



# Lights, Camera, Jihad: Al-Shabaab's Western Media Strategy

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# Executive Summary

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**W**hile the threat that al-Shabaab poses to the West can easily be overstated, its outreach to Muslims living in Europe and the United States has been successful relative to other al-Qaeda-linked groups and warrants exploration. The organisation has recruited dozens of foreign fighters from the West (see Appendix). It also holds the dubious distinction of being the first jihadist organisation to recruit an American citizen to commit an act of suicide terrorism. Its recruitment strategy is therefore worthy of examination as a case study of how jihadist groups formulate strategies to lure Western Muslims.

Through a combination of primary source analysis, background interviews in East Africa and an in-depth quantitative analysis of the group's Twitter output, this paper aims to go beyond the simple statement of this problem by explaining how al-Shabaab markets itself to Muslims beyond its borders and what methods it employs. It also explores how the group is using social media to engage its followers in ways that other actors in the global jihad movement have not yet mastered.

## **Understanding the Threat**

Over the last six years, approximately 1000 ethnic Somalis and 200–300 non-Somalis have been recruited to al-Shabaab from outside Somalia. While radical Islam has been present in Somalia for decades, this alone cannot account for the group's success in recruiting Western Muslims. Western governments were slow to proscribe the group, allowing it to develop a sophisticated communications infrastructure and exploit nationalist, anti-Ethiopian and anti-Western sentiments within the Somali diaspora in the aftermath of the Ethiopian invasion and occupation of Somalia in 2006. As a result, al-Shabaab's interaction with Muslims beyond its borders has not always relied exclusively on Islamist ideology.

## **The Foundations of al-Shabaab's Propaganda: Hijrah, Jihad and the Caliphate**

Al-Shabaab presents its mission in cosmic terms, invoking a civilisational conflict between the forces of Islam and non-Islam. This is coupled with attempts to develop an 'ummah consciousness' in potential recruits, encouraging them to identify with Muslim causes worldwide. Typically, the suffering of Muslims around the world is juxtaposed with the ease of life in the West. The central tenet of this messaging is that faith necessitates action, and Muslims need to recalibrate their priorities by placing the liberation of Muslim lands ahead of esoteric matters of faith.

Omar Hammami (also known as Abu Mansur al-Amriki), an American recruit and military commander in the group, emerged as one of its most effective spokesmen by explaining his reasons for joining a conflict with which he has no tangible connection. Much of his message invokes classical concepts such as the importance

of making *hijrah*, or migrating from one place to another for the communal defence or betterment of Islam, as a precursor to waging jihad.

Hammami's propaganda demonstrates his commitment to what he views as the long-term objectives of the global jihadist movement: the establishment of the Caliphate. Hammami argues that these long-term goals should not be confused with the short-term tactics of expelling occupiers and establishing local Islamist rule. This view is controversial within the movement and there is evidence that some within al-Shabaab believe their localised struggle has been hijacked by those with a more global agenda.

## **Al-Shabaab's Propaganda War and Alternative Media**

Al-Shabaab has become adept at producing material that provides its Western followers with an alternative to mainstream media. Relying heavily on digital video and Twitter, the group projects an image of itself as an effective and united force carrying out the will of God by implementing Shariah and fighting the enemies of Islam. Twitter has allowed the group to do much of this in real time, offering supporters instant interpretations of events and rebuttals of critiques.

At its core, al-Shabaab has a sophisticated and diverse communications strategy aimed at influencing Muslims living in the West. This strategy is infused with culturally relevant material that resonates with members of the Somali diaspora, while also positioning Somalia as a key battleground in the struggle between Islam and the West. As this paper demonstrates, this is a strategy that has enticed many to embrace al-Shabaab's cause over the years.





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# 1 Introduction

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The global threat from al-Shabaab is ambiguous and hard to define. At times, the group has rattled its sabre in the direction of Western states, prompting concern over impending attacks that have not materialised.<sup>1</sup> More often, however, al-Shabaab has appeared to be concerned with a solely Islamo-nationalist agenda focused on Somalia and, at its most expansive, to neighbouring countries in the Horn of Africa with sizeable ethnic Somali populations.

After coalescing into a formal unit in mid-2007, following disagreements with the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) of which it was a part, al-Shabaab rapidly established control over large parts of Somalia, before suffering significant recent losses at the hands of the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM). Despite AMISOM's success, which has forced the group to abandon governing and return to its roots as a jihadist insurgent group, al-Shabaab will maintain a lethal presence in the region for some time to come. This was underscored by a suicide bombing in Mogadishu carried out on 20 September 2012, that killed fourteen people.<sup>2</sup>

This paper does not seek to exaggerate or overstate the threat posed by al-Shabaab to the West, nor does it enter the murky terrain of predicting if such attacks are likely. However, the group's efforts to recruit Western Muslims do merit attention. It is not hyperbole to point out al-Shabaab's success in recruiting large numbers of Western Muslims – an area where it has eclipsed even al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). In September 2010, the Director-General of Britain's Security Service (MI5), Jonathan Evans, stated that the United Kingdom faced an imminent threat from British residents trained by al-Shabaab. 'It's only a matter of time before we see terrorism on our streets inspired by those who are today fighting alongside al-Shabaab,' he warned.<sup>3</sup> This was not without foundation. In recent years, at least ten British residents have travelled to Somalia in order to join the jihad. Indeed, a British Somali named Ahmed Hussein Ahmed was among the first Western suicide bomber for al-Shabaab; he attacked an Ethiopian army checkpoint in Baidoa in 2007, killing twenty soldiers.<sup>4</sup> He left a video imploring other British Muslims to follow him:

*Oh my people, know that I am doing this martyrdom operation for the sake of Allah. I advise you to migrate to Somalia and wage war against your enemies. Death in honour is better than life in humiliation.*

[...]

*To the Somalis living abroad, are you happy in your comfort while your religion, your people are being attacked and humiliated?*<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Most recently, al-Shabaab spokesman Mohammed Ali Raage called for attacks on the West in response to an American-produced film which insults Islam, see: 'Somalia's Shabaab urge attacks on West', Associated Free Press, 15 September 2012

<sup>2</sup> 'UN condemns Somali suicide bombing at Mogadishu cafe; Journalists among the dead', Associated Free Press, 21 September 2012

<sup>3</sup> 'MI5 chief warns of terror threat from Britons trained in Somalia', *The Guardian*, 16 September 2010

<sup>4</sup> 'Somali radicals "importing terror to UK" say intelligence analysts', *The Times*, 16 February 2009

<sup>5</sup> 'Somalia: The new Pakistan for terror recruitment?', Channel 4 News, first aired 16 February 2010

The problem is equally serious in the United States. In July 2011, a report by the U.S. House Committee on Homeland Security found that:

*Shabaab-related federal indictments account for the largest number and significant upward trend in homegrown counterterrorism cases filed by the Department of Justice over the past two years. At least 38 cases have been unsealed since 2009 in Minnesota, Ohio, California, New Jersey, New York, Illinois, Missouri, Alabama, Virginia and Texas.*<sup>6</sup>

One year after the Baidoa attack, another suicide bombing was carried out in Puntland, north-eastern Somalia. Claiming thirty victims was Shirwa Ahmed, an American Muslim from Minneapolis who gained the dubious honour of becoming America's first suicide bomber. Where he led, others would follow. In 2009 another American Muslim, from Seattle, attacked African Union forces in Mogadishu, killing twenty-one. Shortly after, a Danish Muslim of Somali ethnic origin also attacked targets in Mogadishu, claiming twenty-four lives (including those of three government officials). In other cases, Western Muslims have been motivated to act in support of the group without actually joining it, typically by providing material aid via fundraising activities.

Al-Shabaab's outreach to Western Muslims is not new. This paper aims to go beyond a simple statement of the problem by explaining how al-Shabaab markets itself to Western Muslims and what methods it employs. It also explores how the group is using social media to engage its followers in ways that other jihadist actors have not yet fully understood or mastered. In particular, the authors provide a quantitative analysis of the group's Twitter postings over a five-month period in 2011–2012. In doing so, we hope to provide insight into how the group prioritises its various messages to the West.

## **Al-Shabaab in the global jihad movement**

The antecedents of radical Islam have deep roots in Somalia, stretching back to the Islamic Group and The Unity of Islamic Youth in the 1970s. These later coalesced into the Islamic Union in 1982, after which a number of its members went to Afghanistan to wage jihad against the Soviet Union. Although Islam in Somalia has traditionally had Sufi roots, this began to change in the 1970 when Somali men travelled to Saudi Arabia to work in the oil industry. Some brought back with them a more rigid Salafism which began to influence some of these antecedent groups.

The fall of President Siad Barre in 1991 ended more than two decades of autocratic rule and led to a massive proliferation of Islamist groups in Somalia. They sought to fill the vacuum left by the former regime and began implementing forms of Shariah law ranging from Sufi to Salafi. The most powerful of these groups was al-Itihaad al-Islamiya (AIAI), a Wahhabi precursor to al-Shabaab with members that included the current head of al-Shabaab, Ahmed Abdi Godane (also known as Mukhtar Ali Zubeyr), and senior al-Shabaab member and occasional rival, Hasan Dahir Aweys.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> 'Al Shabaab: Recruitment and Radicalization within the Muslim American Community and the Threat to the Homeland', Majority Investigative Report of the Committee on Homeland Security, U.S. House of Representatives, 27 July 2011

<sup>7</sup> Mary Harper, *Getting Somalia Wrong: Faith, War and Hope in a Shattered State* (Zed Books, 2012)

The AIAI began to unravel in the late 1990s after an intense war with neighbouring Ethiopia, and was replaced by the ICU in 2006. This too, had links with jihadism, and at least three of the individuals wanted in connection with al-Qaeda's 1998 twin embassy bombings in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam are known to have taken refuge in Somalia and were thought to be under the protection of the ICU.<sup>8</sup> Throughout the following decade, the proliferation of jihadist groups and Islamic Court militias helped create the infrastructure and networks that later gave rise to al-Shabaab.

The ICU succeeded in bringing together disparate Shariah courts from around the country and united their leaders into a militia, confronting a U.S.-backed coalition of warlords called the Alliance for the Restoration of Peace and Counter-Terrorism (ARPCT). The ARPCT was routed within months, granting the ICU control of much of southern and central Somalia. This was short-lived, as a U.S.-backed Ethiopian invasion at the end of 2006 saw the end of the ICU as an effective governing group.<sup>9</sup> One of its ultra-conservative factions, al-Shabaab, split from the ICU when it sought a negotiated settlement to the conflict. From 2006 to 2008, al-Shabaab established itself as a guerrilla movement, waging an effective campaign against Ethiopian forces. It took much of the credit for the withdrawal of Ethiopian forces in early 2009 and proceeded to consolidate its control of southern and eastern Somalia. It also benefitted from the experience of its leadership, which included seasoned jihadists such as Saleh Ali Nabhan (one of those wanted for the twin embassy bombings) and the aforementioned Ahmed Abdi Godane, a veteran of the Afghan jihad.

This highlights the distinct international network within which al-Shabaab operated from its incipient phases. Westerners were also present in the ICU before al-Shabaab had come to the fore: a group of British Somalis travelled to Mogadishu in 2006 and, according to Professor Ken Menkhaus, 'some of the top figures of the ICU were themselves diaspora members with citizenship in Canada, Sweden, and elsewhere'.<sup>10</sup> Somalia's Transitional Federal Government (TFG) reported that captured ICU fighters included Yemeni, Jordanian, Emirati, Saudi Arabian, Syrian, Swedish and Moroccan nationals.<sup>11</sup> Many of them were later absorbed into al-Shabaab.

Communication between the broader global jihadist movement and al-Shabaab has been bidirectional. Al-Shabaab has frequently reached out by identifying with jihadists abroad and offering them words of support. Godane, for example, argues that:

*Today an Islamic Jihad has become evident in all corners of the world, and the purpose of it is that Allah (sw) may be worshiped alone, without any partners. The struggle from Chechnya to Algeria has united, and The Struggle from Turkistan to Yemen has united.*<sup>12</sup>

The group has also issued statements of support for Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda more generally. In return, al-Qaeda has also reached out to the group. Within the initial sliver of documents released by the U.S. government following the raid on Osama bin Laden's compound last year, one document reveals bin Laden's instructions to Godane. He

<sup>8</sup> 'Hunt for al-Qaeda men in Mogadishu', *The Sunday Times*, 31 December 2006

<sup>9</sup> Cedric Barnes and Harun Hassan, 'The Rise and Fall of Mogadishu's Islamic Courts', Chatham House, April 2007

<sup>10</sup> Ken Menkhaus, 'Violent Islamic Extremism: Al-Shabaab Recruitment in America', Hearing before the Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate, 11 March 2009

<sup>11</sup> David Shinn, 'Al Shabaab's Foreign Threat to Somalia', *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, Spring 2011

<sup>12</sup> 'Translated speech by the Amir of Al-shabaab Al-mujahidiin movement, Sheekh Mukhtaar Abdirahman Abu Zubayr(ha)', Ansar al-Mujahideen Forum, July 2009

advises him on organisational management, in particular regarding the management of al-Shabaab's internal relations and its dealings with third parties.<sup>13</sup> This coincides with reports that al-Shabaab formally merged with al-Qaeda.<sup>14</sup>

Clearly, then, al-Shabaab operates within the rubric of what is recognised as the global jihadist movement. It is in contact with jihadists abroad, supports their causes, echoes their words, and shares the same worldview. Its recruitment of foreign fighters should not, therefore, be seen as entirely unusual.

