Research Article

More than Survival: The Role of al-Shabaab Secret Service, *Amniyat*, in Information-Gathering

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Abstract: The article examines the development and employment of the al-Shabaab secret service, *Amniyat*, in its fight against African Union troops and security forces in Somalia. It first elaborates on the historical background of the terrorist group, which may serve as an introduction to understanding the roots of the organization and how its resurgence is tied to the effective management of Amniyat. The governance structure and intelligence activities of the terror group are also scrutinized. The study then analyzes the capacities and capabilities of the al-Shabaab intelligence apparatus, highlighting the elements that have contributed to its efficiency. In light of the growing importance of intelligence and counter-intelligence, the development of a secret service proved to be crucial for the survival of the terrorist group. Over the last decade, not only has al-Shabaab survived but also managed to thrive, presenting a number of obstacles to better-equipped multinational forces and the international community. Even if al-Shabaab were to be defeated, Amniyat could outlast its dissolution and may be "reborn" in various entities or merge into a criminal network.

Keywords: Amniyat, al-Shabaab, intelligence, security, Somalia.

Introduction

Building and rebuilding well-functioning security structures is never easy.[1] Security and stability are the most fundamental components of viable societies and are especially important in war-torn countries, where it is much harder to

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[1] Omar Dewachi, *Ungovernable Life: Mandatory Medicine and Statecraft in Iraq* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017).

achieve sustainable development. While there has been massive investment in securitization and state-building as well as political, diplomatic, and technical support to Somalia, state institutions cannot tip the balance in their favor and make visible progress.[2]

One of the most significant factors standing in the way of securing peace is the presence of al-Shabaab. Although it is not rare for a terrorist organization to remain operational in its first year, finding groups that survive longer than ten years is more challenging. This is due to their encountering a diverse set of constant threats from the direction of intelligence services and law enforcement agencies.[3] As a result, they would decline and come to an end after the loss of their influential leaders or start functioning non-violently as a political body.[4] If their attacks are not planned precisely, and their activities are not communicated in a well-thought-out manner, terrorist organizations may not survive. Not only has it remained active, but al-Shabaab has also managed to take up the fight against African Union troops and security forces in Somalia for over a decade now.

Although intelligence agencies have a central role in the struggle between the Somali government and the terrorist organization, there has not been much research on al-Shabaab security architecture.[5] This study begins with the historical background of the terrorist group, which may help us comprehend the development of the organization and how its resurgence is tied to the effective management of Amniyat. Before moving on to provide an analysis of the capacities and capabilities of the intelligence apparatus of the terrorist group, the article also scrutinizes the al-Shabaab governance structure and intelligence activities.

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2   United Nations Assistance Mission in Somalia and the World Bank, *The Somalia Security and Justice Sector Public Expenditure Review* (Washington, January 2017) https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/644671486531571103/pdf/Somalia-Security-and-justice-sector-public-expenditure-review.pdf.

3   Blake William Mobley, "Terrorist Group Counterintelligence," PhD dissertation (Washington, DC: Georgetown University, 2008), https://repository.library.georgetown.edu/bitstream/handle/10822/553096/mobleyBlake.pdf.

4   Audrey Kurth Cronin, "How al-Qaida Ends: The Decline and Demise of the Terrorist Group," *International Security* 31, no. 1 (2006): 7-48.

5   There are only a handful of comprehensive studies on the security structures of al-Shabaab, including Mohamed Haji Ingiriis, "Insurgency and International Extraversion in Somalia: The National Intelligence and Security Agency (NISA) and Al-Shabaab's *Amniyat*," *African Security Review* 29, no. 2 (2020): 125-151, https://doi.org/10.1080/10246029.2020.1740752; Gábor Sinkó and János Besenyő, "Comparison of the Secret Service of al-Shabaab, the Amniyat, and the National Intelligence and Security Agency (Somalia)," *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence* (2021), https://doi.org/10.1080/08850607.2021.1987143, and Zakarie Ahmed nor Kheyre, "The Evolution of the Al-Shabaab Jihadist Intelligence Structure," *Intelligence and National Security* 37, no. 7 (2022): 1061-1082, https://doi.org/10.1080/02684527.2022.2095599.

