From a Small to a Long War: Somalia Coping with al-Shabaab

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Al-Shabaab in Somalia: The History and Ideology of a Militant Islamist Group, 2005-2012
by Stig Jarle Hansen
Hurst and Co, 2013, xiii + 195 pages,

Nothing expresses better the new international order in Mogadishu than the airport. While readers of international newspapers expect the city to be largely pacified despite incidents here and there as in Baghdad, the reality of the victory against the Jihadi movement, Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujaheddin (Movement of the Young Combatants, hereafter al-Shabaab), is more tenuous. The whole international presence is stuck between the airfield and the sea and protected by an array of different forces: Somali, African, UN and also a range of secret services protected by Western special forces. Even the compound of the former US embassy used in 1993 by the UNITAF and UNOSOM forces seems today off limit. The very enclaves outside the airport (in and outside Mogadishu) have been subjected to terror attacks. Yet this war is supposed to be going to end soon.

For the last three years, the international narrative on Somalia has been that al-Shabaab is continuously defeated battle after battle and that each of its offensives is the last, desperate attempt to remain relevant in the Somali setting. Its departure from Mogadishu in late July 2011 was described as a strategic defeat credited to AMISOM (African Union Mission in Somalia), though one knew that it was precipitated by the lack of ammunitions and a rethinking of the military strategy more than a hard push by international forces. The loss of Kismaayo in September 2012 was supposed to cut a major source of funding for the Jihadi organisation and bankrupt the organisation, as explained for months by the UN Monitoring Group. None of that happened, apart from some financial tensions that were counter-balanced by the development of an extortion/protection economy all over Somalia (including Somaliland and Puntland). In early March 2014, a new offensive launched by AMISOM with strong Western backing was again proclaimed to cut the Jihadi movement off from its sanctuaries and bring it on its knees; four months after the launch of this new offensive, people fear that the Ramadhan month might be one of the bloodiest experienced in southern Somalia for years.

What may be even more significant is the fact that the Western prophecy on al-Shabaab is increasingly fulfilling itself: the links between al-Shabaab and al-Qaeda and the projection of terrorist actions in eastern Africa are getting stronger to the extent that they could become systemic if this dynamic is not reversed. Al-Shabaab has been concentrating its resources for years on fighting inside Somalia. Its existence outside south and central Somalia was limited and mostly quiet as it had to protect its logistical lines and its funding mechanisms. However, one should keep in mind two dramatic events. The bombing of the US embassies in East Africa in 1998 and a hotel near Mombasa in November 2002 would not have been possible without the support provided by Somali militants. Things started changing in October 2008 when very well coordinated attacks took place in Hargeysa and Boosaaso: nothing of that magnitude had been achieved in years of fighting in the south. On 11 July 2010, over seventy-five people were killed in Kampala in two bomb attacks designed to 'punish the Ugandan army', a leading AMISOM contingent. On 21 September 2013, a mall was attacked in Nairobi and dozens of people were slaughtered, the first high profile al-Shabaab attack after many incidents that were not accounted for. Less than a year later, near Lamu, two attacks in two consecutive days killed again over ninety people. Today the list of countries targeted by al-Shabaab is longer and one can fear that, beside Djibouti and Ethiopia (already attacked several times), Tanzania could be the next one.

Yet, this international focus won't help much to understand al-Shabaab. For whoever is ready to risk leaving the sanctuary of the Mogadishu international airport, of its many secret and special forces moving in the Somali capital, the picture is slightly different. Indeed, there is no more frontline but the presence of al-Shabaab is perceived everywhere, not with the same intensity but with the same sense of the fragility of the achievement of the Somali and international forces on the ground. What matters is to know who the primary targets are for al-Shabaab: foreign visitors or government officials, security officers and their foreign advisers.

News from the countryside also provides the same sense of fragility. Beyond the recurrent description of clan tensions, the continuation of a war that is supposed to have been won counts more than the building up of local administration or the local benefits of an international armed presence. The Jihadi movement has not given up and resurfaces in the countryside in many different ways, sometimes through terror incidents, sometimes through clan pacification, sometimes through religious gatherings and celebrations.

To a large extent, the Somali people came to learn how to live among al-Shabaab as much as al-Shabaab fighters came to learn how not to go too far in implementing their peculiar understanding of Shari'a law. The striking point, known to Somalis but less so to foreigners, is that al-Shabaab is still able to recruit people, mostly youngsters but not always kids, who join the movement for many reasons, some out of pity, others from kinship, and some for ideological reasons. This, more than al-Shabaab's resilience, is perceived by many Somalis as the crucial question to be addressed if al-Shabaab is to be defeated. As many Somalis said to this reviewer, al-Shabaab is deeply rooted in Somali society, though its existence is extremely divisive; if one wants to defeat it, one should first measure this intimacy.