Al-Shabaab propaganda remained freely available for a number of years because Western governments were slow to proscribe the group. In the United States the group was designated as a banned terrorist organisation in February 2008, while the British government did not move against it until March 2010.<sup>15</sup> By then, much of the damage was already done. Videos were freely disseminated, funds collected openly, and recruiters worked without fear of sanction. Indeed, before al-Shabaab was banned in the United States, Omar Hammami, along with other known American al-Shabaab recruits such as Ruben Shumpert, and Shirwa Ahmed, had all joined the group.<sup>16</sup> By the time al-Shabaab was proscribed networks were established and entrenched. As if to underscore the point, the indictment of Omer Abdi Mohamed – an American who was convicted in July 2011 for planning to provide material support to al-Shabaab – reveals that, for years,

*The group solicited donations from unsuspecting members of the Somali community under false pretences...the money was to pay for the airfare and travel expenses of the group of men to join in the conspiracy.*<sup>17</sup>

A unique combination of factors endeared the cause of Somalia's Islamists to Western diaspora Somalis. For all its faults, the ICU was able to reverse decades of instability in Somalia and had established a degree of order, governance and rule of law in the areas where it had jurisdiction. Many hopes were invested in these aspects of its rule, even in cases where individuals did not necessarily share all aspects of the ICU's agenda. Indeed, thousands of diaspora Somalis returned to the country, bringing with them much-needed technical expertise, foreign exchange and capital.<sup>18</sup>

By December 2006, the TFG and its allies had lost control of large parts of the country to the ICU and Islamist forces. This prompted an invasion by Ethiopia, which was concerned about the ICU's consolidation of power on its border. Ethiopian troops decimated the ICU and rolled into Mogadishu without firing a single shot.<sup>19</sup> A popular sentiment was established among Somalis, both within and outside the country, that the United States was supporting an unjust 'occupation' by Ethiopian forces.

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<sup>13</sup> Letter from Osama bin Laden to Mukhtar Abu Zubeyr (Godane), 7 August 2010, Combating Terrorism Center, West Point, Harmony Index, SOCOM-2012-0000005-HT

<sup>14</sup> For more see: Nelly Lahoud, 'The Merger of Al-Shabaab and Qa'idat al Jihad', *CTC Sentinel*, 16 February 2012

<sup>15</sup> See State Department list of Foreign Terrorist Organisations: <http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/other/des/123085.htm>; Home Office list of Proscribed Terrorist Groups or Organisations: <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/publications/counter-terrorism/proscribed-terror-groups/>

<sup>16</sup> See Appendix

<sup>17</sup> United States of America v. Omer Abdi Mohamed, United States District Court, District of Minnesota, Criminal No. 09-CR-352(MJD/FLN)

<sup>18</sup> Ken Menkhaus, 'Violent Islamic Extremism: Al-Shabaab Recruitment in America', Hearing before the Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate, 11 March 2009

<sup>19</sup> 'Ethiopian troops enter Mogadishu', CNN, 28 December 2006

Context is necessary here. Somali-Ethiopian relations are as tense and incorrigible as those one might expect of India and Pakistan. Ethiopian intervention was therefore always going to be an inflammatory issue. To complicate matters, the TFG was backed by the United States, United Nations, African Union, and Arab League. This fuelled the sense of conspiracy against it, discrediting the TFG in the eyes of many Somalis. These tensions were further stoked when it later emerged that the United States was providing diplomatic and intelligence assistance to the Ethiopians.<sup>20</sup>

Anti-American sentiment was therefore added to the combustible mix of nationalist rivalry and perceptions of anti-Muslim conspiracy. Dirk Baehr argues that:

*...an anti-Ethiopian and anti-Western mood developed in Somalia and among Somali migrants in the West which became so deep-seated that many accused the West of wanting to destroy Islam...Shabaab called for the liberation of Somalia from the Ethiopian occupiers. Many Somalis saw this call for the liberation of their country as a justification for armed resistance by the militias, even though they hated the Shabaab for their Islamist ideology.<sup>21</sup>*

In short, al-Shabaab's interaction with Muslims beyond its borders does not rely exclusively on Islamist ideology. People have identified with its cause for a number of other reasons, including nationalism, hostility toward Ethiopia, and anti-American sentiment. With this in mind, the remainder of this paper considers the ideological components of al-Shabaab's Islamist message: how it has been packaged, what has worked, and why it has resonated with some Western Muslims.

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<sup>20</sup> Ken Menkhaus, 'Violent Islamic Extremism: Al-Shabaab Recruitment in America', Hearing before the Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate, 11 March 2009

<sup>21</sup> Dirk Baehr, 'The Somali Shabaab Militias and their Jihadist Networks in the West', KAS International Report, August 2011



## 2 The Foundations of al-Shabaab's Western Propaganda: Hijrah, Jihad and the Caliphate

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In October 2011 a Somali-American from Minnesota, Abdisalan Hussein Ali, became the third U.S. citizen to carry out a suicide bombing for al-Shabaab, targeting African Union forces in Mogadishu. Before his death, Ali had been named along with ten others as wanted by the FBI for connections with al-Shabaab. While al-Shabaab has shown little desire to attack the West directly, the influx of Western Muslims and those from the diaspora is forcing it to expand its horizons. For example, Omar Hammami, an American-born al-Shabaab member and propagandist, repeatedly talks about the West, internationalises al-Shabaab's cause, and seeks to place the movement within the context of the wider jihadist movement.<sup>22</sup> As the most well known and vocal producer of al-Shabaab's Western propaganda, Hammami and his work will be among the main focuses of the coming section.

Hammami is not alone. A video released by al-Shabaab's media wing, al-Kataib, in 2010 – "Inspire the believers" – was specifically aimed at Muslims in the West. 'Oh Muslim youth around the world, do not forget the call of your brothers in Somalia, as their condition calls out', implores Saleh Ali Nabhan. 'If you do not fight Jihad today then when will you?'<sup>23</sup>

The video features a carousel of foreign fighters, many of them ethnic Somalis, who migrated to the country in support of al-Shabaab. Fighters from Tanzania, Sudan, Kenya and Pakistan also appear – along with fighters from Britain and Sweden. A British jihadist who calls himself Abu Dujana speaks with the unmistakable cadence of a cockney rhythm, telling viewers, 'A chance for us to fight for our beliefs is the best thing that can happen to us in this world, and the fact that we might be killed in this path is nothing but a glad tiding.'<sup>24</sup> This is followed by an explicit call to undertake religious migration, known as making *hijrah*:

*I'd like to take this opportunity to invite all the Muslims that are living in the land of disbelief, the lands of oppression, to make hijrah to the land of glory, to the land of izzat [honour], to the land of jihad.*<sup>25</sup>

Similar sentiments are expressed by a Swedish jihadist:

*I encourage you to make hijrah to this country. That is, to make the hijrah from the land of the infidels to the lands of Islam, which is an obligation upon you.*<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> See Abu Mansoor al-Amriki, 'Lessons learned', al-Kataib Media, 7 October 2011; Abu Mansoor al-Amriki, 'In defence of the Khilafah: The next stage', al-Kataib Media, 25 May 2012

<sup>23</sup> 'Inspire the believers', al-Kataib Media, November 2010

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

These young men are referred to as the *muhajiroon* (Muslims who have made the *hijrah*), and their actions are presented as striving to achieve the ultimate glory in Islam.

The video presents al-Shabaab's mission in cosmic terms: a civilisational conflict between the forces of Islam and non-Islam, truth and falsehood, good and evil. The dichotomy is thus established. The West is locked in an existential conflict with Islam and cannot coexist with it. To reject one party in that polarisation is to side with the other. Hammami explains:

*This is a war of civilizations, it's not a war of individuals. It might very well be the case that Joe was just an 'average Joe'... maybe he never meant any harm for Islam. But at the end of the day that doesn't change the fact that he was still part of the civilization that is at war with Islam... we have to choose a side.*<sup>27</sup>

This approach aims to create an unbearable tension for Muslims in the West, forcing them to essentially 'pick a side'. To help his audience decide, Hammami counsels that 'trying to practice your religion in *dar al-kuffar* [the land of disbelief] is nothing more than a dream world'. What is needed is for Muslims to 'throw your lot in with the rest of the ummah [global Muslim nation]'.<sup>28</sup>

## Mobilising for War: Hijrah and Jihad

Shortly after Abdisalan Hussein Ali became a suicide bomber in 2011, al-Shabaab released his final audio sermon. In it, he echoed many of the sentiments previously expressed by al-Shabaab fighters: portraying a cosmic war between Islam and the West, glorifying jihad, and encouraging *hijrah*.<sup>29</sup>

The idea of migrating from one place to another for the communal defence or betterment of Islam is not without precedent in Muslim history. The concept of *hijrah* is derived from events in the early days of Islam, as related in the Quran and Sunnah. After the Prophet Muhammad began preaching monotheism in pagan Mecca he was persecuted, and eventually members of the eleven most prominent clans conspired to kill him in his sleep. Islamic theology holds that God commanded Muhammad to leave Makkah.<sup>30</sup> The significance of this incident is enshrined in the Quran itself by the verse:

*And [remember, O Muhammad], when those who disbelieved plotted against you to restrain you or kill you or evict you [from Makkah]. But they plan, and Allah plans. And Allah is the best of planners.*<sup>31</sup>

In 622 AD, Muhammad and his followers who made the journey – known as the *muhajiroon* – fled to Yathrib (modern day Madinah), where they were received by a small community known as the *ansar*, or helpers. This emigration became known as the *hijrah* and has been invested with profound significance in Islamic theology and history ever since. It has come to represent more than just a flight from

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<sup>27</sup> Abu Mansoor al-Amriki, 'Lessons learned', al-Kataib Media, 7 October 2011

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Audio in authors' possession

<sup>30</sup> Safiur-Rahman Al-Mubarakpuri, *The Sealed Nectar (Ar-Raheequl-Makhtum): Biography of the Noble Prophet* (Riyadh, 2002), pp. 201–204. Also see: Muhammad Abdul-Rahman, *Tafsir ibn Kathir Juz 9 (Part 9): al-A'raf 88 To al-Anfal 40* (London, 2009), pp. 215–217

<sup>31</sup> Quran 8:30

persecution, but also a precursor to the successes that followed. In Medina, Muhammad established a political authority for Islam – regarded by some as the first Islamic State – providing the early Muslims with a platform from which the community of Islam could defend itself and expand.<sup>32</sup> Perhaps the most relevant observation for present purposes is that all the Quranic verses relating to jihad were only revealed to Muhammad after the *hijrah* occurred. Before then, the concept of jihad did not exist, and jihadists attach huge significance to this. They reason that *hijrah* took Muhammad to Madinah, where God delivered him political authority, security and the ability to wage battle on behalf of Islam; thus, without *hijrah* there is no jihad.

Hence, the *hijrah* is seen as a strategic necessity and precursor to jihad, providing an opportunity to organise and prepare for battle. The interconnectedness of *hijrah* and jihad is a prominent theme in jihadist thought. '*Hijrah* and jihad in the cause of Allah are mutually linked to each other for establishing the truth and eradicating falsehood,' Osama bin Laden once explained.<sup>33</sup>

Anwar al-Awlaki, the now deceased al-Qaeda English-language recruiter, was much more explicit in stating how the *hijrah* empowered Islam through jihad. Writing for AQAP's *Inspire* magazine, he argued:

*When the Messenger of Allah was giving da'wah [the call] in Makkah for thirteen years, only a few hundred became Muslim. When he made hijrah to Madinah, within ten years, over a hundred thousand became Muslim. So how come his da'wah in Madinah was much more fruitful than his da'wah in Makkah? That was because he was using a superior form of da'wah in Madinah and that is the da'wah of the sword.*<sup>34</sup>

Both Awlaki and bin Laden practised what they preached in this regard, giving up relative comfort for the privations of battle. This is the example – both prophetic and contemporary – that al-Shabaab wants its followers in the West to embrace. 'Don't sit around like a couch potato or just chill all day...[don't] go on the internet and find out the fate of the Muslims...come to the land of jihad,' Abdisalan Hussein Ali told Western Muslims in his audio will.<sup>35</sup>

Hammami also spoke about *hijrah* in one of his first major speeches, released in response to Barack Obama's 2009 Cairo address. Speaking directly to 'the nearly seven million Muslims of America,' he warns:

*The animosity that America holds for Islam and Muslims, and the establishment of an Islamic state has become as clear as day. And it is a fact that cannot be denied by any intelligent person... The whole ummah feels the enmity, oppression and evil of America. And your Muslim brothers and sisters are surprised at how you are staying in America.*<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> This is a recurrent theme in the writings of revivalist Islamist thinkers like Sayyid Qutb, Syed Abul A'la Maududi and Hassan al-Banna, and also appears in al-Qaeda publications. Perhaps the most lucid expositions come from the transnational Islamist movement Hizb ut-Tahrir, particularly: Taquddin an-Nabhani, *The Islamic State* (London, 1998); and *From Darkness to Light*, Hizb ut-Tahrir, Britain

<sup>33</sup> Osama bin Laden, 'At-Tawjihāt Manhajīyah' [Directions regarding the (divine) method]. No publisher or publication date is given; downloaded from Ansar al-Mujahideen on 2 June 2011.

<sup>34</sup> Anwar al-Awlaki, 'The rule on dispossessing the disbelievers wealth in Dar al-Harb', *Inspire* (Winter 2010), p. 60

<sup>35</sup> Audio in authors' possession

<sup>36</sup> Omar Hammami, 'A Response to Barack Obama: The Beginning of the End', July 2009

Indeed, Hammami argues that Muslims refusing to undertake *hijrah* risk being sent to hell because, while America is hostile towards Islam, God has created an expansive earth where alternative sanctuary can be found. In this case, that sanctuary would be in Somalia or presumably other theatres of jihad such as Yemen or Afghanistan. This reinforces the kind of ideas advanced by preachers like Anwar al-Awlaki, who concluded that 'with the American invasion of Iraq and continued U.S. aggression against Muslims I could not reconcile between living in the U.S. and being a Muslim.'<sup>37</sup>

## Al-Shabaab in search of the Caliphate

Making *hijrah* and fighting jihad are methods rather than ends in themselves. The wider aim for global jihadists is to advance al-Qaeda's worldview and establish a Caliphate. Citing a report from the RAND Corporation that explores ways to develop moderate Muslim networks – a report that has elicited much interest from jihadists – Hammami notes that the authors are correct to suggest that 'the ideology of al-Qaeda is, in reality, its centre of gravity'.<sup>38</sup> That is an ideology with which al-Shabaab identifies. Hammami explains:

*Muslims worldwide must unite under the leadership of one Muslim leader called the Khaleefah. This, then, is the reality of the ideology of al-Qaeda, the ideology of the global jihadists, and the ideology of every truly sincere Muslim.*<sup>39</sup>

Aligning itself with that cause requires al-Shabaab to place its struggle within the broader jihadist cause – something the group has not been particularly adept at doing. Hammami is critical of their propensity to become too localised, obsessing only about Somali causes. There are urgent local concerns, he concedes, but he warns against losing sight of the equally important bigger picture. 'The bonds between the local mujahideen and the mujahideen who have a more global vision for the jihad are still noticeably lacking in certain parts of the world today,' he observes.<sup>40</sup>

To overcome this, he recommends simultaneously working to 'spread jihad globally' and 'freeing Islamic lands and administering them in accordance with Shariah'.<sup>41</sup> Put like this, it is difficult to know what 'spreading jihad' could entail other than an aggressive furthering of the global jihad's frontiers, including into Western countries. It is one of the closest direct threats Hammami makes. Indeed, he is so keen to unite the jihadist cause that he recommends all groups dispense with their names, institutional identities, and structures, merging into one supra-jihad movement. 'This will not only unite the mujahideen but will also turn the jihad into a true jihad of the ummah,' he suggests.<sup>42</sup> This is fanciful thinking, but is useful to illustrate the full extent of Hammami's worldview and vision. In many respects it marks the maturing of his strategic thinking, a coming of age for the man who first entered the public consciousness with his low-grade *anasheed* (Islamic songs) about the jihad in Somalia.