The study adopts a qualitative research approach and applies numerous methods, including studying United Nations (UN) reports, Somali field interviews, document content analyses of open source, peer-reviewed academic works and journals. The objective of the study is to enrich the growing literature on terrorism, intelligence, and security studies in the Somali context. The regionalization (or even globalization) of its activities resulted in al-Shabaab now posing a security threat to Africa and Europe.[6] After remaining undefeated for over a decade, a new approach may be needed to deal with the situation in conflict-stricken Somalia. Due to the increased importance of security, a thorough analysis of the activities and operation of Amniyat may pave the way for making sense of the Somali conflict dynamics.

Historical Background of al-Shabaab

Somalia is considered one of the least developed countries in the world. The situation is further complicated by the fact that various militant groups have targeted it for several decades. After the fall of the Siad Barre regime at the beginning of the 1990s, there was a high degree of disorganization and lawlessness in the country. Al-Qaeda attempted to fill in the emerging power vacuum and establish an Islamist state in the Horn of Africa. It also started providing financial support, firearms, and training to the insurgency party of al-Itihaad al-Islamiya (AIAI).[7]

However, the division of al-Shabaab in the early 2000s brought a major change. While having a political front would have been adequate for the group's soft liners, its hardliners could not settle for less than the extension of Sharia to "Greater Somalia."[8] As a result, the latter allied themselves with the Islamic Courts Union (ICU)—which had taken control of large areas in south-central Somalia by the end of 2006—and launched an armed resistance campaign against the Ethiopian invasion of Somalia.[9] While the ICU was eventually ousted by the Somali Transitional Federal Government (TFG) and Ethiopian troops, al-Shabaab managed to become its most dominant splinter group as a consequence of capitalizing on the Ethiopian military occupation to rally support.

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[6] For more information on the Islam movement, see Olivier Roy, *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

[7] In the beginning of the 21st century, al-Qaeda provided training in Afghanistan to many high-profile al-Shabaab members, including Aden Hashi Farah, Ibrahim Hajji Jamma and Mukhtar Robow.

[8] Somalis were driven by the idea of "Pan-Somalism," believing that all different territories and clans needed to be unified for the Somali state to possess enough power to be able to become more dominant than the prevailing clan system.

[9] Background information on the Ethiopian military intervention in Somalia can be found in Ken Menkhaus, "Somalia: They Created a Desert and Called it Peace (building)," *Review of African Political Economy* 36, no. 120 (2009): 223-233, https://doi.org/10.1080/03056240903083136.

Initially, at the outset of the invasion in 2006, both the Somali population and diaspora helped al-Shabaab and gathered intelligence on the Ethiopian forces' movement[10] and provided financial assistance and foreign fighters to the group.[11] In addition, the insurgency was funded by influential Islamic leaders whose support contributed to the increased recruitment of jihadists.[12] By this time, Somalia had been a war-torn country for over 30 years, so al-Shabaab was able to convince young Somalis to join the organization, offering them a way out of the quagmire and an environment in which they could feel useful.[13] Although the terrorist group was only informally linked to al-Qaeda until 2012, its advisors' expertise and public relations are thought to have been utilized before that, too.[14] Consequently, by mid-2008, al-Shabaab had exercised control over south-central Somalia and was able to push back the TFG, the Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF), and the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) peacekeepers in Mogadishu. Within a short time, the terrorist group had become a dominant player in East African affairs.[15]

Later on, however, al-Shabaab was unable to push forward and drive the TFG and AMISOM peacekeepers out of the Somali capital. They also suffered heavy defeats from the forces of the African Union since the latter had more advanced equipment. Between 2008 and 2011, al-Shabaab weakened militarily and was plagued by conflicts with local clans, who blamed the group for many of their casualties.[16] On top of that, locals were continuously alienated from the organization due to greater fear, a growing number of civilian casualties, and the group's strict interpretation of Sharia.[17] When al-Shabaab was designated as a

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[10] Field interviews conducted in Mogadishu in September-October 2017, see Ingiriis, "Insurgency and International Extraversion in Somalia."

