Al-Shabab and fundamental terrorism in Somalia: Threats to the continent and beyond

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ABSTRACT

This study is motivated by threats faced by Somalia and other countries in fighting terrorism. Although several studies have attempted to explain the rise and dynamics of terrorism groups particularly al-Shabaab, this work is predicated more on how the terrorist activities threaten Africa and beyond informed by how these operations are sustained. This study aims to investigate threats to the continent and beyond by Al-Shabab and Fundamental Terrorism in Somalia. In this study, a content analysis was used on quantitative and qualitative data obtained from publicly available datasets and secondary sources of research work on terrorism. The main contribution of this study is that, terrorism by the al-Shabaab is highly organized and that by skirting direct combat, the group has the potential for sustained fighting episodes despite waged campaigns to deter its spread. This is exacerbated by the reluctance to deploy many infantry forces from conventional armies to deal with the situation. The study may be useful to policymakers, terrorism experts, and scholars in accelerating measures of counter-terrorism.

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Introduction

Al Shabaab has received a lot of attention for two main reasons according to Hansen (2013) and Pitts (2015). First, it was the group's pronouncement of loyalty in 2013 to al-Qaeda. In the past decade, al-Qaeda has been undermined severely, particularly following the demise of the subtle Osama bin Laden. However, ties such as one with al-Shabaab proved that the line of thought remains fundamentally strong with supporters adding to the growing global terrorism fear. Al-Qaeda's support could possibly give advantage to al-Shabaab in getting financial support and arms. Also, Somalia could fast become a performance zone for international attacks or a likely hole up location for those in command. However, as of now, there appear to be no sufficient evidence to show the strengths of the perceived or real alliance. Second, it is when al-Shabab started to extend out of Somalia, generating difficulties for the US supported states like Ethiopia and Kenya, along with the rest of the Western community.

Lately, al-Shabaab declared accountability in Nairobi, Kenya's capital after sixty-two people were killed at the Westgate Mall (Karimi, 2013). Due to this and its previous past with Somalia, the Ethiopian administration has advised its people of likely attacks from al-Shabaab. Moreover, several European and American nationals are believed to have actively become members of this organization. With al-Qaeda, this has been common but for al-Shabaab being a grassroots and small group recruiting from the international community could present a serious threat the world over. While al-Shabaab is beginning to be recognized, what contributed to its rise appear to be unheeded. Poverty, colonization, inadequate infrastructure, and foreign military incursions have all helped the rise. What is unique about the group's rise was the need for independent governance informed by Islam as opposed to the desire for an influential cultural integration nor territorial expansion.

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This study employed a content analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data. Publicly available datasets and secondary sources of research work on terrorism were analyzed. These included media, research reports and statements about al-Shabaab. The logic was to understand better the group's threats and strategies. This position to understand is echoed by Alexander and McKeown (1985). In analyzing issues noted by Alexander and McKeown (1985) the study relied mostly on qualitative and quantitative data gathered from various readily accessible datasets and secondary sources containing research on terrorism. During the analysis of quantitative data, the researcher attempted to strictly adhere to the rules of coding so as to enhance scholarly verification of the study and conclusions drawn.

Mutanda (2017b) contends that the term terrorism is not easy to define due to it being restricted to a particular context. Mutanda further argues that more than a hundred definitions try to describe terrorism in various contexts. This is exemplified by the Kashmir, Palestinian, Kurd, Somali and Lebanese societies who see their armed forces as freedom fighters and not terrorists (Mutanda, 2017b). During the liberation struggle in the then Rhodesia which is now Zimbabwe, the colonial regime recognized the national liberation fighters as terrorists. This supports the explanation that the definition of terrorism is indeed contextual in nature. The Hezbollah case (a militant group and political party based in Lebanon founded in 1985) also provides the partisan character and challenges of defining terrorism. Except for Iran and Lebanon, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the Arab League announced the Lebanese movement which led to the formation of Hezbollah as a group of terrorists (Mutanda, 2017b). Canada, Australia and the United States (US) also labelled Hezbollah as a group of terrorists. Al Jazeera (2016a) reported that the European Union (EU) outlawed Hezbollah's armed forces wing implying that it was a terrorist group. Ghaddar (2016) asserts that the enemy is well known to them, their past is interwoven, and the resolve is very clear.