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<sup>37</sup> Anwar al-Awlaki, 'A call To jihad', March 2010

<sup>38</sup> Angel Rabasa, et al., *Building Moderate Muslim Networks* (Rand, 2007); Abu Mansoor al-Amriki, 'In defence of the Khilafah: The next stage', al-Kataib Media, 2012

<sup>39</sup> Abu Mansoor al-Amriki, 'In defence of the Khilafah: The next stage', al-Kataib Media, 2012

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

Talk of the Caliphate is not new among Islamists, but Hammami insists that the global jihadist movement has lost sight of it while focusing on immediate and localised goals instead. '[We] have made our vision and our goal simply harming the interests of the kuffaar throughout the world without focusing on the importance of establishing the Shariah,' he argues.<sup>43</sup> Re-engaging with that goal means adopting a much broader international agenda, though he is cautious in advocating how this should be done. With uncharacteristic temperance, Hammami argues that the global jihadist movement should differentiate between strategy and tactics, and between its immediate and long-term objectives. In some respects this is a continuation of the old debate regarding the virtues of fighting the 'near' or 'far' enemy, but Hammami brings new sophistication to the argument.<sup>44</sup> He urges his readers not to confuse al-Qaeda's tactics with its objectives.<sup>45</sup> Yes, the group is a vanguard movement fighting the Americans – 'chopping off the head of the snake' – in a conflict it hopes will precipitate the departure of U.S. influence from the Muslim world, but this is not its ultimate aim: Al-Qaeda desires the absolute removal of American power from Muslim societies in order to establish a Caliphate.<sup>46</sup>

It is clear Hammami has grown as a thinker during this period, referring to key jihadist theoreticians such as Abu Musab al-Suri, Abu Bakr Naji, and Mohammed al-Hakaymah. He is also much more expansive in his global outlook, discussing jihadi battlegrounds beyond the Horn of Africa, such as Kashmir and North and West Africa (areas al-Qaeda has largely overlooked in its recent history). Unlike most of his contemporaries in al-Shabaab, Hammami is much more fixated on a grandiose global strategy, even criticising the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Iraq for being too reductively focused on 'removing the occupier.'<sup>47</sup> As a result, 'the issue of making the conflict global has become merely a bi-product of the strategy, and not its core.'<sup>48</sup> Hammami is not naïve about how al-Shabaab should achieve this goal. He first wants to establish a domestic base for the movement before moving into a truly global phase.

These themes – the importance of the Caliphate and the internationalisation of jihad – are ones to which Hammami constantly returns, and it is clear he has given them much attention. In a subsequent lecture, "In defence of the Khilafah: the next stage," he develops many of the ideas expressed in his earlier booklet.<sup>49</sup> 'The bonds between the local mujahideen and the mujahideen who have a more global vision for the jihad are still noticeably lacking in certain parts of the world today' he argues, calling for greater unity between different jihadist outfits.<sup>50</sup> His knowledge of the Caliphate and his fixation on it likely stem from the voluminous literature of Hizb ut-Tahrir, a transnational Islamist organisation whose sole purpose is to revive an Islamic state. Hammami has acknowledged the group in his lectures, while arguing that despite his belief in the necessity of the Caliphate he is not a member. Nonetheless, the influence of the group's worldview on his thinking is more than apparent. Hammami's book, *Strategic Study of the Prophetic Siirah*, reads like a plagiarised copy

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<sup>43</sup> Abu Jihad al-Shami (known pseudonym used by Hammami in online forums), 'The vision of the jihadi movement and the strategy for the current stage', November 2010

<sup>44</sup> On the near and far enemy concept, see Fawas Gerges, *The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global* (Cambridge University Press, 2005)

<sup>45</sup> Mark Stout, 'Assessing "the vision of the jihadi movement"', *On War and Words* (Blog), 4 November 2010: <http://onwarandwords.wordpress.com/2010/11/04/assessing-the-vision-of-the-jihadi-movement/>

<sup>46</sup> Abu Jihad al-Shami, 'The vision of the jihadi movement and the strategy for the current stage', November 2010

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Abu Mansoor al-Amriki, 'In defence of the Khilafah: the next stage' (al-Kataib media, May 2012)

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

of Hizb ut-Tahrir's *From Darkness to Light*, a tract in which the group offers a highly politicised reading of Muhammad's life.<sup>51</sup> The central idea in both books is that Islam needs to anchor itself in a geographical space where it can enjoy political autonomy. From that base, it can then project its message to the world.

Hammami has been frustrated in his attempts to realise that vision. He argues that the bifurcating of the jihadist movement between those with a global vision and those with localised aims has stunted its ability to achieve Islamic dominance. He complains:

*...those of us who have a global strategy for the jihad are left without any political capital in which to steer the jihad which has become made up of a conglomerate of local jihadi fronts. The simple reason for this phenomenon is that in most places of the world, the home team gets the final say and everyone is expected in Rome to do as the Romans do...allowing for localisation to continue is akin to leaving a cancerous tumour within the body of the ummah before it's even reborn. Therefore, in conclusion, I propose to the mujahideen of the world that we unite no longer under our old names which can only encompass a certain region or a certain class of the ummah.<sup>52</sup>*

Hammami also argues that the mujahideen have played into the West's 'trap' by failing to embed the concept of the Caliphate within the popular consciousness of Muslims.<sup>53</sup> He thus attributes the lack of support for the Taliban's Islamic Emirate in Afghanistan and al Qaeda's Islamic State of Iraq to the mujahideen's failure to educate the Muslim world on the importance of a unified Caliphate.

It is natural that Hammami would prioritise the global jihad element, and with it the associated nomenclature of the ummah, because this is his whole *raison d'être* for being in Somalia, where he is fighting in an otherwise highly localised campaign. He has pursued this global focus from the earliest days of his joining the jihad in Somalia. In one of his first public addresses after joining al-Shabaab, Hammami explained:

*We stress here that we are striving to establish the Islaamic Khilaafah from East to West after removing the occupier and killing the apostates. We will do this while holding on to the Book and the Sunnah, upon the manhaj [methodology] of the salaf [literally means 'predecessor' and refers to the first three generations which followed Mohammed] in one hand and the sword in the other, beneath the black banners, by the will of Allaah.*

*As for the Manhaj of the Shabaab then we see that they are focused upon the pure manhaj which is adopted by the Mujaahideen in the rest of the blessed lands of Jihaad. It is the same manhaj repeatedly heard from the mouth of the mujaahid shaykh Usaamah bin Laden.<sup>54</sup>*

In many respects, Hammami is innovating an entirely novel internationalist theory for the contemporary jihad movement, suggesting that all the disparate movements unite under one name.

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<sup>51</sup> Abu Jihad al-Shami, *A Strategic Study of the Prophetic Sirah* (2011); Salim Fredericks and Ahmer Feroze, *From Darkness into Light: An Account of the Messenger's Struggle to Make Islam Dominant* (Khilafah Publications, 2000)

<sup>52</sup> Abu Mansoor al-Amriki, 'In defence of the Khilafah: the next stage' (al-Kataib media, May 2012)

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Abu Mansoor al-Amriki, 'To the beloved Mujaahideen (in specific) and the Muslims (in general)', Ansar al-Mujahideen Forum, September 2009.

It is not enough that al-Qaeda operates local franchises in the Arabian Peninsula, Iraq, and the Islamic Maghreb; his vision is more expansive than that. What of the jihadists in Indonesia, Pakistan, Central Asia, Morocco and the Horn of Africa? He offers a comprehensive vision for achieving this unity, arguing:

*Our exercise of rejuvenating the Khilafah is going to require from us exercising different competencies simultaneously, namely, we need to focus on freeing Islamic lands and administering them in accordance with the Shariah – but we have to continue to do this while still keeping our eyes squarely on the goal of spreading jihad globally.<sup>55</sup>*

For a jihadist obsessed with spreading the movement globally, Hammami demonstrates a greater deference towards spiritual reform than almost any other jihadist ideologue at the moment. While many theoreticians of jihad would argue that personal laxity in the observance of ritual faith has contributed towards the decline of Islam's fortunes, it is rarely a main focus. The trend in recent years has been to move away from advocating spiritual reform and instead encourage self-starting, lone-wolf terrorists (as seen in al-Qaeda publications such as AQAP's *Inspire* magazine).

The last real theoretician to give this issue serious attention was Abdullah Azzam, one of the godfathers of modern jihadism. Now, Hammami parrots him. He argues that one of the principal reasons for the decline of Muslim power in the world is that Muslims have abandoned the truest teachings of their faith. It is not enough to want to revive the fortunes of Islam through jihad or the implementation of Shariah alone – personal reform must also be sought. 'Sins alone are the only obstacle to our return to prominence,' he argues. 'Within a century after the death of the Prophet we were knocking at the doors of Paris, and the only thing that stopped us from finishing the last stronghold of *kufr* [unbelief] in the world was our own sins.'<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Abu Mansoor al-Amriki, 'In defence of the Khilafah: The next stage', al-Kataib Media, May 2012

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

## It's not so simple: clan politics and the real reasons for splits in al-Shabaab

Al-Shabaab has been severely weakened by internal divisions among the group's leadership, and conventional wisdom attributes this to a disagreement over the group's relationship with al-Qaeda. In February 2012, Godane – one of the more ideologically committed jihadists in al-Shabaab's leadership – announced an official merger with al-Qaeda.<sup>57</sup> This courting of al-Qaeda is believed by some to be the reason for a rift between Godane and another leader, Hasan Dahir Aweys, who is not as devoted to the global jihadist ideal.

Aweys is the former head of Hizbul Islam, a militia that merged with al-Shabaab in late 2010 once it became clear to him that his group could not defeat them.<sup>58</sup> His past suggests he is an opportunist, adapting to changes on the ground. Not only did he cut the deal with al-Shabaab when he was head of Hizbul Islam, but in 2006 he also resigned from the leadership of the ICU when it began losing control of Mogadishu.<sup>59</sup> Rumours abound that he is now seeking to make a deal with the Somali government while his own allies lose ground. Aweys may be opposed to the al-Qaeda elements in al-Shabaab, but appears to be primarily motivated by the preservation of his own powerbase.

Clan loyalties, which reign supreme in the region, cannot be ignored when looking at splits within the group. To take one example, after a 2010 battle known as the First Ramadan Offensive, when al-Shabaab tried and failed to gain control of Mogadishu from AMISOM and TFG troops, cracks began to emerge behind the scenes. Sheikh Mukhtar Robow – a senior al-Shabaab leader and member of the Rahanweyn clan, which makes up around 70 per cent of the militia's foot soldiers – became incensed that his clan bore the brunt of the casualties. 'Robow was said to be livid that his troops were being used as cannon fodder' says Matt Goshko, an official at the Somali Affairs Unit in the U.S. Embassy in Nairobi. 'His guys were reportedly being pushed to the front lines while foreign fighters were at the back. There was no medical help and several sources claimed that wounded fighters were killed after the defeat.'<sup>60</sup>

The mishandling by al-Shabaab of the mid-2011 drought and famine in the region also contributed to clan divisions amongst the leadership. Godane, a member of the Isaaq tribe based in Somaliland, which was hardly affected by the famine, publicly refused Western aid while members of Robow's Rahanweyn clan were starving and dying. Robow's request to accept the aid was ignored, and is likely to have further accentuated tensions with Godane.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>57</sup> Nelly Lahoud, 'The Merger of Al-Shabaab and Qa'idat al Jihad', *CTC Sentinel*, 16 February 2012

<sup>58</sup> Mary Harper, *Getting Somalia Wrong: Faith, War and Hope in a Shattered State* (Zed Books, 2012)

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens interview with Matt Goshko, Nairobi, 2 July 2012

<sup>61</sup> The analysis in this text box first appeared in Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens and Hussein Solomon, 'Factors Responsible for al-Shabaab's Losses in Somalia', *CTC Sentinel*, September 2012

## Falling foul of the leadership?

Hammami's globalised agenda appears to enjoy support from sections of the al-Shabaab leadership, including Mukhtar Robow (also known as Abu Mansur) and Godane. Their support for a broader internationalist role for the group prompted them to embrace al-Qaeda, eventually cementing an official partnership with Ayman al-Zawahiri in February 2012.<sup>62</sup> This support for a globalised agenda is, however, thought by many Western analysts to have caused some conflict between Godane and Robow on one side, and other leading members, such as Hasan Dahir Aweys, on the other who want to focus more on internal Somali issues.<sup>63</sup>

It is likely that Hammami's desire for al-Shabaab to join the global jihad brought him into conflict with al-Shabaab leaders, like Aweys, who regard their original cause as having been hijacked and co-opted by something bigger than they had imagined. There is evidence to suggest that Hammami's constant efforts to internationalise the conflict have sometimes upset al-Shabaab commanders. It is widely thought, for example, that this was the reason behind Hammami's haphazardly released video in March 2012 – "Urgent Message" – where he dramatically claimed his life was in danger.

