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Africa Summary

Al Shabaab in Somalia

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Discussant: Mary Harper

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Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of Somalia (2010–11)

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Introduction

This document provides a summary of a meeting held at Chatham House on 12 June 2013. The meeting analysed al Shabaab's emergence as a powerful insurgent movement in Somalia in 2006, and its progress to control large parts of south central Somalia. Al Shabaab remains widely discussed, yet little researched and understood. At this meeting Stig Jarle Hansen, author of *Al Shabaab in Somalia: The History and Ideology of a Militant Islamist Group*, explored the history and ideology of the organization, based on field research and interviews conducted in Somalia.

The meeting was held on the record. The following summary is intended to serve as an *aide-mémoire* for those who took part and to provide a general summary of discussions for those who did not.

Stig Jarle Hansen

Dr Hansen welcomed the opportunity to present his book *Al Shabaab in Somalia: The History and Ideology of a Militant Islamist Group*. The book is the result of field research carried out in Mogadishu since 2004. He said that Mogadishu had changed dramatically in subsequent years, and the timescale of research had allowed him to study radical networks in Somalia even before al Shabaab became an organized group. At times, this work had been a sad experience – approximately 25 per cent of Dr Hansen's contacts in Somalia had been killed since 2005–06.

Dr Hansen remarked that there had been a lot of rumour and hearsay about al Shabaab. He pointed to a lack of understanding about the group's dynamic organizational history and its relations with partners outside Somalia. He argued that it was misleading to view al Shabaab as an organization that had moved from being a local entity to an international one. Instead, it had gone through phases of different kinds. The example of al-Qaeda was instructive: it was also often referred to as a static and stable entity, but it had developed significantly since 2001 and was very different today. Al Shabaab's increased interest in Kenya demonstrated that the organization's ambitions transcend international borders.

In his book, Dr Hansen divides al Shabaab's history into five distinct phases. The first phase is 2003/04 to 2006, when al Shabaab emerged as a small network. Although it was not then a formalized organization, the name 'al Shabaab' was circulating in Mogadishu at this time. There were individuals from al-Qaeda who were essential to al Shabaab's early history, including Abu Talha al Sudani, Fazul Abdullah Mohammed and Saleh Ali Saleh Nabhan.

The diary of Fazul Abdullah Mohammed gives some evidence that the relationship between these figures and al-Qaeda was very remote, and that they were drawn from the periphery of the terrorist organization. A lot of them had been involved in fighting in Afghanistan.

Dr Hansen listed the different ways in which *jihad* is interpreted by al Shabaab. Offensive *jihad* aims to change the world, while the broad ambition of defensive *jihad* is to protect the *ummah*. Defensive reformist jihadists want to remove all borders in the *ummah* and recreate the caliphate. One result of the War on Terror was increased support for al Shabaab.

Dr Hansen went on to explain the advantages for al Shabaab resulting from the political and social environment in Somalia. His research had found that

the political fragmentation in the country meant that factions were concerned with fighting one another, leaving civilians to the whims of warlords. Attempts by the state to implement justice totally disappeared, and so the extremists' implementation of *sharia* law was seen as a good alternative to the warlords' form of justice. Additionally, these extremists had some military training and managed to transcend the clan system.

Dr Hansen proceeded to detail al Shabaab's second phase and its role as part of Somalia's Islamic Courts Union (ICU). He maintained that while some commentators have painted al Shabaab as the armed wing of the ICU, in fact members of the group played a political role. For example, the senior al Shabaab leader Fuad Mohamed Qalaf, also known as Shangole, became a member of the ICU cabinet, and Sheikh Moktar Ali Zubeyr, known as Godane, became an Executive Secretary. Al Shabaab figures did well to reach key positions with responsibility for dealing with immigration into Mogadishu or with diaspora funds, as this access enabled the organization to grow rapidly during this phase. Despite internal differences, particularly about methods of implementing *sharia* law, al Shabaab demonstrated an impressive unity.

The ICU fell as a result of the Ethiopian intervention in 2006. Dr Hansen explained that during this time al Shabaab did not take part in larger battles. It conducted suicide attacks, which gave the organization a lot of press coverage, but it was other ICU-affiliated militias which bore the brunt of the fighting for most of 2007. At the end of 2007, al Shabaab activity grew, partly because of the lack of trust in the underpaid and overworked Somali police forces. The withdrawal of Ethiopian forces in 2009 led to a big territorial expansion of al Shabaab – from then on, the group controlled a territory larger than Denmark. At the time when al Shabaab claimed allegiance to al-Qaeda, it was one of the affiliates that controlled the most territory. Because of this territorial control, al Shabaab now had to implement and deliver on governance structures, which changed the ethos of the organization. The group's efforts at tax collection in Kismayo and at establishing *sharia* courts did not go smoothly. Opportunists had been entering the organization for the money, and al Shabaab leaders suddenly faced the need for technocrats.