[11] Roland Marchal, "The Rise of a Jihadi Movement in a Country at War: Harakat al-Shabaab al Mujaheddin in Somalia," Research Report (SciencesPo, CERI, 2011), https://spire.sciencespo.fr/hdl:/2441/5ncvgncesl8n4a0rpg5k3c1j5p/resources/art-rm2-1.pdf.

[12] United Nations Security Council, "Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 1853 (2008)," S/2010/91 (UN, March 2010), 31, https://reliefweb.int/report/somalia/report-monitoring-group-somalia-pursuant-security-council-resolution-1853-2008.

[13] More than two-thirds of the Somali population is made up of young people.

[14] For more information on public relations support provided by al-Qaeda to al-Shabaab, see Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, "The Strategic Challenge of Somalia's Al-Shabaab," *Middle East Quarterly* 16, no. 4 (2009): 25-36.

[15] Péter Kiss-Álmos, János Besenyő, and István Resperger, *Szomália: Országismertető [Somalia: Country Profile]* (Budapest: Honvéd Vezérkar, 2014).

[16] Christopher Anzalone, "Al-Shabab's Setbacks in Somalia," *CTC Sentinel* 4, no. 10 (October 2011): 22-25, https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/CTCSentinel-Vol4Iss106.pdf.

[17] Human Rights Watch, "Somalia: Al Shabaab Attack Indefensible: Mogadishu Bombing Shows Price Being Paid by Civilians," October 5, 2011, https://www.hrw.org/news/2011/10/05/somalia-al-shabaab-attack-indefensible.

terrorist group by the United States in 2008, the Somali diaspora also cut back its support.

The 2011 Somalia famine led to the further decline of the reputation of the organization after the al-Shabaab Emir, Ahmed Abdi Godane, stated they would not allow foreign food aid to enter Southern Somalia. Not only did the group deny the existence of a famine, but they also did everything to make sure locals in the south were not able to get their hands on the aid.[18] The militants retreated from the Somali capital since a conventional war with the better-equipped AMISOM troops drained them financially. While it might be stated the international community won a major victory, al-Shabaab's withdrawal could have been of a strategic nature, signaling the group's return to guerrilla warfare. The port cities of Baraawe and Kismayo generated substantial revenues for al-Shabaab,[19] thus losing them had a great financial and strategic impact on the insurgency and prompted them to become overly involved in criminal activities under the guise of businesses' and clan elders' taxation.[20]

In addition, there were internal disputes within the leadership of al-Shabaab, which were exacerbated by the increased number of conflicts between Godane and his opponents.[21] The emir was criticized for striving to be a dictator, while making strategic mistakes (e.g., involvement in fighting against Ahlu Sunna Waljama'a (ASWJ), a paramilitary group with moderate Sufis) and disregarding basic principles of al-Shabaab (e.g., the summary execution of "true Muslims"). Godane felt he had to use pragmatic and brutal ways to suppress his opponents and the reputation of al-Shabaab needed to be improved. These factors might explain the 2012 merger with al-Qaeda.[22] As a result of the purge, the group became more compact but less limited, which proved beneficial in waging an asymmetric war against the TFG and AMISOM forces with suicide attacks, IEDs, and hit-and-run tactics. In this way, the terrorist organization was able to create the most favorable conditions for war.

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[18] Ken Menkhaus, "No Access: Critical Bottlenecks in the 2011 Somali Famine," *Global Food Security* 1, no. 1 (December 2012): 29-35, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gfs.2012.0 7.004.

[19] It is estimated that al-Shabaab generated 35-50 million dollars yearly from port revenues and an additional 30-60 million dollars from "taxes" on businessmen in Somalia. For more details, see Barbara Starr, "U.N. Report: Al-Shabaab is Raising Millions Illegally in Somalia," *CNN World*, August 5, 2011, https://edition.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/ africa/08/05/somalia.al.shabaab.report/.

[20] As a consequence of Amniyat increased capability and its ability to continuously learn from its mistakes, al-Shabaab has since taken a tactical move and started extorting money.

[21] Godane's decision to suspend the Shura—which functioned as a forum for settling disputes collectively by mediation—definitely contributed to internal divisions within al-Shabaab.