In the short clip he told viewers:

*I record this message today because I feel that my life may be endangered by Harakat Shabaab al-Mujahideen due to some differences that occurred between us regarding matters of the Shariah and matters of the strategy.*<sup>64</sup>

Hammami was incarcerated by al-Shabaab shortly after the video. It was assumed this was due to his support for al-Qaeda, but it may have been due to his decision to break ranks and publically expose internal troubles within the group. Despite ongoing internal divisions, the al-Shabaab leadership has always maintained a unified public face, and Hammami's decision to violate this principle may well have been the main reason for his punishment.

A series of rebuttals followed from al-Shabaab. The group used Twitter to declare it was 'surprised' by Hammami's video and went on to 'assure our Muslim brothers that #AlAmriki is not endangered by the Mujahideen & our brother still enjoys all the privileges of brotherhood.'<sup>65</sup> Rumours then emerged suggesting Hammami had been killed, but these were dismissed when Hammami released both his autobiography and audio message discussing the Caliphate.

In late October Hammami released a second part of his March 2012 video, in which he claimed that his life remained under threat and that there was a schism forming between foreign fighters such as him and the al-Shabaab leadership. Requesting help from al-Qaeda, he complained that 'they [al-Shabaab leadership] are imprisoning people

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<sup>62</sup> Nelly Lahoud, 'The Merger of Al-Shabaab and Qa'idat al Jihad', *CTC Sentinel*, 16 February 2012

<sup>63</sup> This is a slightly simplistic understanding of the internal dynamics within al-Shabaab, see the text box on p. 20 for more

<sup>64</sup> Abu Mansoor al-Amriki, 'Urgent message', YouTube, March 2012: <http://youtu.be/GAr2srINqks>

<sup>65</sup> Harakat al-Shabaab Twitter account (@HSM Press Office). Both tweets published on 17 March 2012. See: <https://twitter.com/hsmrpress/status/181029197064585218> and <https://twitter.com/hsmrpress/status/181029781574385664>

without any proof of crime and without trial.<sup>66</sup> His current status is unclear, and it may be the case that his idealised vision of a unified global jihadist movement has clashed with the realities of internal clan rivalries in Somalia. It is too early to say what, if any, affect Hammami's apparent plight will have on the group's ability to continue attracting Western jihadists, though if it is indeed the case that he and other foreign fighters have been mistreated, it will be more difficult for al-Shabaab to draw in recruits in the future.

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**66** Abu Mansoor al-Amriki, 'Urgent message', YouTube, October 2012: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VpnrQ4jbGYM&feature=g-all-u>

### 3 The Rise of Omar Hammami and His Outreach to Western Muslims

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Omar Hammami's initial public pronouncements amounted to little more than a few Islamic rap songs and short, generic calls to jihad. That changed in October 2011, when he released a lengthy audio sermon – “Lessons Learned” – which was markedly different in tone.

That much is clear from the early parts of the sermon, where Hammami reflects on his five years of jihad in Somalia and offers critical insights for those sympathetic to the jihadist cause.<sup>67</sup> Western Muslims are undoubtedly his intended audience, and Hammami's experience is highly valued here. Having grown up in the West before migrating to Somalia, he embodies the naivety of many young men who offer themselves up for jihad. Reality seldom meets the expectations of romanticism, and Hammami's lecture offers an important insight into the development of a young idealist turned mature jihadist.

'I've had some time to reflect over my five years or so in Somalia, and I thought that maybe my transition in thinking – from pre-jihad and *hijrah* days to post-jihad and *hijrah* – was something worth discussing for those who haven't gone through a similar experience,' he says. Some of these lessons, he warns, will be 'a bit more blunt and real than we might like.'<sup>68</sup>

This is clearly born of his experience in swapping the charms of his home state, Alabama, for the privations of subsistence in Somalia. Hammami observes that his time in jihad has taught him that the actual necessities of life are very few, mocking the tailored luxuries of Westerners. He marvels at such superfluous accoutrements of modern life as fish knives, waffle makers, and pepper grinders.<sup>69</sup> It is a critique of modernity that resembles the kind of primitive reaction of Sayyid Qutb to the Western culture he found in America.<sup>70</sup> 'Here in Somalia especially, you'll probably never, ever see a microwave, or even a normal oven,' Hammami notes.<sup>71</sup>

His intent is not to scaremonger, but to motivate new recruits. 'The real point is that it's a bit like a Slim-Fast commercial: If I can do it, you can do it too!' he says. 'The real basic necessities of life, you can actually carry them on your back.'<sup>72</sup>

Addressing the personal difficulties of jihad – its physical demands, insecurities, loneliness – is something that al-Qaeda Central has not touched on for years. This is likely because most of their foreign cadres are seasoned fighters who committed to the cause more than a decade ago. But those jihadist chapters that are still actively reaching out to Western sympathisers have found this a most necessary issue to address. There have been anecdotal reports of some Western Muslims offering themselves for jihad, only to find their experience falling short of

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<sup>67</sup> Abu Mansoor al-Amriki, *Lessons Learned*, al-Kataib Media, 7 October 2011

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Sayyid Qutb, *The America I Have Seen: In the Scale of Human Values* (1951)

<sup>71</sup> Abu Mansoor al-Amriki, *Lessons Learned*, al-Kataib Media, 7 October 2011

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

what they had expected. Indeed, it has been reported that one Somali-American was executed in 2010 after deciding he wanted to leave an al-Shabaab training camp and return home.<sup>73</sup>

To address those concerns, AQAP regularly featured a section in *Inspire* magazine which warned potential recruits about the hardships they could expect to encounter. An article entitled "What to expect in Jihad" provides an important overview of the issues new volunteers will face. 'Knowing what to expect in jihad is vital in order to avoid confusion, shock, and even depression. The psychological state of mind one is required to have in jihad is far removed from what we see in jihadi videos,' it warns. 'In simple language, it's not all about the shooting and ambushing of the enemy; rather it is much greater than this.'<sup>74</sup> Among the practical advice it offers is learning the local language and customs, and bringing a friend or companion. All this will help with feelings of loneliness and adjustment.

Hammami appears to mimic this advice. He notes that Western recruits expect to embrace a life of near-constant action where they are 'never going to see another free second.'<sup>75</sup> This is a fallacy. Combat is 'a rare occasion' he confesses, occurring only once or twice a month at best. Indeed, to counter the boredom, Hammami advises that 'the first thing you need to do is you need to get yourself a hobby.'<sup>76</sup>

But he also argues that this downtime is an opportunity, as the lulls between fighting offer time for self-development, learning more about the faith, and performing acts of worship. 'The people that don't get martyrdom live on,' he explains. 'They have a lot of free time that they need to fill with Ibadah [acts of worship], they need to fill it with seeking knowledge and other such beneficial things.'<sup>77</sup>

In highlighting this, Hammami also addresses potential recruits who might feel their current level of religious knowledge or observance is not yet at its required level. He argues:

*For those of you out there who believe that the virtue of seeking knowledge is greater than the virtue of acting upon it, that it's greater than the virtue of fulfilling the individual obligation of liberating the Muslim lands we have out here... you have the opportunity to engage in both of these actions [in the battlefield].<sup>78</sup>*

The message is clear and invested with urgency: act now. Again, this echoes the style found in AQAP's *Inspire* magazine, which essentially aimed to mobilise jihadists in the shortest possible time period. 'Whatever you do, make sure that it doesn't prevent you from coming to the lands of Jihad as soon as possible,' Hammami declares.<sup>79</sup>

Yet, he warns incoming recruits not to arrive with rose-tinted views about the mujahideen. They are 'not angels,' he says, but are 'humans [who] get things wrong as often as they get them right.' Recognising this fact should not dissuade anyone. 'Separate the validity of the cause and the sanctity of those upholding it,' Hammami urges. 'You know the cause is one hundred per cent valid.'<sup>80</sup>

<sup>73</sup> Scott Stewart, 'Fanning the flames of jihad', Stratfor, 22 July 2010

<sup>74</sup> Mukhtar Hassan, 'What to expect in Jihad: Part one', *Inspire*, Summer 2010

<sup>75</sup> Abu Mansoor al-Amriki, Lessons Learned, al-Kataib Media, 7 October 2011

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

## Developing an “ummah consciousness” over other identities

To link Western Muslims with the cause of those in Somalia, Hammami implores his audience to adopt what the authors of this paper will refer to as an “ummah consciousness”. Islamists have used this concept to create a transnational political identity for Muslims, believing that identity and allegiance are determined through the fraternity of faith rather than geography. Even this idea is given a sharp recruitment edge. Merely identifying with the ummah or sympathising with its plight is not enough. ‘Becoming part of the ummah doesn’t happen until you get out of the belly of the beast and you really start living in the crisis zones of the Muslims,’ Hammami explains. ‘You start walking in the poverty, living the oppression, and having that feeling of lost hope. This is what it’s really like to be part of the ummah.’<sup>81</sup>

Among the most important changes, he says, is a recalibration of how Muslims perceive their identity. What is required is the construction of what may be described as an “ummah-centric” identity: Western Muslims must become part of the ummah and cast aside any national or cultural ties. This can only happen, according to Hammami, when one makes *hijrah*. Hammami argues that living in the West corrupts and damages Muslims’ links to the ummah and leads them to overlook their divinely ordained duties to their co-religionists around the globe. Western Muslims, he asserts, can never be true members of the ummah ‘by walking down orderly sidewalks and buying Subway sandwiches on your way back from the gym.’<sup>82</sup>

Muslims who refuse this identity are guilty of embracing a secular outlook. Jihadists have often derided moderate Muslims, employing different memes by which to disparage them. The founder of the UK-based Salafi-jihadi sect al-Muhajiroon, Omar Bakri Mohamed, used to call them ‘chocolate Muslims’, meaning ‘they melt when the heat is on.’ Anwar al-Awlaki similarly described them as ‘Muslims for the sake of the infidels’, meaning their allegiance lies with non-Muslims rather than God. He explained:

*Just like there is a Muslim for the sake of Allah, there is a new phenomenon of a Muslim for the sake of the disbelievers. And just like the Muslim for the sake of Allah does everything thinking what will Allah will think of me, the Muslim for the sake of the disbelievers does everything thinking what the disbelievers would think of him.*<sup>83</sup>

Hammami created a less catchy and more esoteric meme of his own, describing these Muslims as ‘Starfish Muslims’ or ‘Starfish Mo’. Just as some starfish are capable of regenerating severed limbs, these Muslims are so disconnected from the ummah and its concerns that they self-generate their own priorities. For Hammami, this is an outrage. He argues that being Muslim is ‘not about studying for your Master’s Degree or getting a promotion at work.’<sup>84</sup>

Such a level of detachment from the ummah leads Muslims to ‘start to see the problems that are affecting the Muslim world through the perspective of their brand-new Ray-Ban or Oakley sunglasses.’<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Anwar al-Awlaki blog post; originally available at: <http://www.anwar-alawlaki.com/2008/12/11/a-muslim-for-the-sake-of-the-disbelievers/> (It is widely reproduced on the internet.)

<sup>84</sup> Abu Mansoor al-Amriki, *Lessons Learned*, al-Kataib Media, 7 October 2011

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

This is a boilerplate Islamist characterisation of the West, referencing its secular and material culture. The most notable exemplar of this approach was, of course, Sayyid Qutb, who recorded his revulsion at what he saw as the decadent lifestyle of Middle America in *The America I Have Seen*.<sup>86</sup> More recently, the ringleader of the 7/7 terrorist attacks in London, Mohammed Siddique Khan, declared the following in his suicide video:

*Our so-called scholars today are content with their Toyotas and semi-detached houses. They seem to think their responsibilities lie with pleasing the kuffar instead of Allah, so they tell us ludicrous things, like 'you must obey the law of the land.'*<sup>87</sup>

Attacking Islamic scholars in this way is a necessary device for jihadists seeking to project themselves as the sole arbiters of “legitimate” authority and interpretation. They argue that imams counseling against jihad are errant and have broken their covenant with God; only the jihadist worldview is authentic. Hammami has imbibed this mantra to its fullest, as one might expect. ‘I’m here to tell you that it doesn’t matter who your mentor is, it doesn’t really matter who taught you Islam and who wears the robes of a scholar,’ he says. ‘The truth is plain for everyone to see, but it’s only the brave who can go forth and embrace it.’<sup>88</sup>

Hammami is at his most potent when empowering and imploring his audience to become autonomous proponents of jihad while discarding existing religious strictures. Just as he is derisive towards moderate Muslims, he displays similar disdain for moderate scholars, characterising them as part of a corrupt and hierarchical ‘Vatican system.’<sup>89</sup> This strategy of attacking established religious authorities does carry some risks: people generally conform to those in authority, and young jihadist sympathisers risk being seen as outcasts and renegades. To reassure his audience, Hammami reminds them of a hadith where the Prophet Muhammad explains how his companions were seen as errant, strange and regressive for embracing Islam’s monotheism in the context of polytheistic, pre-Islamic Arabia. Hammami goes on to note that when one of the Prophet’s companions challenged the dominant Makkan tribes shortly after converting, he was not admonished for his efforts. ‘The Prophet didn’t grab him [his companion, Abu Dharr] and lecture him for being an ignorant radical who doesn’t understand the sacred [Islamic] science,’ he explains. ‘He didn’t tell Abu Dharr that he will be the cause of the revocation of all the Companions’ Green Cards in Mecca, he didn’t tell him that Abu Dharr is going to be the cause for all them going to jail.’<sup>90</sup> The implicit message is clear and powerful.