Notwithstanding the above, there is some agreement that terrorism is an act or threat of violence which is motivated politically targeting mostly at noncombatants. Gunaratna (2009, p.140) concludes that regardless of location, time of attack, legitimacy and the type of perpetrator, terrorism serves as means to an end. Duyvesteyn (2007, p.118) describes terrorism as an aggressive act desirous of political change. Gunaratna (2009, p. 140) opines that groups of terrorism have a tendency of developing religious and secular ideas in order to mobilize, radicalize and politicize their potential and actual followers. This is evident in the conduct of the Islamic State, Boko Haram, al-Shabaab and al-Qaeda among others. Terrorism can be viewed as a revolutionary tactic by non-state actors seeking to disrupt and influence political arrangements and to takeover governments. Cunningham (2003, pp. 9–10) argues that terrorism is a mechanism used by the feeble against those who are strong typically seen in the military history. Terrorism by suicide bombers represents recalcitrant threat to management (Gunaratna, 2009, p. 152). The main reason why terrorist groups are joined in the developing countries is due to poverty. For instance, in Lebanon the young people joining Hezbollah dubbed the party of God hail from the deprived areas of Beirut's southern suburbs (Dahiyeh), where unemployment rate is very high (Ghaddar, 2016). In Somalia, although many people are opposed to Islamic terrorism, about 20 per cent support al-Shabaab because of the hopelessness for an answer to the prevalent chaos, poverty, factionalism and corruption

Terrorism and its Effects in Africa

The terrorism effects in the African continent when reported by the West may appear negligible yet the converse is true in comparison to attacks of terrorism in the West. Maybe, the explanation could be located in the Western media's global appeal, rather than African media's backwardness. For instance, media consumers have a tendency of giving high priority to the British Broadcasting Cooperation (BBC), France 24, Al Jazeera and Cable News Network (CNN) among others. In Africa, not many people are keen to spare time on the Nigerian site called 'The Nation' known for coverage on daily acts of terrorism occurring in that country.

In East Africa and West Africa, it is apparent that al-Shabaab and Boko Haram are respectively the most dangerous. Due to al-Shabaab's activities of atrocities, East Africa is known to be having extremely high levels of terrorism incidents in the region. Davis (2010, p. 1) asserts that North Africa ranks second as a result of the prevalent al-Qaeda linked groups. During the Arab Spring that rocked North Africa, Libya was the epicenter with North Africa considered as the terrorists' exporter. Ever since 2014, thousands of jihadists from Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Libya including some other countries may have joined wars in Iraq and Syria. Weizhong, Wensheng and Lei. (2015, pp. 271–272) contend that, home governments have been worried that upon the return of these jihadists back home, they could serve as the local terrorist backbone posing a very serious national security threat to their own governments and other countries.

The Independent (2016) reports that al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) seeking to do away with the Western influence in North Africa stands as the region's most dangerous group with a membership of 1000 in Algeria alone and a wide support base in Mali, Chad, Nigeria, Libya, Tunisia and Mauritania. Before the French soldiers drove the group back, it held huge tracts of land in Mali together with its allies in 2013. Countries mostly falling victim of terrorism in sub-Saharan Africa are Mali, Nigeria and Kenya. Williamson (2016, p.174) opines that among the most obvious effects of the terror due to radicalization is the amplified negative impact on the civilian.

Although it is unacceptable targeting the vulnerable civilians, it partially assists to describe why terrorism has existed for many years. For the African Union (AU) and related regional economic communities al-Shabaab has remained a hurdle on efforts to guard Somalia against extremist terrorism.