The book under review arose from such a context and proves its originality by demarcating itself from the mainstream security-centred discourse on Somalia. 9/11 has indeed promoted a new wave of literature on terrorism and security. According to one expert of that field, Adam Dolnik,[1] a new book on terrorism comes out roughly every six hours. While little academic knowledge on Somalia has been gained over the last decades, the country has been the subject of a huge number of publications after the beginning of the civil war, and even more so after 9/11. Most of those articles or pamphlets are poorly researched and written by people who had spent only a few days or weeks in Somalia (often in Somaliland and Puntland, or at the international airport in Mogadishu under AMISOM protection). Exceptions to this are a small percentage of the current literature on Somalia. Stig Hansen's book is certainly one of them as the author spent time in Somalia since 2005, not only in Mogadishu but also in other regions.

His book presents a history of al Shabaab, a movement that has been defying forecasts for years as it has been able to reinvent itself every time it faced annihilation. While, in 2005, Stig Hansen estimates its membership at less than 40 militants, five years later, the same movement controlled most of south and central Somalia, nearly three times the population of Somaliland. The book goes into details about its birth, the tense relations it had with other political actors (especially in the Islamist arena) in Somalia, its connections with al-Qaeda and the current spill-over of the confrontation with the AMISOM in neighbouring countries, especially Kenya.

His book is different in its focus compared to many previous publications on the same subject: it does not take al-Shabaab propaganda for granted and analyses this movement as a collective Somali actor and also an implant of something more extraneous, fundamentally linked to the Afghan experience of a few Somalis and the proselytism of al-Qaeda in East Africa.[2] At variance with many security-oriented publications, it pays attention to several important features of what could be called the state-building strategy of this radical group. Overcoming clan factions, al-Shabaab has been able to develop a genuine apparatus that is institutionalised enough to survive the change of leaders, some being killed, others giving up the war. This distinctive feature is also extended in the way the militants capture clan politics more than they are captured by it. While the book covers the formative years of post-9/11 up to 2011, reading it helps one to understand the contradictions to which most Western discourse is captive: a movement recurrently beaten but able to reinvent itself by changing the parameters of the war it wages.

Like a few other publications that have helped us to understand the various aspects of militant Islam in Somalia, Stig Hansen's book suffers from some weaknesses that are worth examining here.

The first one deals with the emergence of the Salafi trend and its violent component. Stig Hansen could have gone farther in looking at how Salafi Islam got entrenched in the Somali society and became a way for many people to re-emerge as new born Muslims, especially after 1992. For instance, many newcomers in the business realm were suspected to have been involved in the militias who destroyed the country in 1991-1992: their 're-Islamisation' provided them with a new respectable identity that could not be questioned. The role that Dubai and other Gulf States played as supplying markets but also business models for those neophyte traders could have been mentioned. This new generation of business people was instrumental in promoting the Islamic Courts in 1998 and later in 2003 in Mogadishu. There were those who put pressure on the main business people to legitimise those institutions and fund them. They also provided the foot soldiers of many military adventures of al-Shabaab in 2006 and later against the Ethiopian army. Today, analysts should pay more attention to the way the business realm provides once again space for former al-Shabaab supporters or members to reintegrate into 'normal' society without clearly giving up their *takfiri* ideology.

These social dynamics are as important as Islamist organisations that predated al-Shabaab and willingly or unwillingly contributed to frame its political and military agenda. Al-Shabaab's growth was made possible thanks to the support it got from other potentially rival groups at different moments for different reasons. In particular, the role played by al-I'tisaam al-Islaamiyya and Hisbul Islaam should have been accorded a more detailed analysis; those groups pioneered a Salafi trend that visibly had problems to entertain the notion of global Jihad despite being very hostile to the policies of regional states and the West in Somalia. This lack of appreciation for nuances explains much of the failures of regional states and US policy to corner al-Shabaab. To put it in a nutshell, al-I'tisaam's supportive role was essential in the formative years, and the major defeat encountered by al-Shabaab was not, as claimed in the book, the loss of Mogadishu in July/August 2011, but the hostile attitude of most of the 'ulemaa who were close to that organisation after the summer of 2010 just before Hisbul Islam was forced to merge to avoid eradication. This split inside the Salafi Somali trend is essential to explain how al-Shabaab failed to gain more influence in Puntland and Somaliland despite a strong constituency in both regions.

This point leads us to discuss another debatable aspect of the book. While Stig Hansen is very clear at the beginning on the complexity of the movement, he increasingly focuses on the military narrative and loses what made his points earlier on so relevant: the fact that al-Shabaab is not only or simply a terror group but carries out important social tasks (in a debatable manner). After 2011, many Western observers emphasize the role played by Amniyat (secret police and hit squad) and often compare it to a Mafia.[3] In doing this, they miss an important point. Had the Amniyat been only a Mafia gang, the business people would have organised themselves to get rid of them, but Amniyat's existence is understood as part and parcel of a Jihadi group that develops religious and political discourses that are not always easy to contradict. The role played by the *d'awa* cannot be reduced to propaganda because al-Shabaab is not a secular organisation and its religious discourse has much stronger resonance than secularists would like to admit. It is because of this religious nature that al-Shabaab takes on board duties that make it different: clan reconciliation, reform of the Qoranic schools, occasional distribution of land, proclamation of the equality of believers have a strong resonance that goes much beyond the rank and file of the Jihadi movement. It sheds light on a point the book is at pains to explain: why the movement, despite all its defeats and its massive coercion of the population, is still able to recruit Somali youth in the country as well as in the diaspora.