## Faith necessitates action

Just as Hammami echoes the general Islamist position that identification with the ummah is not enough, so too the general concept of faith is found to be insufficient. Faith cannot be passive, and it demands action. This theme was originally elucidated by Abdullah Azzam, who argued that defending Muslim lands is the

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<sup>86</sup> Sayyid Qutb, *The America I Have Seen: In the Scale of Human Values* (1951)

<sup>87</sup> Mohammed Siddique Khan, ‘The last will of Mohammed Siddique Khan’, as-Sahab Media

<sup>88</sup> Abu Mansoor al-Amriki, *Lessons Learned*, al-Kataib Media, 7 October 2011

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

first requirement of any believer after faith itself.<sup>91</sup> Hammami echoes this, declaring 'we have to put the liberation of the Muslim lands first. Jihad and *hijrah* have to be the first order of the day.'<sup>92</sup> He continues:

*You're claiming to be supporting the Jihad and you're claiming to be supporting the ummah, but yet you still haven't thrown your lot in with the rest of the ummah. So basically, what I'm trying to say here is that waiting for the Khilafah to spring up and then flying-in in style is not really a means of support for the Muslims in the Muslim ummah. And waiting for the Mujahideen to fail and then going back to your normal life because you never compromised anything is also not a real form of support.*<sup>93</sup>

He is particularly scornful of Western Muslim preoccupations with sometimes esoteric matters of faith, such as whether the hadith command Muslims to wear their trousers above the ankle, or what the ideal length of one's beard should be. He is almost insulted that Muslims in the West obsess over these matters when others are facing the urgent disaster of conflict all around them. 'Every part of our religion is due its rights and all matters of our religion are important,' he concedes. '[But] it's necessary for us to prioritise, especially in these times of crisis.'<sup>94</sup>

Among those American Somalis thought to be close to Hammami is Cabdulaahi Ahmed Faarax, a naturalised American citizen who is currently in Somalia and wanted by the FBI for providing material support to al-Shabaab.<sup>95</sup> According to the Department of Justice and FBI he had fought previously for al-Shabaab in 2007, before returning to Minnesota where he sought to recruit local youth to fight against Ethiopian troops.<sup>96</sup> He returned to Somalia in 2009, and has been seen in photographs with Omar Hammami dated from late 2011 and early 2012.

Faarax also maintained a personal Facebook page which he updated from Somalia and posted pictures of himself with Hammami, referring to him as his 'brother'.<sup>97</sup> Until the page was taken down he posted regular messages which suggested that he had fully embraced Hammami's global jihadist vision. This included one that called for jihad against America:

*I swear by Allah, America you will pay every drop of blood you shed. For Hiroshima, Chicago will pay. For Baghdad, New York will burn. For Vietnam, the redneck Texans will be gassed. For Torabora [Afghanistan] the rocky mountains [Colorado] will ruin. America, as you terrorized you will be terrorized.*<sup>98</sup>

He also posted in support of influential jihadist ideologue, Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi – writing 'may Allah protect him, I love him for the sake of Allah'<sup>99</sup> – and wrote of his admiration for core jihadist precepts such as *al wala' wal bara'* [loyalty to Muslims and enmity toward non-believers], jihad and *tawheed* [the unity of God].<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Abdullah Azzam, 'Defence of Muslim lands: the first requirement after Iman', 1984

<sup>92</sup> Abu Mansoor al-Amriki, *Lessons Learned*, al-Kataib Media, 7 October 2011

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> See Appendix

<sup>96</sup> 'Terror Charges Unsealed in Minnesota Against Eight Defendants, Justice Department Announces', U.S. Department of Justice Press Release, November 2009; Criminal Complaint in the Case of United States of America V. Cabdulaahi Ahmed Faarax, Abdiweli Yassin Isse, 8 October 2009

<sup>97</sup> This Facebook page has since been taken down and archived copies of his posts are in the authors' possession

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<sup>99</sup> This Facebook page has since been taken down and archived copies of his posts are in the authors' possession

<sup>100</sup> For more on these terms, see Jarret Brachman, *Global Jihadism: Theory and Practice* (Routledge, 2008)

Omar Hammami's current status in Somalia is uncertain, as is his position within al-Shabaab. As the group has lost most of its territory in the country to AMISOM, it has splintered with many members going into hiding. Whether or not Hammami will continue in his role as a military commander and English-language propagandist in the wake of al-Shabaab's recent troubles is unclear. However, his output thus far has provided researchers with a useful picture of how al-Qaeda and its sympathisers and affiliates continue to formulate arguments and ideas with the express intention of mobilising Western Muslims to act, sometimes violently, against their respective governments.

## 4 Al-Shabaab's Propaganda War and Alternative Media

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**W**hile al-Shabaab principally uses its media output to justify its actions and give followers updates on the group's progress, it also produces material which is specifically aimed at Western Muslims. Like a number of al-Qaeda affiliates, it has recognised the importance of establishing alternatives to the mainstream media. Since the advent of the printing press, movements have sought to create their own media in order to provide alternative narratives to its target audiences.<sup>101</sup> This attracts new recruits and strengthens the resolve of existing members by providing a conduit through which they can interact with more senior and respected individuals within the organisation.

Al-Shabaab has pursued this alternative media strategy by producing English-language videos, presented as news reports and press releases, and by building a strong presence on Twitter, the micro-blogging site. This section explicates the priorities and goals of this alternative media strategy by analysing a number of the 'news reports' and providing a quantitative analysis of the group's Twitter output between December 2011 and April 2012. Through this propaganda, al-Shabaab attempts to demonstrate that it remains an effective and united force for carrying out the will of God by implementing Shariah and fighting against the enemies of Islam.

### News reports and press releases

Al-Shabaab's media production group is called al-Kataib, and it employs the slick and professional production values used in many jihadist videos. These videos aim to present the group's version of events, motivate recruits and establish an alternative narrative. Where the mainstream media might report losses, al-Shabaab records victories.

Consider, for example, a video released in November 2011 called "The Burundian Bloodbath: Battle of Daynile." This presents a battle between al-Shabaab and Burundian AMISOM soldiers in Daynile, a district in Somalia. In contrast to mainstream media reports claiming that al-Shabaab was struggling to control the area, al-Kataib alleged a massacre of the 'African Crusaders and their Western masters.'<sup>102</sup> The report also attempted to fuel the idea that the West is engaged in a concerted 'war on Islam'. Much is made, for example, of "Made in France" tags found on the armoured vests of dead Burundian soldiers. Additionally, among the interviewees is al-Shabaab spokesman Sheikh Ali Mohammed Ali Raage, who declares that: 'We also want to let the Muslims know that this is a war between Eman [belief] and Kufr, between Islam and Christianity.' In order to illustrate his point, he holds up a bible and cross taken from the bodies of the Burundian soldiers and says: 'What you see here is a Christian cross and a bible. They carry these two along with them as we carry the book of Allah and the Sunnah of His Messenger.' The holy nature of this conflict, according to Raage, means that all of the world's Muslims are obligated to join the

<sup>101</sup> Lauren Kessler, *The Dissident Press: Alternative Journalism in American History* (Sage, 1984)

<sup>102</sup> 'The Burundian Bloodbath: Battle of Daynile', al-Kataib Media, November 2011

fight: 'Since the battle is between the defenders of this cross and bible, and those defending the Holy Quran, it is obligatory upon the Muslim people as a whole to stand by and support the Holy Quran.'

As well as short news reports, al-Kataib has also begun to produce longer, documentary-style films which follow the same London-accented reporter as he demonstrates how al-Shabaab's implementation of Shariah has improved sections of Somali society. The first of these, a 45-minute video entitled "In the Shade of the Shariah", shows a visit to the south-central Somali city of Baidoa, which al-Shabaab captured in early 2009 after fierce fighting with Ethiopian troops.<sup>103</sup> 'With the escalation of the atrocities of the Ethiopian crusaders against the innocent Muslim population at the time,' declares the reporter, 'the mujahideen decided to take action.' Al-Shabaab troops are presented as the saviours of the city, and footage of bullet-riddled, desperate slums taken after the capture of the city in 2009 is contrasted with more recent footage of bustling street markets and improved infrastructure. Locals proclaim that not only is business booming, but Shariah has ensured that crime is virtually non-existent. 'Baidoa is completely safe today,' says one business owner. 'We remember that there used to be a checkpoint in the middle of the city where people were robbed daily...today however, no one can touch someone else's belongings...and that is because of the Islamic Shariah that the mujahideen have established in this city.'<sup>104</sup>

Al-Shabaab's engagement with Western Muslims also occurs through the production of English-language press releases. These releases are sent to Western journalists and researchers who are known to follow the group and include reports from key battles or information on individuals who have been "martyred" by AMISOM forces. It offers the leadership of al-Shabaab a unique channel through which it can react to current events which concern Somalia and the global jihad.

One of the first press releases issued by the group provided the details of the martyrdom of Bilal al-Barawi, a foreign al-Shabaab fighter with Lebanese roots who grew up in London.<sup>105</sup> Not all al-Shabaab deaths are reported in this way, underscoring the significance of al-Barawi's glorification by the group. He embodied the ideal foreign fighter and his death was used to show that 'the Martyrdom of Abu Hafsa [al-Barawi], much like the Martyrdom of many other Mujahideen before him, shall not hinder the progress of Jihad; rather it is the blood of such Martyrs that irrigates the path of Jihad and provides a renewed impetus to the determination of the Mujahideen.'<sup>106</sup>

This was not the only press release to involve the United Kingdom, and two that have been produced in 2012 appear to be concerned specifically with events in London. The first, from February 2012, is a reaction to the London Conference on Somalia that took place that month. The conference, made up of senior officials from all over the world, including U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, sought to bring governments together in order to discuss the future of Somalia and ways to end the ongoing war with al-Shabaab. For al-Shabaab, the conference was nothing more than an attempt to expand foreign control over the country and 'bolster the invading African forces that are prolonging the instability in Somalia'.<sup>107</sup> The conference was

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<sup>103</sup> Al-Shabaab lost control of Baidoa to AU troops in late February 2012.

<sup>104</sup> 'In the shade of the Sharia', al-Kataib Media, June 2012

<sup>105</sup> 'PRESS RELEASE: A Drone Strike Pronounces a Martyr!', HSM Press Office, 21 January 2011

<sup>106</sup> 'PRESS RELEASE: A Drone Strike Pronounces a Martyr!', HSM Press Office, 21 January 2011

<sup>107</sup> 'PRESS RELEASE: London Conference aimed at carving up the Somalia Nation', HSM Press Office, 23 February 2012

presented as a meeting of Crusaders plotting to further subjugate and humiliate Muslims. Britain was a specific target of al-Shabaab's anger:

*Britain already provides military advice and training to the African invaders and now with the increased support from Britain in the form of logistical support as well as financial aid, we will see to it that the 'coordinated approach' proposed by Britain does not succeed under the current conditions in Somalia and the delusory attempts aimed at carving up the Somali nation do not materialize.*<sup>108</sup>

Britain is again attacked in a March 2012 press release, which addressed attempts by the government to extradite a jihadist preacher named Abu Qatada to his native Jordan to face terrorism charges. The Abu Qatada case is of great interest to Western, and particularly British, jihadists who see his treatment as an example of Western attempts to destroy Islam. Al-Shabaab's decision to focus on this shows an awareness of issues that concern Western Muslims, and may even indicate the involvement of British citizens in the production of its media output.

## **Al-Shabaab and the war on Twitter**

As already discussed, al-Shabaab's English-language output has several aims: to convey its narrative and ideology to potential Western recruits; to present al-Shabaab as a legitimate and capable arbiter of God's will; to show unity within the group; and to provide followers with a trusted alternative media source. This strategy echoes that of al-Qaeda and its affiliates by attempting to control and manipulate the flow of information about the group's fortunes, while also enticing the targeted audience into supporting its cause.

To this end, James Forest has developed a six-pronged analytical framework for exploring which aspects of information control matter most to leaders of al-Qaeda.<sup>109</sup> These analytical categories are:

- religious authority;
- strategic authority;
- group integrity and cohesion;
- competing voices;
- operational capacity;
- relevance.

Forest argues that messages must be 'credible and legitimate'; he also broadly elaborates the concept of 'influence warfare' as drawing attention to the enemy's mistakes and offering a more compelling alternative narrative. While Forest has developed this framework in order to explore the strategy of al-Qaeda Central, it is broad enough to apply to other organisations that consider themselves affiliates of al-Qaeda, such as al-Shabaab.

Al-Shabaab posted its first tweet on 7 December 2011. It was in Arabic and translates to 'In the name of God the merciful.' The description of the Twitter user is: 'Harakat Al-Shabaab Al Mujahideen is an Islamic movement that governs South & Cen. Somalia & part of the global struggle towards the revival of Islamic Khilaafa,' with its location listed

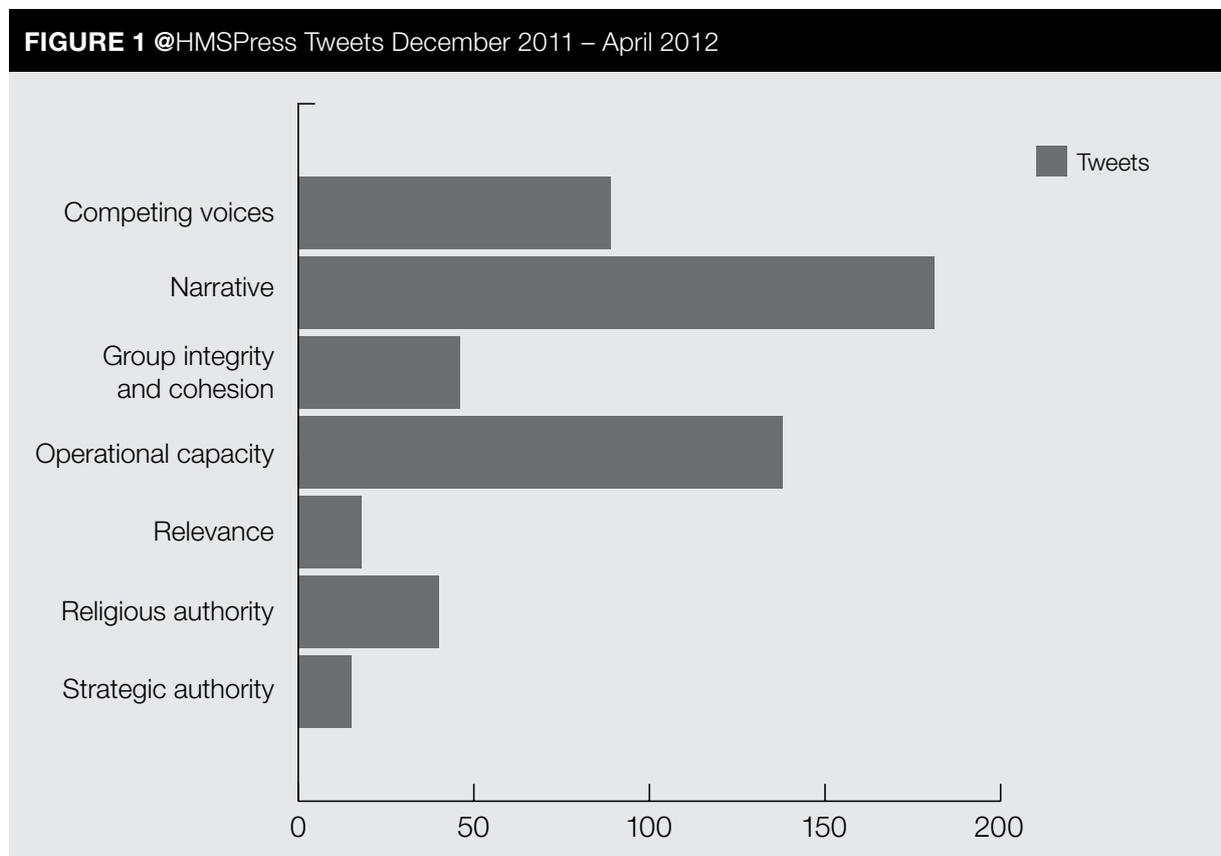
<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> James J.F. Forest, 'Perception Challenges Faced by Al-Qaeda on the Battlefield of Influence Warfare', *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (2012), pp. 8-22

as Somalia. The account has the title HSM Press Office and posts under the handle @HSMPress. As of 20 September 2012, the account has 15,780 followers and follows no other users.