[22] Therefore, pledging allegiance to al-Qaeda did not serve operational purposes. However, it was meant to solidify ideological links between the organizations and increase the strength of al-Shabaab.

However, al-Shabaab suffered operational and symbolic losses in the early 2010s as well.[23] Probably the most crucial setback for the group was the killing of Godane in a US airstrike in 2014. It was believed that the former emir was the glue holding together the organization, and in the absence of strategic planning, a power struggle could have emerged that would fragment or disintegrate the group. Contrary to the belief of the international community, the successor of Godane, Ahmed Umar (better known as Abu Ubaidah), exerted tight control over al-Shabaab from the beginning, keeping the group largely unified.[24]

Since then, al-Shabaab managed to increase its capabilities and capacities in Somalia and the neighboring territories. It has become an efficient, predictable, and consistent terror group that could cater to the security needs of the locals much better than the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS). While some of their top members were killed and the international community has made various bilateral and multilateral efforts to defeat al-Shabaab, the terrorist organization is holding its reins on large areas in western, southern, and central Somalia.[25] The intelligence apparatus has played an instrumental role in the asymmetric strategy of the group, and al-Shabaab's strong reliance on the fearful Amniyat network definitely contributed to the resurgence of the organization.

Amniyat

The organizational structure of al-Shabaab is well-defined, with the emir being in charge of all operations and the only person authorized to make decisions on his own. He is responsible for the functioning of the advisory and executive councils that assist and execute the strategies of the group. Furthermore, several specialized departments deal with administrative and military affairs, justice, propaganda, security, taxation, etc.[26] The three independent security bodies of the organization are Hesbat, Jabhat, and Amniyat.[27] While Hesbat—with the help of its religious police—implements Sharia in the territories under al-Shabaab con-

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23 Robert Burns and Lolita C. Baldor, "US Confirms Death of Somalia Terror Group Leader," *The Times of Israel*, September 5, 2014, https://www.timesofisrael.com/us-confirms-death-of-somalia-terror-group-leader/.

24 Claire Klobucista, Jonathan Masters, and Mohammed Aly Sergie, "Al-Shabab," Backgrounder, *Council on Foreign Relations*, updated May 19, 2021, https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/al-shabab.

25 Christopher Anzalone and Jason Warner, "Al-Shabaab," *Oxford Bibliographies*, updated June 23, 2021, https://doi.org/10.1093/OBO/9780199743292-0303.

26 Some of these departments include Jugta Ulus (quick reaction force), Mukhabarad (intelligence service), Iclaam and al-Kataib (media offices), Zakawaat (tax collection and taxation), and Mutafajirad (suicide missions unit with two subdivisions: Amaliya Istishhad (suicide bombings) and Amaliya Inquimas (suicide assaults)).

27 National Counterterrorism Center, "Counter Terrorism Guide: Al Shabaab" (Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2022), https://www.dni.gov/nctc/groups/al_shabaab.html.

trol, and Jabhat—with individuals responsible for communication, explosives, logistics, medicine, and the media—carries out high-level operations with military units assigned to different regions,[28] Amniyat is the *de facto* intelligence unit.

According to a 2013 UN report, the al-Shabaab secret service is "structured along the lines of a clandestine organization within the organization."[29] Nobody is aware of the other's identity, and tasks and penetrations remain unlikely due to the strong ties between the members. Capacities and roles define the nature of work. Most operatives work part-time, making apprehending agents challenging for the National Intelligence and Security Agency (NISA). Although the exact origins of Amniyat are not known, the establishment of the intelligence apparatus in the 2010s was regarded as a quite radical shift from the group's tactics. Yet, now it seems to have been linked to modernizing efforts in the terrorist organization's planning and operations.[30] Amniyat is largely independent of other departments within al-Shabaab, which is attested by having its separate financial and logistics network and a clear chain of command.[31] Throughout the years, it has performed as an efficient tool in identifying potential targets and mapping out vulnerabilities, thereby contributing to an uncertain security environment in Somalia.