Stig Hansen could also have considered much more carefully the role *d'awa* plays in the survival strategy of the movement and its ability to be seen as an 'avant-guarde' for many Sunni youth. As he rightly underlines, the al-Shabaab leadership has always been divided on many important political and tactical issues and, at the same time, less prone to ideological discussions since most in the leadership do not share a sophisticated religious culture: Ahmed Godane, its Amir, is certainly one of the few to master it, with Fu'aad Shangoole and 'Abdiqaadir Muumin coming next. When the movement is losing its constituency somewhere, it does not send additional troops and tough commanders, it sends its religious figures because they can still play a role that goes beyond secular functions. This situation points out to another aspect often mentioned in analyses but never really reflected upon.

After 2011, in fact from 2009 onwards, al-Shabaab has put greater emphasis on rural areas and has built there sanctuaries and training camps, whereas earlier, these used to be near big villages and cities. The explanation is not purely military: being far away from the tarmac roads is a good way to be protected. It also deals with two major features of Somali society. First, the Djibouti process that started early 2008 and the election of Sheekh Shariif Sheekh Ahmed (former leader of the Executive Committee of the Islamic Courts Union) in January 2009 brought a lot of troubles within the ranks of al-Shabaab and Hisbul Islaam. At that time, the main media in southern Somalia were hosting religious debates on all aspects of the Shari'a law that the new president had promised to enforce. The question that arises is therefore why there was still fighting. Only in rural areas were the people oblivious to those discussions since the radios could not reach those regions. It was a plus for al-Shabaab in a difficult moment. Another point was also considered by the al-Shabaab leadership: to apply pressure on clan elders or business people, it is better (and often easier) to control the 'homeland of their clan' rather than the neighbourhoods they are settled in.

The connections with al-Qaeda are seen for what they have been, fluctuating and relative in many regards despite the fundamental commitment of a core group in the leadership. Yet the author could have been more nuanced on the loyalty shown by many commanders who had their own reading of the situation. In 2006, the al-Shabaab project was still confused for many in the leadership who were inclined to believe that the Islamic Courts Union could fulfil the role they envisioned for their movement. Many who were then in the leadership never became genuine Jihadists and gave up the movement or even politics at the dawn of the Ethiopian intervention. Stig Hansen's book concludes at a time al-Qaeda's hold on the movement is reasserted. Without getting into details, one can surely say that its importance is greater after having helped solve the 'leadership crisis' in June 2013; that was the moment when internal tensions reached a high level but there was no political room for dissidents to leave the organisation and provoke a major split.

Should al-Shabaab activities beyond the Somali borders be understood as a spill-over of the Somali crisis? Stig Hansen's response is fundamentally right when he underlines the connections that existed from the very beginning between influential al-Shabaab figures and al-Qaeda in East Africa. He also describes in some details the recruitment of East Africans starting in 2009. The date is important because it is also from that moment that AMISOM, left alone following the departure of Ethiopian forces, started playing the leading military role in opposing al-Shabaab. Yet, with the intensification of the relations or the will to payback the support he got from al-Qaeda in internal controversies, the al-Shabaab leader seems to have developed a more ambitious project that could be described as an attempt to build a local Kenyan Jihadi movement rooted in grievances articulated on the Swahili Coast: an 'accidental guerrilla',[4] as described by David Kilcullen. It is too early to say whether al-Shabaab is going to be successful, but the attacks carried out in 2013 and 2014 do not seem to have impacted the Kenyan Muslim communities as much as was expected by the Somali Jihadi movement: the reaction of the Kenyan state may be more successful in radicalising local Muslims.

Stig Hansen has chosen not to discuss in detail the policies followed by Ethiopia, Kenya and the US; only cursive remarks help the readers to follow the succession of badly planned moves and debatable attempts to curb the influence of the Somali Jihadi group. Certainly, the book raises good questions: Why are such ineffective policies not reviewed if not radically altered for being so dysfunctional? Why are the issues of engaging al-Shabaab and dealing with the underpinning reality it expresses simply taboo? Let us hope a decent answer won't be too long in coming. Somalia deserves peace once and for all.

Notes

1. 2013, *Conducting terrorism field research: A guide*, London: Routledge.
2. Of course, it is not the first to provide a more comprehensive analysis of al-Shabaab and that does not limit itself to the security-centred approach. Among others, one can cite a few ICG reports (and especially the very last one published in June 2014), Ken Menkhaus's work, including the latest article published in February 2014 in *CTC Sentinel*,"Al-Shabaab capabilities post Westgate", and my own work (notably the one accessible at http://www.sciencespo.fr/ceri/sites/sciencespo.fr.ceri/files/art_RM2.pdf).
3. Matt Bryden, February 2014, *The Reinvention of al-Shabaab. A Strategy of Choice of Necessity*?, CSIS, available at http://csis.org/files/publication/140221_Bryden_Reinvention of AlShabaab_Web.pdf.
4. David Kilcullen, 2009, *The Accidental Guerrilla. Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One*, New York: Oxford University Press.