Unlike al-Shabaab's video output, the high volume of Twitter messages has allowed for a quantitative analysis which reveals some of the key concerns of the group's media wing. The first set of findings presents an analysis of @HSMPress from its creation until 30 April 2012. The aim of each tweet is assessed here based on an interpretation of the core message being delivered. The tweets are then coded into seven analytical categories of information control, including the six developed by James Forest.<sup>110</sup> The additional analytical category, narrative promotion, has been crafted to fill a void that the other six categories do not address. This category relates to the overarching general understanding of the conflict that al-Shabaab is trying to promote.

The graph below, “@HSMPress Tweets Dec 2011 – April 2012” (Figure 1), shows the frequency of each category of influence derived from every tweet by @HSMPress from the creation of the account through the end of April 2012. @HSMPress tweeted a total of 541 times in the period examined. Of those tweets, there were fifteen tweets that were not coded because they were either not in English or they were a tweet in response to another user where there was not enough information to discern the message. Each category of influence will be defined and examples of tweets that fit into that category will be provided. Analysis is provided at the end of this section which will contextualise the data presented in the graph.<sup>111</sup>



<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> The authors can provide access to the data set, which includes coded screenshot images of the Tweets, upon request.

## Group Integrity and Cohesion

Promoting group integrity and cohesion is about ensuring that followers trust and respect al-Shabaab as a group promoting the interests of all Muslims.<sup>112</sup> This includes, for example, the idea that the group cannot be seen as corrupt, favouring certain members over others, or engaging in criminal activity.<sup>113</sup> @HSMPress tweeted to promote the perception of group integrity and cohesion 46 times, around 8.5 per cent of their Twitter-based messaging.

Tweets within this category show that al-Shabaab is trying to present an image of a just and honourable organisation. This is evident in tweets where the group promised that their War Statistics Office would publish via Twitter the personal details of slain Burundian soldiers, at the request of the deceased soldiers' families.<sup>114</sup> Al-Shabaab followed this initial post with a litany of tweets featuring the Burundian soldiers' identification cards, with names and dates of birth, claiming this was done for the families of the dead because the Burundian government was incapable of providing the families with any information.<sup>115</sup> In similar tweets, the group has described how it treats its prisoners, explaining that it provides medical care through its paramedic teams for dying enemy soldiers.<sup>116</sup> This messaging is an attempt to appeal to supporters by displaying a level of humanity and good will. By using terminology such as 'press office', 'paramedic team' and 'War Statistics Office', the group is also projecting an impression of structural cohesion.

Al-Shabaab has also promoted the unity of the group and solidarity with other groups, for example by tweeting messages that highlight allegiances with certain clans.<sup>117</sup> It has also highlighted al-Shabaab's own organisational strength, attempting to dismiss claims it is divided.<sup>118</sup> To show its dedication towards Muslims in Somalia, it tweeted several times regarding the construction of schools, promoting education as a priority.<sup>119</sup>

Part of promoting cohesion is also responding to reports from others that suggest fractures within the organisation. In March 2012, al-Shabaab responded to the video featuring Omar Hammami, where he claimed that he was under threat from al-Shabaab, by tweeting it was surprised that the video had surfaced and that his life was not in danger.<sup>120</sup> Al-Shabaab later tweeted that reports of Hammami's arrest

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<sup>112</sup> James J.F. Forest, 'Perception Challenges Faced by Al-Qaeda on the Battlefield of Influence Warfare', *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 6, No. 1, pp. 8–22 (2012)

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>114</sup> @HSMPress Tweet: 'Details of #Burundian soldiers published by HSM War Statistics Office (WSO) with promise of details of more slain soldiers to be published', 12 December 2011, 8:41: <http://twitter.com/HSMPress/status/146147685748060160>

<sup>115</sup> @HSMPress Tweet: 'PR: With lack of verification from #Burundian Army, family members contacted HSM in an appeal to confirm the fate of missing soldiers', 12 December 2011, 8:31: <http://twitter.com/HSMPress/statuses/146145225180590080>

<sup>116</sup> @HSMPress Tweet: 'One of the PoWs is severely injured, with a bullet wound to the head, & is currently being tended to by HSM paramedic team', 12 March 2012, 15:21: <http://twitter.com/HSMPress/status/178500882789445632>

<sup>117</sup> @HSMPress Tweet: 'Coming from all regions the entire #Gaaljecel tribe has officially entered into pledge of Allegiance with the Mujahideen', 1 January 2012, 16:20: <http://twitter.com/HSMPress/status/153510916493803520>

<sup>118</sup> @HSMPress Tweet: '@nazanimoshi Yes do & HSM is united unlike the crippled TFG militia. A fragmented org. couldn't possibly confront so many adversaries', 13 December 2011, 11:41: <https://twitter.com/HSMPress/statuses/146555373304819712>

<sup>119</sup> @HSMPress Tweet: 'While in control of #Baladweyne the Mujahideen have helped establish three universities, 550 Madrassas & 150 primary & secondary schools', 2 January 2012, 15:26: <http://twitter.com/HSMPress/status/153859662528262144>

<sup>120</sup> @HSMPress Tweet: 'We assure our Muslims brothers that #AlAmriki is not endangered by the Mujahideen & our brother still enjoys all the privileges of brotherhood', 17 March 2012, 6:50: <http://twitter.com/HSMPress/status/181029781574385664>

were false and were created '...purely for propaganda purposes.'<sup>121</sup> Calculated responses such as this from the group are essential in maintaining the image of a cohesive organisation.

### *Narrative Promotion*

A central component of al-Shabaab's Twitter messaging has been the promotion of its narrative. This can be defined as messaging which highlights the presence and actions of AMISOM and Ethiopian forces in Somalia, as well as the actions of Western governments and international organisations such as the UN and Red Cross. This messaging uses a critical tone towards these foreign nations and organisations and contends that their involvement in Somalia is the cause of many, if not all, societal problems. Above all, this messaging communicates to al-Shabaab supporters that the real threat is foreign invasion and foreign control of their government. Additionally, this narrative promotes the failure and illegitimacy of the TFG as a governing authority in Somalia. Al-Shabaab tweeted to promote this narrative 181 times, approximately 33.5 per cent of its Twitter-based messaging.

There is a dichotomy here. Al-Shabaab wants to suggest that the greatest threat it faces is from foreign intervention, while also trying to maintain the aura of being in complete control of Somalia (failing at this would counteract its messaging in the operational capacity category). Tweets in this category often take the form of mocking foreign troops, Western states, and international organisations, as well as highlighting perceived human rights abuses by those entities. Al-Shabaab highlights the impact that foreign intervention has had, not on its own capacity, but on the quality of life of Somali civilians. For example, the organisation tweeted that one Kenyan aerial bombing killed a 67-year-old man, destroying his home and injuring his daughter.<sup>122</sup>

The group has also connected the presence of troops from other African nations in Somalia as an extension of Western interests. It tweeted with the hashtag '#BlackColonialism' that these nations have capitulated to the interests of Western imperialism.<sup>123</sup> It also draws links whenever possible between African forces and the West, for example by tweeting that one of the Ugandan commanders was a British citizen from London.<sup>124</sup> This tweet was followed by an image of the man's British driving license. The group also responded to the February 2012 Conference on Somalia held in London by tweeting that Muslims have long rejected British imperialism and that any renewed attempts are in vain.<sup>125</sup>

One approach to diminish trust in the TFG has been to question its commitment to Islamic ideals. For example, al-Shabaab tweeted that once TFG fighters sobered up from their qaat binges, they would find

<sup>121</sup> @HSMPress Tweet: '@leeferran All reports of #AlAmrik's arrest are false and intended purely for propaganda purposes. Beware of such inaccurate reports', 19 March 2012, 7:14: <https://twitter.com/HSMPress/status/181760605831692290>

<sup>122</sup> @HSMPress Tweet: 'bombs dropped from #Kenyan aircraft pulverized the home of poor 67-year old man & his family. He died & his only daughter is severely injured', 8 December 2011, 6:25: <http://twitter.com/HSMPress/status/144784697795420161>

<sup>123</sup> @HSMPress Tweet: 'By invading Somalia, E. African nations subserviently succumbed to the interests of Western imperialism at their own peril #BlackColonialism', 18 January 2012, 7:24: <http://twitter.com/HSMPress/status/159657386360053763>

<sup>124</sup> @HSMPress Tweet: 'According to info. obtained by HSM intelligence department, one of the commanders killed was a British citizen from #London #JihadDispatches', 21 January 2012, 6:38: <http://twitter.com/HSMPress/status/160732949803827200>

<sup>125</sup> @HSMPress Tweet: 'Britain must understand that the Muslims have long rejected British Imperialism and the futility of their renewed attempt is all too obvious', 13 February 2012, 11:30: <http://twitter.com/HSMPress/status/169141380466225152>

that the war had turned in al-Shabaab's favour.<sup>126</sup> It has also tweeted examples of the TFG being rejected by the people of Somalia, in one case stating that the TFG Prime Minister visited Baladweyne only to find that no one there was interested in what he had to say.<sup>127</sup> It also promotes the idea that the areas controlled by the TFG are not safe and are more prone to violence. For example, it highlighted the actions of a lone gunman who stormed a TFG office in Mogadishu and carried out a shooting spree, saying this was only possible because the TFG is incapable of providing security in the areas it controls.<sup>128</sup>

## Relevance

Promoting relevance is a pre-emptive response to the concern that one day an organisation's supporters will no longer view it as effective or capable of achieving meaningful goals.<sup>129</sup> The issue of durability is one of the biggest challenges facing the jihadist movement, including al-Shabaab.<sup>130</sup> While many of the tweets in other categories could arguably be interpreted as promoting relevance, the tweets categorised here are explicitly concerned with the organisation's attempt to stay meaningful in the mind of its audience. Eighteen tweets were explicitly concerned with organisational relevance, about 3.3 per cent of al-Shabaab's overall Twitter messaging.

This form of messaging has often reported on large gatherings of Somalis in support of the group, typically accompanied by a photo.<sup>131</sup> Al-Shabaab has also promoted its relevance by mocking attempts by the American government to shut down the Twitter account.<sup>132</sup> In highlighting these attempts, al-Shabaab is promoting the idea that the U.S. government perceives it as a real threat. For its supporters this is a powerful message concerning both its potency and durability. It has also framed itself as the only entity that is moving Somalia forward, highlighting and describing post-conflict public policies. In support of this, the group has tweeted that its cartographic team will soon be redrawing the geographic boundaries of Somalia that were originally imposed by colonialists.<sup>133</sup>

## Religious Authority

This category of messaging is concerned with promoting the idea that the organisation is serving God's will and that its members are true holy warriors.<sup>134</sup> Al-Shabaab has tweeted to promote its religious authority

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**126** Qaat is an intoxicating plant chewed in the Horn of Africa. @HSMPress Tweet: 'By the time the intoxicated #TFG militia has sobered up from their excessive Qaat sessions, the scales of war would have turned rather significantly!', 8 December 2011, 8:02: <http://twitter.com/HSMPress/status/144689146286440448>

**127** @HSMPress Tweet: 'TFG PM visits Baladweyne only to find that none of the residents wanted to hear what he had to say. Disappointed, he flew back to #Mogadishu', 6 January 2012, 11:50: <http://twitter.com/HSMPress/statuses/155375719420141568>

**128** @HSMPress Tweet: 'The identity of the gunman is not yet known or the motive behind the shooting spree, but points to lack of security in TFG-controlled areas', 29 December 2011, 6:41: <http://twitter.com/HSMPress/status/152398830434926592>

**129** James J.F. Forest, 'Perception Challenges Faced by Al-Qaeda on the Battlefield of Influence Warfare', *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (2012), pp. 8–22

**130** Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism: Revised and Expanded Edition* (Columbia University Press, 2006)

**131** @HSMPress Tweet: 'Thousands of Muslims gathered outside Mogadishu to welcome the Bay'ah of the Mujahideen in Somalia with Al-Qaeda pic.twitter.com/pHmwsPqd', 13 February 2012, 10:08: <http://twitter.com/HSMPress/status/169120678493171713>

**132** @HSMPress Tweet: 'How many accounts would #US government be able to close before realising the futility of their attempt? They need a team now to monitor HSM!', 20 December 2011, 19:28: <http://twitter.com/HSMPress/status/149209461947498496>

**133** @HSMPress Tweet: 'HSM cartographers will soon redraw the geographical boundaries carved up by inebriated colonial masters in preparation for Islamic Khilaafa', 4 March 2012, 00:22: <http://twitter.com/HSMPress/status/176221168930529280>

**134** James J.F. Forest, 'Perception Challenges Faced by Al-Qaeda on the Battlefield of Influence Warfare', *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (2012), pp. 8–22

forty times in the period examined, around 7.4 per cent of its Twitter messaging.

