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Scramble for the Horn of Africa – Al-Shabaab vs. Islamic State

Over the past three years, the so-called Islamic State (IS) has made significant progress in building an international network of Jihadist groups that pledged allegiance to the organisation. The affiliates of IS are both new-born movements like the Islamic State in Libya, and older groups like Boko Haram in Nigeria. The latter are much more valuable for the ‘Caliphate’ because they have broad experience and capacities that allow them to operate independently of IS. In its global Jihad, therefore, the Islamic State tried to gain the support of the members of former al-Qaeda franchises, shifting their alliances from Ayman al-Zawahiri to Abu Bakr al-Bagdadi. The paper offers an overview of such IS efforts in the Horn of Africa and an evaluation of how successful this quest had been until 2017.

Keywords: Somalia, Libya, terrorism, extremism, Africa, Islamic State, al-Shabaab

Al-Shabaab in Somalia (full name: Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen, or ‘Movement of Striving Youth’) is distinct from other Jihadist organisations. Al-Shabaab established and extended territorial control in Somalia over at least 250,000 square kilometres in 2008–2009 – five years prior to IS.¹ It created effective administrative and judiciary systems and launched military, political and ideological attacks against the Transitional Federal Government of Somalia and its foreign supporters. In 2011–2012, offensives of the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) and the Somali National Army (SNA) inflicted serious setbacks on the movement, and it had to vacate the capital, Mogadishu.

Al-Shabaab took advantage of the mistakes and failures of its enemies, however, and recovered within half a year, conducting a devastating wave of terrorist attacks not only in Somalia but also abroad in 2013. After the offensives of AMISOM in 2014, the group lost other major cities, and in September 2014, a U.S. airstrike killed its emir, Abu Zubeyr Godane. Yet the movement’s operational capabilities remained intact, as demonstrated by various terrorist attacks in Mogadishu.² Since summer 2015, al-Shabaab has over-run at least four AMISOM military bases (Leego, Janale, El Adde, Kulbiyow) defended by forces of 150–250 soldiers. They killed some 250–300 African Union (AU) peacekeepers and seized a large amount of weapons and explosive devices to use against AMISOM and SNA. “The calendar year 2016 witnessed the highest number of IED events³ in Somalia ever recorded.”⁴

¹ HANSEN, Stig Jarle: *Al-Shabaab in Somalia*. Hurst, London, 2013, pp. 83–96.

² Deaths in al-Shabab attack on AU Somali base, [online], 26.12.2014. Source: Al-Jazeera [31.07.2017.]

³ Improvised explosive devices.

⁴ Shabaab bombs use explosives seized from Kenyan bases, expert says, [online], 01.07.2017. Source: Hiiraan [31.07.2017.]

Besides its war at home, al-Shabaab started a regionalisation effort, creating or trying to establish local cells in Ethiopia, Djibouti, Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania.⁵ The most vulnerable is Kenya: al-Shabaab conducted hundreds of terrorist attacks there in the last six years, including such high-scale assaults as the Westgate incident and the Garissa University massacre. The Jihadists established strong networks in the country,⁶ and in the last year shifted to a more alarming insurgency in the Boni forest.⁷

Many scholars therefore write about the resurgence of the Jihadist group, which still controls an area inhabited by at least 2 million people.⁸ Its shadow government in the “liberated” cities and its extended intelligence network in Mogadishu allow the Jihadists to maintain their financial resources through the taxation (*zakat*) of trade (livestock, charcoal, sugar) and big companies (telecommunication, money transfer) – not to mention foreign donations. Nobody knows the exact amount of money flowing to the movement monthly, but it could reach tens of millions of dollars. Although taxation sometimes leads to clashes with local communities, few clans and companies dare to reject the demands.⁹

Al-Shabaab therefore is a valuable target for all big Jihadist groups. As security expert Ryan Cummings noted: “Al-Shabaab is the largest jihadi movement in East Africa, and central to the core mandate of ISIS is the unification of the Muslim world, so it would be a significant ideological victory for the group. It would be massive from a public relations perspective, which is central to the Islamic State’s operations.”¹⁰ The Islamic State therefore made significant efforts almost immediately after its founding to gain the allegiance of the movement and declare it as one of its affiliates.

Until now, this campaign had been fruitless. According to some sources, there were serious debates among the Shura (council), but Al-Shabaab remained loyal to al-Qaeda and introduced sanctions against secessionists.¹¹ A few lesser commanders and their warriors seceded under the leadership of imam Abdulqadir Mumin, but he could not launch a bigger movement. The core value of al-Shabaab, its unity, remains.