For nearly a decade, the AU forces have battled al-Shabaab pushing the terrorists beyond Mogadishu the capital city and some other previous strongholds dotted in the Horn of Africa (Mutanda, 2017b, p. 25). However, even in the wake of the AU's 22,000-strong peacekeeping force deployed al-Shabaab has continued to mount deadly attacks in Somalia. Omar (2017) notes that Ugandan and Kenyan soldiers have been held hostage although the number is not known. These events and incidences are testament of the lingering real terror threats in Africa and beyond.

Somalia witnessed a multiparty democracy immediately after its political independence for almost a decade until the government was deposed and the assassination of its President Abdirashid Ali Sharmarke in 1969 (Maruf & Joseph, 2018, p. 9). Mohamed Siad Barre a Major General took over power after the coup and reigned for more than twenty years (Maruf & Joseph, 2018, pp. 9-17). Siade Barre's administration was suppressive, brutal and silenced dissenting voices characterized by the execution of people extrajudicially (AI, 1995, p. 5). In 1991 Siade Barre's administration collapsed breaking down the Somali state into a civil war and protracted conflict (Maruf & Joseph, 2018, p. 17).

Thousands of people in Mogadishu died as the contestation for power intensified in the aftermath of Siad Barre's death (Kaptiejns, 2013). The conflict was aggravated by the 1992 drought whose effects caused pervasive famine that left many people on the verge of malnutrition and starvation (UNDPI, 1997). It is believed that about 300,000 people died from the effects of both conflict and drought, and also about two million people displaced as they fled away from their homes (UNDPI, 1997). Despite the deployment of a joint UN-US forces in December 1992 and other intervention efforts, there was no peace brokered hence violence went on into the 1990s (Bradbury & Healy, n.d, pp.10-11).

The Islamic Courts Union (ICU) known to be an ally to the Shari's courts was founded in June 2006. Its formation was meant to wrestle power from the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) of Somalia which had been newly installed. The ICU seized power and reigned supreme over Mogadishu including some areas located in the South-central of Somalia (SU, 2016; CFR, 2019). Recognizing a security threat and at the request of TRG, Ethiopia joined forces with Somalia by December 2006 (CFR, 2019; CSIS, 2019). This alliance succeeded in driving out the ICU from the capital, Mogadishu. Unrelenting and regardless of Ethiopia's intervention, the ICU unsubdued only had to disperse all over the central and south of Somalia while continuing with their attacks. Many experts and researchers believe al-Shabaab was birthed and rose out of this extreme opposition to the Ethiopian involvement (CSIS, 2011; CFR, 2019; TBIGC, 2017; HRW, 2010; ICG, 2018).

The US military only got involved for the first time in Somalia around December 1992 but withdrew when 18 of its forces were killed in October 1993 (Maruf & Joseph 2018:29). According to Maruf and Joseph (2018, p.29) in 2002- 2003 and according to Wired (2011) the US President Bush sent US forces back to Somalia. This was after the US 11 September 2001 attacks. These US forces together with the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) officers (Wired, 2011) were assigned among other things to capture or kill al-Qaeda members in East Africa as well as those thought to have been involved in the 1998 attacks of the US embassies in Tanzania and Kenya (Maruf & Joseph, 2018,p.30).

President Barack Obama of the United States also deployed the first official convoy of US forces in October 2013 to support the Somali National Army (SNA) since 1993 (Maruf & Joseph, 2018). In the period 2014-2016, when al-Shabaab won several battles as well as invading the African Union posts of soldiers (WP, 2016), the US increased its military support (NYT, 2016). This increased US military support against al-Shabaab was predicated on the new legal direction as informed by security threats. President Obama had to issue the Presidential Policy Guidance (PPG) (Online, 2013) on the 22nd of May 2013 which sought to establish the modus operandi for activities "against terrorist targets outside the United States and areas of active hostilities, including Somalia" (Online, 2013). Conspicuously, the PPG avowed that people can be besieged merely if their actions pose an enduring, looming threat to the U.S. people.