Utilising the interactive aspect of the platform, al-Shabaab has promoted its religious authority by responding to inquiries or comments of other users regarding the nature of Islam. These tweets can be simple responses to users that assert positive phrases about God.<sup>135</sup> They can also be conversational but adopt a combative or hostile tone when defending al-Shabaab's beliefs against criticisms levelled by other users.<sup>136</sup> These tweets may offer religious instruction, such as obligations regarding prayer during a solar eclipse.<sup>137</sup> They also praise the martyrdom of fighters, where the focus of the message is on the religious dimension of their act rather than on operational matters.<sup>138</sup>

These tweets have also expressed the group's commitment to both its local and global goals. Al-Shabaab has tweeted expressions that it will never compromise on the goal of establishing a government based on Shariah law in Somalia.<sup>139</sup> Globally, it has communicated the obligation of all Muslims to engage in jihad against God's enemies.<sup>140</sup> It has also stated that educating Muslims on this obligation is part of its role.<sup>141</sup>

Al-Shabaab has also highlighted the religious aspect of its merger with al-Qaeda, stating that with the leadership of Ayman al-Zawahiri they will be able to achieve the implementation of Shariah without concessions.<sup>142</sup> Promoting its ambitions outside of Somalia, al-Shabaab propagandists have also tweeted in reference to the al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem, saying they will one day claim it as their own.<sup>143</sup>

## Operational Capacity

The promotion of operational capacity targets 'confidence and competence,' instilling the idea within supporters that the organisation comprises serious warriors.<sup>144</sup> Al-Shabaab has tweeted about operational capacity 138 times, about 25.5 per cent of its overall tweets. This constitutes the second most frequent category of messaging. Effectively, this category of messaging is where the group presents itself as an organisation on the march, boasting about specific attacks, describing victories, communicating threats and demonstrating its strength as a fighting force.

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- 135** @HSMPress Tweet: '@7ekMatYar Ameen, Insha-Allah, Allah, the Almighty, is our protector!', 16 December 2011, 16:42: <https://twitter.com/HSMPress/status/147778651579105280>
- 136** @HSMPress Tweet: '@Hodiyana Perhaps we are unreconstructed fundamentalists who believe that fundamentals of Islam do not need to be reformed to suit modernity', 10 January 2012, 11:57: <https://twitter.com/HSMPress/statuses/156766625717170177>
- 137** @HSMPress Tweet: 'Lunar eclipse visible here in #Somalia too. According to Sunnah of Prophet (PBUH) Muslims offer congregational prayers until eclipse lasts..', 10 December 2011, 11:46: <http://twitter.com/HSMPress/status/145529748163014658>
- 138** @HSMPress Tweet: 'Brother Bilaal Al-Barjawi, a native of Lebanon also known as Abu Hafsa, attained Martyrdom as a result of the strikes as Allah had ordained', 21 January 2012, 18:12: <http://twitter.com/HSMPress/status/160846334398697472>
- 139** @HSMPress Tweet: 'We will not, at any point in time, compromise on our beliefs & goals of establishing governance according to Islamic Shari'ah #LDNSomalia', 23 February 2012, 13:56: <http://twitter.com/HSMPress/status/172681309079093249>
- 140** @HSMPress Tweet: 'Sheikh, Jihad is an individual obligation; so all Muslims, and Somalis in particular, must march forth for Jihad against the enemy of Allah', 20 March 2012, 20:14: <http://twitter.com/hsmprss/status/181836122375200768>
- 141** @HSMPress Tweet: 'To propound, propagate and promote the forgotten obligation of Jihad among the Muslims around the globe is the essence of #JihadPhilosophy', 24 January 2012, 18:23: <http://twitter.com/HSMPress/status/161876680783298561>
- 142** @HSMPress Tweet: 'With Sheikh Ayman now at the helm, Mujahideen aim to establish Shariah of Allah without conditions, without negotiations, without compromise', 12 February 2012, 10:13: <http://twitter.com/HSMPress/status/168638787050684416>
- 143** @HSMPress Tweet: 'Patience O' Aqsa...We are coming!', 12 February 2012, 10:18: <http://twitter.com/HSMPress/status/168640102032097281>
- 144** James J.F. Forest, 'Perception Challenges Faced by Al-Qaeda on the Battlefield of Influence Warfare', *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (2012), pp. 8–22

One popular form this type of messaging has taken is the description of al-Shabaab attacks on foreign or TFG forces. These descriptions usually include how the attack was carried out, what types of arms were used, and how many casualties were incurred by the opposing side. For example, an attack on Ethiopian soldiers in early January 2012 was described as an IED attack on a military vehicle that left two Ethiopians dead and four seriously injured.<sup>145</sup> Al-Shabaab also describes more symmetrical engagements with the enemy, in one instance recounting attacks on Ethiopian bases where they were able to kill seventy-four soldiers.<sup>146</sup> Al-Shabaab has also described asymmetric operations against softer targets, including police stations and government buildings. One such attack against a TFG police compound was described as employing a remote-controlled car bomb, killing thirteen and wounding twenty.<sup>147</sup>

Through highlighting a variety of attacks that utilise different war-fighting tactics, the group is able to demonstrate its operational capacity to strike in a multitude of circumstances. It is consequently able to show that despite its relatively modest numbers, it is able to engage the enemy on equal terms while retaining the ability to damage it with terrorist tactics.

### *Strategic Authority*

Efforts to promote the idea of strategic authority focus on messaging that demonstrates the organisation is a 'competent vanguard' of the Islamist movement.<sup>148</sup> Al-Shabaab tweeted about strategic authority 15 times, making it the least frequent category of messaging, accounting for only 2.8 per cent of the tweets examined.

Where al-Shabaab has promoted its strategic authority, it has generally been in a defensive manner. Tweets in this category typically provided context for events, without which the group's actions could have been interpreted negatively by supporters. For example, to contextualise territorial losses that it sustained in January 2012, the group tweeted that victory and defeat cannot be viewed solely through the prism of territorial control, a factor that represented a strategic misunderstanding by its enemies.<sup>149</sup>

Similarly, when al-Shabaab had to withdraw forces from Baladweyne in late December 2011, the retreat was described as a measure to stop Ethiopian shelling of civilian areas.<sup>150</sup> The retreat was therefore projected as an altruistic step designed to minimise threats to civilians. This communicates a level of competence and compassion to its supporters: the retreat was a calculated decision, not an action taken out of fear or failure. Al-Shabaab has also described its reasoning for

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<sup>145</sup> @HSMPress Tweet: 'IED destroys an #Ethiopian military vehicle in #Baladweyne; 2 Ethiopians confirmed dead so far and at least 4 seriously injured', 4 January 2012, 20:51: <http://twitter.com/HSMPress/status/154666305167953920>

<sup>146</sup> @HSMPress Tweet: 'Mujahideen field commanders in Yurkud confirm 74 Ethiopian soldiers killed & more than 100 injured in today's fierce battle #JihadDispatches', 10 March 2012, 10:47: <http://twitter.com/HSMPress/status/178431868977418240>

<sup>147</sup> @HSMPress Tweet: 'A remote-controlled car bomb inside the largest TFG Police compound kills 13 apostate soldiers and injures more than 20 #JihadDispatches', 17 February 2012, 17:01: <http://twitter.com/HSMPress/status/170553585405403136>

<sup>148</sup> James J.F. Forest, 'Perception Challenges Faced by Al-Qaeda on the Battlefield of Influence Warfare', *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (2012), pp. 8-22

<sup>149</sup> @HSMPress Tweet: 'Shallow understanding & military ineptitude allow one to declare victory/defeat in terms territory lost/gained. HSM holds strategic advantage', 1 January 2012, 8:23: <http://twitter.com/HSMPress/status/153511750841540608>

<sup>150</sup> @HSMPress Tweet: 'Sheik Abu Mus'ab's declaration comes owing to indiscriminate Ethiopian shelling of heavily-populated city & mounting civilian-combatant ratio', 31 December 2011, 3:39: <http://twitter.com/HSMPress/statuses/153077812398538754>

certain types of operations and in one tweet described night raids as the preferred method of attack on the Kenyan Defence Forces (KDF). It argued that this type of attack imposed additional psychological trauma on KDF soldiers, who were already afraid of them.<sup>151</sup>

## Competing Voices

The goal of influence warfare has been described as keeping your audience from turning to a competing source of information.<sup>152</sup> This can be done by promoting a compelling narrative as well as by criticising other sources of information directly. While shaping perception in this arena often involves competing against other voices in the Muslim world,<sup>153</sup> the nature of the audience considered here (English-speaking Muslims) means that the primary competition for al-Shabaab's information efforts are Western media agencies. In this form of messaging, the group openly mocks or disparages Western media outlets, asserting that only al-Shabaab has the real facts. While it comes as no surprise that al-Shabaab seeks to delegitimise Western media, it is still important to view this as part of a broader media strategy.<sup>154</sup> Al-Shabaab had 92 tweets of this type, or 17 per cent of their messaging.

The group has taken both a general and a specific approach to its criticism of Western media. General criticisms describe Western sources of information as inherently corrupt and part of the "war on Islam". For example, in response to criticism the group tweeted that '... Western Media has spent years inculcating derogatory anti-Islam views into ur [sic] minds & ur [sic] too credulous to question what ur [sic] fed.'<sup>155</sup> It has also branded all Western media as a propaganda arm of the United States, arguing that it suppresses the truth.<sup>156</sup> In promoting its own supposedly dispassionate and objective news, the group says that it is simply relaying a description of the events as they happen.<sup>157</sup> Al-Shabaab also uses Twitter to offer specific and rapid rebuttals of events as they occur. Following reports that an attack in Baidoa in April resulted in civilian casualties, the group tweeted that Western media reports in this regard were incorrect.<sup>158</sup> This tweet was followed by several others which described such reports as deliberate attempts to divide the mujahideen and break the unity of the ummah.<sup>159</sup> Al-Shabaab also responded to claims from Kenyan reporters that the KDF successfully killed 100 of its fighters in Dalayad, dismissing them as propaganda.<sup>160</sup>

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**151** @HSMPress Tweet: 'In addition to fear of being stationed in Somalia, nocturnal raids inflict the decisive psychological trauma needed to unsettle #KDF sanity', 17 January 2012, 14:29: <http://twitter.com/HSMPress/status/159401999887106049>

**152** James J.F. Forest, 'Perception Challenges Faced by Al-Qaeda on the Battlefield of Influence Warfare', *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (2012), pp. 8-22

**153** Ibid.

**154** Scott Gerwehr and Kurt Hubbard, 'What is Terrorism?: Key Elements and History', in Bruce Bongar, et al., eds., *Psychology of Terrorism* (Oxford University Press, 2007)

**155** @HSMPress Tweet: '@Sonozializ Western Media has spent years inculcating derogatory anti-Islam views into ur minds & ur too credulous to question what ur fed', 14 December 2011, 3:03: <http://twitter.com/HSMPress/status/146908086160990208>

**156** @HSMPress Tweet: 'With millions of websites & newspapers disseminating their propaganda, the #US couldn't endure to hear the real truth. What a travesty!', 20 December 2011, 2:16: <http://twitter.com/HSMPress/status/149070732670943233>

**157** @HSMPress Tweet: 'HSMPress merely reenacts the ground battle on Twitter & is an expression of the suppressed soliloquy of the supposedly modern-day troglodytes', 11 March 2012, 10:29: <http://twitter.com/HSMPress/status/178910640235229184>

**158** @HSMPress Tweet: 'With regard to the incident in Baidoa yesterday, the explosion did not, as reported by the Western Media, kill any innocent civilians at all', 10 April 2012, 5:47: <http://twitter.com/HSMPress/status/189696061445644288>

**159** @HSMPress Tweet: 'The Muslims must be aware of such bogus reports that intend to sow sedition and disunity among the Mujahideen and the wider Muslim ummah', 10 April 2012, 5:49: <http://twitter.com/HSMPress/status/18969657237477859>

**160** @HSMPress Tweet: 'Poor propaganda aside, it beggars belief that KDF claims to have killed 100 HSM fighters in an event that has not yet transpired at all', 4 February 2012, 8:38: <http://twitter.com/HSMPress/status/165836634334572545>

## Understanding al-Shabaab's Use of Twitter

Taken as a whole and in order of importance, the overarching message from al-Shabaab as distilled from its Twitter campaign is the following: *Somalia is a key battleground in the conflict between the West and Islam* (**narrative**). *Al-Shabaab has the capacity to successfully guard against belligerent forces* (**operational capacity**), *but there is a campaign of misinformation being promoted by the Western media to discredit the group* (**competing voices**). *Al-Shabaab is a united and coherent organisation with the best interests of Somali Muslims in mind* (**group integrity and cohesion**) *while it makes sacrifices in order to achieve an Islamic state governed by Shariah* (**religious authority**). *In this quest, the group has support from Somali Muslims* (**relevance**) *and has the strategic knowledge to win this battle* (**strategic authority**).

As the data reveals, al-Shabaab's primary aim on Twitter is to promote its own overarching narrative of events. This narrative places invading East African forces and the TFG, defined as Western proxies, as being at war with Muslims in Somalia. The group is also concerned with encouraging the perception of its ability to carry out operations (of varying types) against these foreign entities. The third largest category of messaging, competing voices, is essential in establishing al-Kataib Media as the only reliable source of information.