It is the most dreaded, integral, and organized branch of al-Shabaab, which directly reports to the emir.[32] It seems Amniyat uses intelligence and counterintelligence to provide critical analysis of their opponents' vulnerabilities. After verification, information is sent to the top commander, who may decide to forward it to the emir for further use. The secret service recruits its members from the rank of the group's fighters; however, the most important recruitment pool is the locals, who are approached based on recommendations from reliable and paid informants.[33] While an increasing number of women find safe shelters, relay messages, and provide food, most of their operatives are educated young men affiliated with the clans of dominant al-Shabaab members.[34] Amniyat fulfills various roles within the organization, as it is first and foremost in charge of (counter)

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[28] Nor Kheyre, "The Evolution of the Al-Shabaab Jihadist Intelligence Structure."

[29] United Nations Security Council, "Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 2060 (2012): Somalia," S/2013/413 (UN, July 2013), 7, https://reliefweb.int/report/somalia/report-monitoring-group-somalia-and-eritrea-pursuant-security-council-resolution-2060.

[30] Anneli Botha and Mahdi Abdile, "Radicalisation and al-Shabaab Recruitment in Somalia," ISS Paper 266 (Institute for Security Studies, September 2014), https://issafrica.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/Paper266.pdf.

[31] United Nations Security Council, "Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea," 13.

[32] Harun Maruf and Dan Joseph, *Inside Al-Shabaab: The Secret History of Al-Qaeda's Most Powerful Ally* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2018), 90.

[33] Carlos Revilla Arango, "Insurgent Counterintelligence," *Studies in Intelligence* 12, no. 1 (Winter 1968): 39-54.

[34] United Nations Security Council, "Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea," 57.

intelligence operations. It is also the operational body of the group and, as such, executes small and large-scale attacks using grenades, bombs, hit-and-run tactics, and organized assassinations.[35]

In the past, al-Shabaab conducted more low-profile operations but has since begun to carry out attacks against frequented restaurants, UN compounds, and the Somali Supreme Court, which are not only deadlier but have higher visibility.[36] Although they used to set their sights on local targets, the terrorist organization is now more active regionally as well.[37] Some of their most infamous operations include the 2010 suicide bombings in Kampala, Uganda, the 2013 Westgate shopping mall attack in Nairobi, Kenya, and the 2015 Garissa University College attack in Garissa, Kenya. Amniyat indirectly contributes to al-Shabaab being able to execute these attacks by the forced recruitment, intimidation, and murder of government officials, security agents, local journalists, and business people. The presence of the intelligence unit is extremely inconvenient to the Somali government and AMISOM troops, but it is also threatening to foreign agencies and aid organizations.

It was Godane who prioritized investment in the secret service after the group had withdrawn from Mogadishu in 2011. He liked to think about Amniyat as his own counter-intelligence apparatus, which was used as a tool to preserve al-Shabaab's integrity and achieve his personal goals.[38] Increasing the capabilities and capacities of the secret service served a dual purpose, as the emir could keep regional and sub-commanders in check, and more importantly, he was able to get rid of his opponents.[39] Then Amniyat operatives had to gather intelligence and induce fear in the local population and jihadists by all means necessary, such as imprisonment, intimidation, or even assassination of their relatives or close friends. In case of unsuccessful defection, the traitor was either jailed or killed,

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[35] Ken Menkhaus, "Al-Shabab's Capabilities Post-Westgate," *CTC Sentinel* 7, no. 2 (February 2014): 4-9, https://ctc.westpoint.edu/al-shababs-capabilities-post-westgate/.

[36] A "well-chosen target" has the potential to gain supporters, specify the interests of the terrorist group and may even contribute to the reduction in the cost of attacks. For more information, see János Besenyő, "Low-cost Attacks, Unnoticeable Plots? Overview on the Economical Character of Current Terrorism," *Strategic Impact* 62, no. 1 (2017): 83-100, http://real.mtak.hu/83718/1/low_cost_attacks_unnoticeable_plots_overview_on_the_economical_character_of_current_terrorism.pdf.

[37] Peter Bergen, Bruce Hoffman, and Katherine Tiedemann, "Assessing the Jihadist Terrorist Threat to America and American Interests," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 34, no. 2 (2011): 65-101, https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2011.538830.