The PPG was in operation until the lapse of Obama's second term of office. However, the New York Times (NYT) recounted in October 2016, that the US administration began to "quietly broaden the president's authority for the use of force in Somalia by allowing air strikes to protect American and African troops" in the fight against al-Shabaab (NYT, 2016; WH, 2016). The paper reported further that the US considered al-Shabaab as an affiliate to the conflict directed by the Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF) against terrorists (NYT, 2016). Al-Shabaab's affiliation to al-Qaeda was echoed in December 2016 through a letter penned by the then President Obama to the Speaker of the House of Representatives, stating that the US forces were defying the "the terrorist threat posed by al-Qaeda and its Somalia-based associated force, al-Shabaab" (WH, 2016). The preceding letters to Congress regularly mentioned "al-Qaeda and associated elements of al-Shabaab" (WH, 2016).

International Engagement Against Terrorism

From the origins of the global war of terrorism, concerted efforts have been made by the Western powers to react against those perceived to threaten democratic values and principles. But the new groups of fundamentalisms and their adherents carry on building a global vast network of organizations seeking to end the perceived imposition of anything that is believed to be Western. Al-Shabaab is one such group. The world powers have recently started to recognize the augmented threat of al-Shabaab prompting the Western media to turn their media gadgets to the East African nations. Despite increased attention, there has been no major deployment of US troops or their allies. It can be argued that despite all this, like any other African state Somalia does not necessarily present as a main

issue of concern for the West. This could be associated with the Eurocentric and racist tendencies dogging the world related to the land once named the 'dark continent.' This way of thinking could have catalyzed the existence of the al-Shabaab group.

Policy Implications

There is a very important need for the provision of a visible presence of infantry forces when dealing with terrorism. The study reveals that in the war on terrorism spanning from Somalia to Syria, not much has been ensured in terms of deploying enough manpower for dealing decisively with terrorists. Authorities tend to react to acts of terrorism only after some attacks. Additionally, with respect to the continent's most two threatening groups of terrorism, there are no continued campaigns against them being done. It is inconceivable to expect much to be done by the international community without local authorities being devoted to exterminating terrorism. A blend of both the local and international communities is vital to deal with the al-Shabaab elements anywhere where they could be holed.

The challenges revealed which are promoting Somalia and Africa's spread or growth of terrorism and armed conflicts comprise the dearth of development, inequality in the wealth distribution, complicated religious and tribal conflicts, and poor governance systems. There is also a need for programs that are comprehensive to accelerate Somalia's economic growth, inclusiveness, improved social justice and capacity of governance. Military strikes on their own will not effectively abate the challenges of security that are fronting Somalia and the continent if critical facets of structural violence remain hard to pin down (Weizhong, et al. 2015, p. 278). In the past, lack of political maturity and economic development have weighed in the rise of terrorism especially in the Middle East and Africa. The AU's efforts to contain the situation in Somalia should have a sustained support and build a very effective and strong government in Somalia because the potential of threats as revealed in this study are very clear to Africa and beyond.

The study also revealed that terrorist activities in Africa thrive owing to the avoidance of direct action on them by governments. Al-Shabaab has been successful in its strategies because of the hit and run approach. It targets unarmed people in order to spread terror in pursuit of objectives that are political such as power and authority. The social media has helped to advance the ideology of violent extremist (Khader et al. 2016, p. xxi) with terrorist groups thriving on the dissemination of content which indoctrinates their followers and prospective supporters (Steinfatt & Janbek, 2016, p. 16). This is doable since the internet uses features that are unique, like that of being relatively anonymous and the ability to have a global reach hence not easy to control. This is not possible with outlets that are more traditional like the television, radio and print media. For proscribed groups such as terrorist groups internet makes it easier to be in touch for religious and political expediency (Steinfatt & Janbek, 2016, p. 30). This communication together with guerrilla strategies as well as policies of counterterrorism that are weak, imply that it will not be easy to foil terrorism in Africa and beyond for now.