The final four categories are limited in frequency, but are important in the establishment of what could broadly be called legitimacy. The medium, Twitter, is important as well, as certain types of media are more persuasive than others.<sup>161</sup> Twitter offers a real-time form of communication that is effective in framing events that have recently occurred. Describing specific atrocities committed by the enemy, or touting one's operational successes, is easily done via Twitter. This platform also allows users to experience events as they happen. When al-Shabaab describes attacks, it may well provoke a sense of excitement among sympathetic followers who are following the jihad in real time. This also has the effect of creating a sense of urgency; atrocities are happening right now, the war is being waged and all the while the recipients are merely sitting at home. The sense of moral shock this generates, coupled with emotional impact, can be an effective tool for campaigners.<sup>162</sup> This gives Twitter an advantage over traditional mediums such as video or audio clips, which require an editorial process.

In this respect, al-Shabaab's Twitter account does not focus too heavily on strategic authority. Instead, it prefers to offer quick updates on operational capacity, possibly because such messages resonate with diaspora Muslims, who are not military strategists but who might be sympathetic with their overall aims. This presents tangible and simple information that is easily comprehended: *an attack has taken place, and this was the outcome*.<sup>163</sup> This is what Twitter best lends itself to, and it allows the group to effectively communicate with its primary foreign audience: Members of the Somali diaspora and English-speaking Muslims.<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> Scott Gerwehr and Kurt Hubbard, 'What is Terrorism?: Key Elements and History', in Bruce Bongar, et al., eds., *Psychology of Terrorism* (Oxford University Press, 2007)

<sup>162</sup> Donatella della Porta and Mario Diani, *Social Movements: An Introduction* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2006)

<sup>163</sup> Scott Gerwehr and Kurt Hubbard, 'What is Terrorism?: Key Elements and History', in Bruce Bongar, et al., eds., *Psychology of Terrorism* (Oxford University Press, 2007)

<sup>164</sup> Mary Harper, *Getting Somalia Wrong: Faith, War and Hope in a Shattered State* (Zed Books, 2012)



## 5 Conclusion

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**A**s this paper has shown, al-Shabaab employs a sophisticated and diverse communications strategy aimed at influencing Muslims living in the West. This strategy is infused with culturally relevant material that resonates with members of the Somalia diaspora while also employing rhetoric from the global jihadist narrative, positioning Somalia as one front in a greater struggle between Islam and the West.

Omar Hammami's messaging in particular speaks directly to Western Muslims beyond the diaspora, and emphasises the global nature of the struggle. Through this messaging, Hammami highlights the seemingly irreconcilable conflict between being a Muslim and living in the West. To this end, he presents his audience with an ultimatum whereby in order to be a good Muslim they must choose a side – become a member of the ummah and make *hijrah* to the land of jihad, or risk falling into disbelief and going to hell. Moreover, Hammami's vision is expansive, looking beyond the local towards the globally inspired movements affiliated with al-Qaeda. The endgame is the establishment of a Caliphate. This is a significant development in the strategy and rhetoric of al-Shabaab.

To convey its message, al-Shabaab has employed the use of new media, primarily digital video and Twitter, as its preferred medium of communication. Both of these tools serve as an alternative form of media whereby al-Shabaab is able to present its interpretation of specific events and the conflict at large. The message being produced portrays the organisation as a united and effective fighting force that is promoting God's will. This conflict is framed as a product of foreign intervention whereby "apostate" East African nations and the TFG are defined as proxies of the United States, and Western powers in general.

Yet, this strategy is neither universally accepted within al-Shabaab nor is it wholly uncontested. A clear divide appears to have emerged between those who support a more globalised vision of the conflict, and those who are primarily concerned with maintaining a local insurgency.

Although al-Shabaab's English output has principally come through videos and Twitter, there has been a recent attempt to move into the world of publications as well. The group has produced a magazine entitled *Gaidi Mtaani*, which means "Street Terrorist" in Kiswahili.<sup>165</sup> There have been two issues of the magazine so far, and while most of the material is in Kiswahili, both editions also carry some articles in English.<sup>166</sup> Kiswahili is not spoken in Somalia but is a local dialect in Kenya and Uganda, suggesting the group is increasing its efforts to recruit Muslims from those countries.<sup>167</sup> With regards to the English content, one article in the first issue and two in the second state that it has drawn its inspiration from AQAP's Inspire magazine.<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> 'Al-Shabaab attempts to terrorise Kenyans with online magazine', *Sabahi Online*, 8 August 2012

<sup>166</sup> 'Gaidi Mtaani – Issues 1 & 2', *Billa Journal of Somali Security Studies* (Blog), 8 August 2012: <http://somalisecuritystudies.blogspot.com/2012/07/gaidi-mtaani-issues-1-2.html>

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>168</sup> 'Al-Shabaab attempts to terrorise Kenyans with online magazine', *Sabahi Online*, 8 August 2012

This paper has explored the methods employed by al-Shabaab to market its ideas to Muslims in the West, and contextualised the manner in which such outreach has been framed in order to better understand both how and why such efforts have been so successful. In many respects, al-Shabaab has not achieved any novel innovations. Much like other jihadist groups, it repeats the traditional mantra: that it is the legitimate vanguard of Muslim interests; that it is resisting insidious attempts to undermine Islam; that it is invested with religious legitimacy and capacity; and that it is divinely mandated. Where al-Shabaab has achieved some noteworthy success is through its ability to find ways of ensuring that its message resonates with its target audience. In part, al-Shabaab got lucky: Somali diaspora politics and slow governmental responses helped it disseminate its message effectively. But the group has been innovative too. Its use of Twitter, which has been comprehensively catalogued above, represents an effective way of offering real-time updates on the jihad. This combination – of fortuity and ingenuity – has allowed al-Shabaab to cultivate a highly potent message which has succeeded in helping to seduce scores of Western Muslims into supporting its cause.

## 6 Appendix

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List of Western-based individuals who have either been convicted of involvement with al-Shabaab, have died in its cause, have appeared in its propaganda or are confirmed members.<sup>1</sup>

### United States

Last name	First name	Offense(s) convicted for	Description
Abdow	Abdow Munye	False statements (2)	Indicted in October 2009 for obstructing an FBI investigation into recruitment of young men in the US to fight for extremist groups in Somalia. Accepted plea deal in May 2010 and given 8-month split sentence.
Ahmed	Salah Osman	Providing material support; conspiracy to kill; false statements	Indicted in February 2009 for providing material support to terrorists, conspiracy to kill, and making false statements. Pled guilty to one count of providing material support to terrorists in July 2009.
Ahmed	Shirwa	N/A	From Minneapolis, first known American suicide bomber. Drove a car bomb in October 2008 into a government compound in Puntland, northern Somalia.
Alessa	Mohamed	Conspiring to murder	Pled guilty in March 2011 to conspiring to murder persons outside the US on behalf of al-Shabaab. Scheduled to be sentenced in March 2012.
Ali	Adarus Abdulle	Perjury	Indicted for perjury in October 2009 and pled guilty in November.
Ali	Abdisalan Hussein	N/A	Indicted in July 2010 for providing material support to al-Shabaab and conspiracy to kill. Committed a suicide attack against African Union troops in Mogadishu in October 2011.
Ali	Amina Farah	Providing material support; false statements	Convicted in October 2011 of conspiracy to provide material support to a terroristic organization and 12 counts of providing material support to al-Shabaab.
Almonte	Carlos E.	Conspiracy to murder	Pled guilty in March 2011 to conspiring to murder persons outside the US on behalf of al-Shabaab. Scheduled to be sentenced in March 2012.

<sup>1</sup> At present, there are a number of individuals facing indictments for their involvement with al-Shabaab. They have not been included here for legal reasons.

Bana	Jamal	N/A	Allegedly left Minneapolis for Somalia in November 2008, and reportedly killed in Mogadishu in July 2009.
Beledi	Farah Mohamed	N/A	Indicted in July 2010 for providing material support to al-Shabaab and conspiracy to kill. Killed at a TFG checkpoint in Mogadishu in May 2011 while trying to commit a suicide attack.
Chesser	Zachary Adam	Providing material support	Sentenced in February 2011 to 25 years in prison for communicating threats against the writers of South Park and attempting to provide material support to al-Shabaab.
Faarax	Cabdulaahi Ahmed	Providing material support; conspiracy to kill	Indicted in July 2010 for providing material support to terrorists and conspiracy to kill. Seen in pictures with Omar Hammami on his Facebook page. Currently wanted by the FBI.
Gurey	Dahir	N/A	American citizen who arrived in Somalia in early 2010. Killed in fire fight with government forces in September 2010
Hammami	Omar Shafik	Providing material support	Indicted in September 2009 for providing material support to terrorists and conspiracy to provide material support to al-Shabaab. Currently wanted by the FBI.
Hassan	Hawo Mohamed	Providing material support (money)	Convicted in October 2011 of conspiracy to provide material support to a terroristic organization and making false statements to authorities.
Hassan	Kamal Said	Providing material support; false statements	Plead guilty to lying to federal agents about his involvement with al-Shabaab in August 2009.
Hassan	Burhan	N/A	Allegedly left Minneapolis for Somalia in November 2008 during his senior year in high school, and reportedly killed in Mogadishu in June 2009.
Hassan	Mohamoud	N/A	Left Minneapolis for Somalia in November 2008, and reportedly killed in Mogadishu in September 2009.
Isse	Abdifatah Yusuf	Providing material support; conspiracy to kill	Pled guilty in April 2009 to one count of providing material support to terrorists.
Kastigar	Troy	N/A	An American-born Muslim convert, allegedly left Minneapolis for Somalia in November 2008, and reportedly killed in September 2009.

Kaziu	Betim	Conspiracy to commit murder in a foreign country	Convicted in July 2011 of conspiracy to kill US soldiers abroad and attempting to provide material support to al-Shabaab.
Mahamud	Ahmed Hussein	Providing material support	Indicted in June 2011 for conspiring to provide material support to al-Shabaab and pursuing a plea agreement as of February 2012.
Maruf	Zakaria	Providing material support; conspiracy to kill	Left Minnesota for Somalia in spring 2008 and became a recruiter for al-Shabaab. In July 2009, reported killed in Mogadishu by friends and relatives.
Masri	Shaker	Providing material support	Charged in August 2010 of attempting to provide material support to al-Qaeda and al-Shabaab and attempting to provide material support through the use of a Weapon of Mass Destruction. Pled guilty to providing material support.
Mohamed	Omer Abdi	Providing material support; conspiracy to kill	In July 2011, pled guilty to one count of conspiracy to provide material support to kill in a foreign country.
Morton	Jesse Curtis	Threatening violence	Pled guilty to threatening violence against South Park creators. Arrested in Morocco in May 2011. Sentenced to 11.5 years.
Shumpert	Ruben	N/A	Born in a Christian household and converted to Islam while imprisoned for drug trafficking charges. Fled to Somalia while being prosecuted for currency fraud and killed in a missile attack in fall 2008.
Tracy	Anthony Joseph	Helping Somalis illegally enter US	Pled guilty in June 2010 to conspiracy to induce aliens to enter the United States and sentenced to 4 months in prison.
Yusuf	Mohamud Abdi	Providing material support; money laundering	Pled guilty in November 2011 to providing material support to al-Shabaab. Scheduled to be sentenced as of January 2012
Yusuf	Nima Ali	Providing material support; false statements	Pled guilty in December 2011 to conspiring to provide material support to al-Shabaab.

## United Kingdom

Last name	First name	Offense(s) convicted for	Description
Ahmed	Ahmed Hussain	N/A	21 year-old from Ealing. Dropped out of a business course at Oxford Brookes and travelled to Somalia where he set off a suicide bomb at an Ethiopian checkpoint, killing 20.
Berjawi	Bilal	N/A	Killed by U.S. drone strike in January 2012. Thought to be an al-Shabaab commander who also participated in the insurgency in Afghanistan
Dujana	Abu	N/A	Appears, masked, in al-Shabaab recruitment video. Abu Dujana is likely a pseudonym
Hussain	Shabaaz	Fundraising for terrorists (7)	Donated £9,000 to fund terrorism in Somalia. Jailed for 5 years.

## Canada<sup>2</sup>

Last name	First name	Offense(s) convicted for	Description
Ibrahim	Mohamed Elmi	N/A	Message posted on YouTube that Ibrahim was 'killed in battle'.

## Australia

Last name	First name	Offense(s) convicted for	Description
Aweys	Saney Edow	Conspiring to prepare for or plan a terrorist act	Convicted in December 2010 of a plot to storm the Holsworthy Army Barracks in Sydney and shoot as many people as possible. Sentenced to 13.5 years.
Fattal	Wissam Mahmoud	Conspiring to prepare for or plan a terrorist act	Convicted in December 2010 of a plot to storm the Holsworthy Army Barracks in Sydney and shoot as many people as possible. Sentenced to 13.5 years.
Sayed	Nayef El	Conspiring to prepare for or plan a terrorist act	Convicted in December 2010 of a plot to storm the Holsworthy Army Barracks in Sydney and shoot as many people as possible. Sentenced to 13.5 years

<sup>2</sup> Latest reports from the Canadian government suggest that around 20 Canadian residents have travelled to join al-Shabaab in Somalia, though as yet have been named.

## Denmark

Last name	First name	Offense(s) convicted for	Description
Geele	Mohamed	Attempted murder; Terrorism	Broke into the house of cartoonist Kurt Westergaard with an axe and a knife. Had links with al-Shabaab. Sentenced to 9 years.
Unknown	Unknown	N/A	23 year old Danish-Somali committed a suicide bombing at the Hotel Shamo, killing 25 people

## Sweden

Last name	First name	Offense(s) convicted for	Description
Ahmed	Mohammed Ibrahim	Conspiracy to provide material support to a terrorist organization; Conspiracy to receive military-type training from a terrorist group	Eritrean national, living in Sweden. Travelled to Somalia and spent 6 weeks in company of al-Shabaab. Handed over an AK-47 to an al-Shabaab commander before leaving. Arrested by Nigerian authorities. Pled guilty to providing material support and receiving training from a terrorist group.
Ali	Yassin	N/A	Arrested in 2008 by Swedish authorities. Released due to lack of evidence. Returned to Somalia and took a leadership position in Hizbul Islam
Khalaf	Fuad	N/A	High ranking al-Shabaab official who has told followers to murder journalists.
Zaid	Abu	N/A	Appears in al-Kataib recruitment video urging Western Muslims to make hijrah to Somalia. He also makes threats against Lars Vilks, with a throat slitting gesture.





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