Dr Hansen summarized the group's most recent phase, following the Ramadan offensive of 2011, when it encountered significant loss of territory as Ethiopian and Kenyan troops entered Somalia. Dr Hansen argued that al Shabaab was currently in a similar situation to that of 2007 and 2009, as it could not defeat the armies of Ethiopia or Kenya in open combat. However, Dr Hansen maintained that this did not mean that al Shabaab as an

organization was defeated. Questions remained as to whether the crisis in Somalia would again provide the right environment for its re-emergence. The influence of al-Qaeda would also be significant for al Shabaab. Al-Qaeda's actions in Yemen and Iraq, where it had tried to slow down the implementation of strict *sharia* to hinder criticism of its local affiliates, could provide a clue to al Shabaab's future in Somalia. Al-Qaeda had also directly criticized Godane in the past.

Dr Hansen argued that neither al-Qaeda nor al Shabaab should be underestimated. Al Shabaab clearly has a local agenda, and his research had shown that al-Qaeda had accepted this. However, international networks were still important to al Shabaab, as demonstrated by the training of 70 individuals from Boko Haram in Somalia. Al Shabaab had an increasing regional presence. In Kenya its members included Kenyan Somalis, as well as people from other ethnic groups. Dr Hansen argued that an al Shabaab presence also existed in Tanzania, Uganda and Ethiopia, although it was difficult to judge its size. During a court case in 2012, a Kenyan individual confessed to attempting to establish an al Shabaab cell in Ethiopia, but the truth of this could not be verified. Dr Hansen highlighted the unique nature of al Shabaab's presence in Kenya, arguing that it might have merged with a domestic Kenyan group. He pointed to differences in the way in which Kenyans and Somalis were recruited, and to the rudimentary nature of al Shabaab attacks in Kenya. His research had found that some al Shabaab publications in Swahili contained a mix of al-Qaeda rhetoric and typical anti-colonial rhetoric, which demonstrated an Africanization of al-Qaeda's message.

Dr Hansen concluded by emphasizing the complexity of al Shabaab. He argued that the organization had always had a local focus but had also seen wide acceptance outside Somalia. Some observers had been surprised by its demonstration that it had the internal mechanisms for dealing with conflict. Al Shabaab had not fragmented, as some had predicted in 2008, and the group would continue to take advantage of the international community's mistakes in Somalia.

Mary Harper

Ms Harper praised Dr Hansen for mentioning some of the positive changes which al Shabaab had introduced. This countered the predominant media narrative, which maintained that because al Shabaab was linked to al-Qaeda, everything it did was evil and destructive. Ms Harper argued that since the fall of Siad Barre, al Shabaab seemed to be the only group that had brought

some semblance of stability to places such as Kismayo. Al Shabaab's rule was highly imperfect, but since the group left Kismayo in 2012, the situation in the city had deteriorated. Ms Harper said that – with provisos – people should assess the actions taken by al Shabaab and see what might be instructive for the future rebuilding of Somalia.

Ms Harper pointed to an example from Dr Hansen's book, where he discussed the general increase in business activity and employment in al Shabaab-controlled areas before 2011, al Shabaab's construction of tarmac roads around Kismayo and its implementation of a taxation system. While emphasizing that al Shabaab's rule was also accompanied by horrific human rights abuses, Ms Harper maintained that not every action of the group had been negative.

She questioned how al Shabaab had managed to change behaviour in Somalia so radically, given the entrenched Somali way of life and the failure of other groups to do so. She went on to praise Dr Hansen's honesty about the difficulty of researching al Shabaab, as areas under the group's control tended to be no-go areas for Westerners. Ms Harper referred to her experience as a journalist, including interviews with Mukhtar Robow, and said that she had [words missing] where al Shabaab members would give entirely different views on events; it was difficult to know what al Shabaab actually believed in, because each leader gave such a different picture. She said that Dr Hansen's book sometimes stated information as fact without reflecting this nuance.

