and Radio al-Andalus. 158 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 fled to have the country for IS-controlled areas in other countries, such as Libya, or been arrested or killed by the Amniyat internal security network. 159

In a short film released by one of IS’s media appendages, Furat Media, in mid-April 2016, Mu‘min appeared 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. 160 Deserts training «camp», though the location looks more like an open plain than an actual camp. 160

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

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-Ayni, and Barhan. Rather than engage in a tit-for-tat debate with Hammami, whose online and political apparatus continues to evolve into an ever more capable propaganda machine. 163

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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.

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-Kataiba 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

157 Abd al-Qadir Mu‘min, Bayy’i’iis Sheik 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.


160 Furat Media, Shaykh Abu Na‘im Military Camp, released in April 2016. The camp is probably named after another Al-Shabab defector, Abu Na‘im 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.


162 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).
Al-Shabab following its loss of urban centers such as Kismayo 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 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.
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.

HSI is a member of the Global Investigative Journalism Network (GIJN).