[38] Amniyat was responsible for eliminating internal threats and enforcing loyalty. For more information, see Matt Bryden, "The Reinvention of Al-Shabaab: A Strategy of Choice or Necessity?" A Report of the CSIS Africa Program (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic & International Studies, February 2014), https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/publication/140221_Bryden_ReinventionOfAlShabaab_Web.pdf.

[39] Hassan M. Abukar, "Somalia: The Godane Coup and the Unraveling of Al-Shabaab," *African Arguments*, July 2, 2013, https://africanarguments.org/2013/07/somalia-the-godane-coup-and-the-unraveling-of-al-shabaab-by-hassan-m-abukar/.

which instilled another layer of fear in the secret service members and discouraged potential defectors.[40]

In addition to performing administrative, military, and intelligence-related tasks, Amniyat is responsible for the management of internal justice within al-Shabaab. The secret service operates designated prisons and courts where they hold show trials against alleged conspirators and spies. It also plays an active role in the observation of civilian behavior, and if needed, Amniyat could enforce laws and policies. Thus it is also a supervisory body that oversees various departments and communicates with the leadership of al-Shabaab. The jurisdiction of the intelligence apparatus is quite extensive, functioning outside the judicial system of the terrorist group.[41] Besides, severe punishment could be imposed on its own members, especially if their involvement in espionage for the FGS or the West is proven right. Religious commitment, toughness, and hatred towards foreign troops were characteristics Amniyat operatives needed to be able to prioritize to demonstrate loyalty to the emir.[42] While they were undoubtedly feared, they also enjoyed the benefits of higher reputation and salaries, which made serving as a member of the intelligence apparatus a great honor.

Due to the fact that security and secrecy are of paramount importance to Amniyat, it is absolutely essential the intelligence unit is separate from the rest of the organization. While al-Shabaab's secret service is an organization within the organization, various subdivisions with code names and autonomy have been set up to make the group even more secure.[43] Their responsibilities range from preventing leaks to ensuring that members cannot share classified information with enemy forces if they are captured and interrogated. It was a rather prescient measure, especially considering the offensive of AMISOM troops between 2012 and 2015 that resulted in the retreat of al-Shabaab to Jubaland. Nevertheless, the informants of the intelligence apparatus remained in the heavily populated areas of Somalia, providing intelligence to Amniyat.[44]

The secret service has since installed its operatives practically everywhere in the country. It is believed they have gathered intelligence in foreign diplomatic

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[40] Stig Jarle Hansen, *Al-Shabaab in Somalia: The History and Ideology of a Militant Islamist Group* (London: Hurst, 2013).

[41] In cases of spying, Amniyat was able to circumvent the Sharia courts of the terrorist group. However, if a high-ranking commander was convicted of spying, it was the Shura that dealt with it. See Hansen, *Al-Shabaab in Somalia*, pp. 84 and 87.

[42] Maruf and Joseph, *Inside Al-Shabaab*, 90.

[43] Amniyat structure is believed to be organized in the following way: Central command; Regional commanders; Finance and logistics support units; Intelligence collection units; Grenade attacks/ assassination squads and Suicide operations squads. See United Nations Security Council, "Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea," 57.

[44] Michael Horton, "Reclaiming Lost Ground in Somalia: The Enduring Threat of al-Shabaab," *Terrorism Monitor* 15, no. 15 (2017): 8-11, https://jamestown.org/program/reclaiming-lost-ground-in-somalia-the-enduring-threat-of-al-shabaab/.

missions and managed to infiltrate government offices, African Union headquarters, and even the National Intelligence and Security Agency (NISA).[45] Although the infiltration is often downplayed, it is important to highlight Amniyat's involvement in both offensive and defensive counter-intelligence activities. As a former NISA officer reasoned, "due to the increased level of infiltration by al-Shabaab operatives into our government agencies, we have noticed a rise in the number of attacks."[46] Therefore a linear connection appears to exist between the number of al-Shabaab agents installed in government offices and attacks against FGS.