Ms Harper went on to mention the difficulty of writing about contemporary Somalia, as the situation in the country changed rapidly and sometimes in surprising ways. She questioned whether there was hard evidence of a link between al Shabaab and Boko Haram, but agreed that the dominant narrative was that the two groups were somehow liaising with each other. She concluded by saying that it was naïve for people to believe that al Shabaab is on the way out, because the group has ability and time on its side.

Summary of Q&A

Questions:

Is it likely that Kenya could face challenges because of the displacement of people fleeing al Shabaab?

Is it plausible that al Shabaab affiliates could masquerade as refugees and enter Italy, the United Kingdom or the United States?

As part of your research, did you look for possible financial reasons for the Kenyan and Ethiopian push into Somalia? On a related point, have you assessed what is happening to the money which is collected in Somalia, purportedly for humanitarian reasons?

What is the future of al Shabaab and al-Qaeda in Somalia? Will they stick together?

Do you think that Kenyan heavy-handedness with Somali communities in Kenya and in Somalia could lead to greater recruitment by al Shabaab within Kenya?

Stig Jarle Hansen

Dr Hansen detailed his research method of assessing different sources from different angles. He also referred to his contacts behind the frontlines, but admitted facing some personal struggle when deciding which sources to use.

He described one method used by al Shabaab to change the behaviour of Somalis, using the example of some Norwegian-Somalis' attitude to the group in 2007, when they sent money to al Shabaab because they saw it as a movement against the Ethiopian intervention of that time. Today, he said, many of these Norwegians had an entirely different approach to the group, and were now very critical of it. Al Shabaab was advantaged by emerging at a time when the Somali population was fed up with the misuse of power by the warlords.

Dr Hansen explained that two ongoing court cases in the United States pointed to a relationship between Boko Haram and al Shabaab. The cases involved Somalis accused of bringing bomb equipment into Nigeria. He also argued that the governments in Somalia and Nigeria, al Shabaab and Boko Haram had claimed that these links existed.

Dr Hansen went on to identify the lack of international coordination within Somalia as a major problem. He said that al Shabaab had been aided by the failure to pay Somalia's police force, and that this had been exacerbated by a

lack of planning on the part of international donors. He argued that there was potential for scandals to emerge related to the types of training and the clan backgrounds of the Somali police force. Dr Hansen was reluctant to say that the wages for police and army forces in Somalia were improving, because of the level of vested interest on the part of some larger international organizations. He maintained that having some kind of security presence on the ground remained the most important thing, and that this was improving in Mogadishu.

Dr Hansen then emphasized his view of al Shabaab as both an organization and a movement or idea. He spoke about attempted attacks in Australia by men claiming to be affiliates of al Shabaab, highlighting that there was evidence that these attacks were not supported by sheikhs associated with al Shabaab. In general, al Shabaab had a local focus, and the attacks it carried out in Kampala in 2010 were a response to the presence of Ugandan troops in southern Somalia. Dr Hansen thought it doubtful that al Shabaab would carry out attacks in Western countries. He said that while al Shabaab's propaganda effort on the internet was very impressive, its indoctrination techniques did not always work, and that foreign fighters seldom returned to their home countries to carry out terrorist activity.

Dr Hansen argued that al Shabaab's ability to recruit rose as it gained territorial control, as the organization would be attractive because it seemed to be winning and had money. He cited examples of al Shabaab giving mobile phones to schoolchildren in some areas to persuade them to join the group. But he asserted that as al Shabaab lost territorial control, money would become less important.

Dr Hansen disagreed with the rumour that al Shabaab received Kenyan or Ethiopian money. He emphasized his interest in the taxation system implemented by al Shabaab, as the group managed to tax transport routes and the port at Kismayo and retained checkpoints in the area. He believed that local supporters of al Shabaab in Kenya and Qatar organized collections for the group, on an individual basis. Although there are a lot of rumours,[to the contrary? or in support of his belief?] Dr Hansen said that he believed that Eritrea supported al Shabaab, although the level of this support had been slightly overestimated by observers.

Dr Hansen said he believed that the new leadership of al-Qaeda was more aligned with the agendas of al Shabaab, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and al-Qaeda in the Maghreb. He highlighted al-Qaeda's flexibility in adapting to local circumstances within Somalia.

Dr Hansen concluded by commenting on Kenya. He said that al Shabaab maintained a good presence in Nairobi and Mombasa. In the latter it was entrenched to an extent because of the existing Islamist movements in the area. He said that in Tanzania, al Shabaab could choose to play on the differences between Zanzibar and the mainland, but this could potentially lose the group supporters.