The entrenched position of the al-Shabaab group is revealed clearly in this study that, at any rate it seeks to force out the African Union Mission to Somalia (AMISOM)'s peacekeeping troops if they don't exit at their own volition, oust the Somalia government which is backed by the West, and create an emirate under the Islamic strict Shariah law. Even though al-Shabaab is mostly kept to the countryside after its withdrawal from the capital city Mogadishu, about six years back, it has frequently taken small towns causing substantial deaths to the Somali and AMISOM troops. Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed, Somali's president who assumed power in February 2017, undertook to destroy al-Shabaab while the US forces compounded strikes by drones among other endeavors. Al-Shabaab responded recently by pledging to intensify its terrorist attacks. Yet, against this background, the AMISOM is anticipated to pull out its forces by the close of 2020 then abdicate the security of the country to the Somali forces.

Suffice to say that, al-Shabaab's newest strategy poses a threat not only to the isolated Somalia, but to the extent that it is likely to cause instability to the Horn of Africa, the continent and some parts that are out of Africa. Therefore, there is an urgent need for international and regional forces to provide more government support and safeguard economic interests and regional trade. The Al-Shabaab group is likely to stay on as a dreadful force in the interior of Somalia and a threat to the exterior. The group has demonstrated the ability to be adaptive and slip away when dragnets appear to close in.

In general, the success of terrorism can be summarized in the words of the Somali's former President Mohamud who had this to say, "The terrorists are so linked together, they are associated and so organized, [that] we the world need to be so organized" (Gaffey, 2016a, online). Undeniably, hope is not lost only if there is a unity of purpose among all important stakeholders.

Conclusion

Despite the fact al Shabaab was debilitated in the period 2011-2016, it is too early to celebrate its defeat unless urgent measures are put in place to tackle governance, economic and political problems that are central to the cause of the conflict. Al Shabaab is a group that does not easily give up and should not be underestimated. It has proved to be capable of being ruthless and able to plan for aggressive future attacks. Moving forward, there are challenges ahead. First, the Somali National Army is still very feeble and weak due to poor military training. Second, the Western governments and the US have not mobilized sufficient resources or given adequate attention to address the politico-economic and governance deficits that are at the core of Somalia's causes of conflict. Third, the absence of the US permanent Department of State in Somalia contributes to the challenges faced to a large extent.

A successful campaign against al-Shabaab for a customized approach of engagement involves capacity building that should be directed on the local actors to regain and control the territory. For al-Shabaab, just like the Islamic State, the control of a territory is very important because the group seeks to attract fighters, secure funds and govern the population. Apart from the African continent, the Western communities have to be geared up for an increase in terrorist violence if al-Shabaab or any similar group loses a territory or if they choose to expand their influence by going international as already mooted. This study may be very useful to policy makers, terrorism experts and scholars in accelerating measures of counter-terrorism and mitigating threats in Africa and beyond.

- i. *It is recommended that the Western allies should start to concentrate on capacity building of the Somali locals, identified lawful nonstate actors, the Somali government and its neighboring states.*
- ii. *Al-Shabaab should cease all civilian attacks indirect or direct, arbitrary attacks and infringements on international humanitarian law.*
- iii. *The group should without further ado grant humanitarian actors' free access to all areas under its purview and treatment of the injured. Work together with researchers of human rights and journalists. All these are the dictates of the Islamic Quran which group claims to observe.*
- iv. *The African Union and the regional economic communities should pool financial, human and material resources together and conclusively deal with al-Shabaab's terrorism before it is too late.*

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