While frequent rivalries exist between the two intelligence apparatuses, their intelligence activities seem interconnected.[47] Although Amniyat is much more focused on external intelligence and spends a considerable amount of time monitoring and investigating their adversaries' intelligence activities, they are also continuously working towards recruiting informants from the Somali government. They have realized their value for the terrorist group and would go the extra mile to have the human resources needed for conducting successful operations. For instance, Amniyat operatives would drive around in luxury cars without license plates the same way NISA agents do in the hope of blending in and getting closer to potential government informants.[48]

Recognizing how dependent al-Shabaab core members had been on clan politics and the destructive effects of inter-clan rivalries in offsetting organizational cohesion, the emir and his inner circle chose to implement a two-stage plan. Except for their technical expertise, foreigners were considered nothing more than "unnecessary liability" and were either killed or expelled so that Godane could retain local support.[49] The terrorist group was then restructured along the lines of the Somali clan system, which operates through influence and consensus rather than through a centralized and formal hierarchy. As a result, the organization's commanders and sub-commanders were given more responsibility in appointing junior officials and recruiting infantrymen. On top of that, organizing

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[45] "Car Bomb Rocks Mogadishu Hours after Somalia Cabinet Announcement," *The New Arab*, 2017, https://english.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2017/3/21/car-bomb-rocks-mogadishu-hours-after-somalia-cabinet-announcement.

[46] Former senior NISA official, interviewed in February 2020 – see Nor Kheyre, "The Evolution of the Al-Shabaab Jihadist Intelligence Structure."

[47] For more information on the interconnectedness of NISA and the National Security Service (NSS), see Gábor Sinkó, "Different Times, Same Methods: The Impact of the National Security Service on the Operations of the National Intelligence and Security Agency," *Journal of Central and Eastern European African Studies* 1, no. 1-2 (2021): 112-123, https://jceeas.bdi.uni-obuda.hu/index.php/jceeas/article/view/6.

[48] Field interviews conducted in Mogadishu in May-September 2015, April-August 2016 and September-October 2017, See Ingiriis, "Insurgency and International Extraversion in Somalia."

[49] Gaining an increased level of public support to bolster Amniyat activities was also needed and it was facilitated by adequate recruitment.

and executing joint small-scale terror attacks have become a possibility for the group's commanders.

However, Godane knew that decentralization of power could only come at the expense of Amniyat, whose reach and dominance had to be strengthened so that the intelligence apparatus could keep a tight rein on al-Shabaab commanders.[50] There seemed to be a fundamental contradiction between the terrorist group and its leadership because while the former, like clans in Somalia, was decentralized, the latter reflected high centralization. Besides, only the current emir could hold Amniyat accountable for their deeds. As it was also a local insurgency, al-Shabaab was aware of the importance of its active involvement in clan politics. As a matter of fact, the senior members of the organization have mediated between Somali sub-clans and rival clans many times, which paved the way for al-Shabaab to be able to consolidate its power in the country.[51]

Due to the fact that it interprets Islam in a strict, Salafist way, al-Shabaab needs to overcome an increasing number of obstacles in achieving local support. Nevertheless, the provision of a higher degree of predictability and security[52] is a significant advantage for the terrorist group. It could be especially important in a place where such factors had not been taken for granted for more than 30 years. Although their methods are radical and their punishments are harsh, the jihadists are also consistent, which sets them apart from the FGS.[53] Somalis never quite know the tax rates they are expected to pay to the SNA and AMISOM forces. There are additional problems, including confiscation of products and imposition of taxes on several occasions. On the other hand, the organization only makes a one-time collection of taxes, and merchants receive a receipt of payment for travel within territories controlled by al-Shabaab.[54] While attacks and ambushes on traders are commonplace in areas administered by the Somali government, local insurgents and bandits avoid open confrontation in the southern parts of the country. This contributes to an increased sense of security, which the locals greatly value.

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[50] Daniel Maxwell and Nisar Majid, eds., *Famine in Somalia: Competing Imperatives, Collective Failures, 2011-2012* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

[51] Horton, "Reclaiming Lost Ground in Somalia."

[52] As one Somali remarked: "The good that they do is that you cannot be robbed in the street in Mogadishu, actually, the part they control... You can walk openly with a lot of money, if you are not a target [of al-Shabaab]. So, they do policing. They protect against thieves, they protect property, they do guard." Interview conducted by Michael Scheldrup in Nairobi, August 13, 2010. – see Hansen, *Al-Shabaab in Somalia*, 84.

[53] Omar Faruk and Max Bearak, "If I Don't Pay, They Kill Me: Al-Shabab Tightens Grip on Somalia with Growing Tax Racket," *The Washington Post*, August 30, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/africa/if-i-dont-pay-they-kill-me-al-shabab-tightens-its-grip-on-somalia-with-growing-tax-racket/2019/08/30/81472b38-beac-11e9-a8b0-7ed8a0d5dc5d_story.html.

[54] Harun Maruf, "In Somalia, Businesses Face 'Taxation' by Militants," *VoA*, December 3, 2018, www.voanews.com/a/in-somalia-businesses-face-taxation-by-militants/4684759.html.

Nonetheless, not only predictability and security are present but fear too, which is induced in the Somali population and the members of the terrorist group. Clan elders not respecting al-Shabaab authority, businessmen unable to meet deadlines with their payment, or individuals believed to have conspired against the group may all fall victim to Amniyat that would detain, imprison or execute them depending on the severity of their actions. Amniyat operatives found guilty of bribery, embezzlement, or misconduct would also not be immune to strict punishments. As a consequence of Somalia being at war for several decades now, there is a rather low bar for good governance, which in turn creates more opportunities for terrorist organizations. So far, al-Shabaab has managed to make good use of Amniyat. Provided this trend—coupled with the group's ability to provide increased predictability and security and its capability to gain local support—continues in the future, we have all reasons to believe they will thrive in the long term.

Conclusion

The study has explained the development and employment of the al-Shabaab secret service, Amniyat, in its fight against African Union troops and security forces in Somalia. Over the years, the terrorist group has become a dominant player in Somali security and politics. With the use of covert operations, counter-intelligence measures, and its capability to gather intelligence, the organization has taken advantage of the vulnerabilities of the Somali government. The latter has, in turn, attempted to defeat al-Shabaab through taking pre-emptive measures against the group's terror attacks, the prosecution of jihadists, and responding militarily, but they did not manage to be successful due to a lack of capacity both in technological and human terms. The intelligence apparatus of the FGS, NISA, also failed to excel in intelligence-gathering and could therefore not improve its effectiveness.

On the other hand, Amniyat is more capable than other Somali security forces. This may partly be explained by the technically savvy strategists of the group. It seems to be a highly advanced and well-equipped intelligence unit with regard to security as well as making its strength widely known. However, it is also the most feared part of the terrorist group, which is infamous for carrying out suicide attacks and being responsible for detentions, imprisonments, and assassinations. While al-Shabaab lost territories, Amniyat retained its tactical capabilities, especially in urban centers, which is attested by the organization's covert operations and its ability to function effectively in AMISOM-controlled areas. The secret service may even become deadlier in the future since, as it lacks political and/or clan backing and territorial authority, its sole purpose is to ensure al-Shabaab survival.

Even if the organization is eventually defeated, it is important to remember that Amniyat was created "with the intention of surviving any kind of dissolution."[55] Constant warfare and state collapse have characterized Somalia for the last 30 years, with armed groups rising and falling all the time. Nonetheless, due to taxing local businessmen, having secret agreements with Somali politicians, and most importantly, the increased efficiency of Amniyat, dangerous parts of the terrorist group may outlast its dissolution and may be "reborn" in various entities or merge into a criminal network. Gaining or losing territory will decide if al-Shabaab will likely innovate strategically or organizationally.[56] They would either increase tax rates in the territories controlled by the group or expand the scope of the intelligence apparatus. Be that as it may, differentiating between the risk of violent extremism in Somalia and al-Shabaab is essential because the former may survive the latter.

Disclaimer

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[55] United Nations Security Council, "Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea," 7.

[56] Strategic innovation may be exhibited due to al-Shabaab gradual resemblance to a criminal network, while operational innovation may be visible in Amniyat's expansion.