The following analysis examines the history of IS in the Horn of Africa. It will explore the campaign of the ‘Caliphate’ for gaining the support of Somali Jihadists, and map up their achievements within Mumin’s movement, the obstacles to the strengthening of the new group, and the factors which contributed to its stagnation.¹² The main finding is that

⁵ Al-Shabaab as a Transnational Security Threat, [online], 15.08.2016. p. 2. Source: IGAD-Sahan [31.07.2017.]

⁶ Kenya: Al-Shabaab – Closer to Home, [online], 25.09.2014. Source: International Crisis Group [02.08.2017.]

⁷ KISER, Margot: Big Game: U.S. Soldiers’ Secret Hunt for Jihadists in a Kenyan Forest, [online], 08.02.2017. Source: Dailybeast [02.08.2017.]

⁸ All-Shabaab’s Resurgence in the Horn of Africa: Factors Contributing to the Group’s Persistence, [online], 02.07.2017. Source: Hiiraan [31.07.2017.]; Shabaab gains in Somalia due to ‘lapses in offensive counterterrorism operations’, [online], 23.07.2017. Source: Hiiraan [31.07.2017.]; BURKE, Jason: Al-Shabaab militants ban starving Somalis from accessing aid, [online], 27.07.2017. Source: The Guardian [31.07.2017.]

⁹ Somali civilians clash with al-Shabab over tax dispute, [online], 28.11.2016. Source: Al-Jazeera [31.07.2017.]

¹⁰ KRIEL, Robyn – LEPOSO, Lillian: In video, Somali ISIS members court Al-Shabaab, [online], 23.05.2015. Source: Hiiraan [02.08.2017.]

¹¹ Somalia’s Shebab loses jihadist lustre, [online], 23.05.2015. Source: Hiiraan [02.08.2017.]

¹² When analysing the IS campaign targeting Somalis, we must note some methodological obstacles. Most information available on the inner dynamics of al-Shabaab and the struggle of IS come from media outlets, anonymous diplomatic and security sources – and rumours. Even intelligence agencies have very limited knowledge from the ground about these issues. Therefore, it is almost impossible to verify the validity of such information.

IS lost the momentum in the Horn of Africa because of three reasons: first, it faced a surprisingly hostile environment after the anti-IS decision of al-Shabaab's Shura in which its leadership declared and conducted an extremely effective war against defectors. Second, Mumin – likely not independently of the pressure of Amniyat – revealed his secessionist motives too early and launched an aggressive military attack in the North without a strong background and sufficiently strong basis. It led to the quick defeat of IS militias by Puntland forces which jeopardised its credibility as a potent military actor. Last, but not least, Mumin left his universalist Jihadist ideology too soon, and turned for support to his own clan to gain a stable background for his recruitment and operations. Although this move provided him some additional warriors and safe havens, in the long term it also contributed to the weakening of the cohesion and credibility of the new pro-IS group as a movement which stands above clan-lines.¹³

The Islamic State and the Somalis

In the previous part the strategic value of al-Shabaab for Islamic State was shown. Nevertheless, al-Shabaab members were not the first targets of IS propaganda. First and foremost, the Caliphate had to win the battle of narratives for the leadership of the global Jihadist movement. Namely it had to prove that IS (and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi) was the only rightful and legitimate 'successor' of Osama bin Laden in heading global Jihad. IS launched an aggressive, highly professional, and extremely successful media campaign for the support of radical Islamists around the world.

The first Somalis who joined the group came from the diaspora. In late 2014 and early 2015, there were regular reports about foreign fighters from Canada, the U.S. and the U.K. killed in fights in Syria and Iraq.¹⁴ Among them there were high-profile figures like Sayid Hussein Feisal Ali, the Finnish-born son of a presidential candidate in Somaliland.¹⁵ According to the report of the Soufan Group in January 2015, some seventy Somali fighters in Syria "appear from their accents to be drawn mainly from the diaspora".¹⁶

Al-Shabaab-linked websites initially welcomed the rise of IS, shared their news, and made positive reports about developments like the accession of Boko Haram to the

¹³ Last, but not least, we must clarify some phrases in the beginning. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi has not accepted the allegiance of Mumin yet. Therefore, the use of the term "Islamic State in Somalia" (ISS) is academically inaccurate. It also must be pointed out that the borderline is very thin between: 1. pro-IS groups, who are familiar with the narrative of Islamic State and sympathise with it, but remain loyal to al-Shabaab and its emir, Ahmad Diriye; 2. pro-IS groups in al-Shabaab, who do not agree with its Shura's decision, but instead of secession they try to transform the organisation from an inner position to a pro-IS movement; 3. and the people who – like Mumin – seceded from al-Shabaab and try to launch another movement. As a guideline in this conceptual disorder, the simplest methodology is to follow the approach of al-Shabaab itself. According to its narrative, both the members of the second and the third group are pro-IS warriors who are legitimate targets. Therefore, this paper will also follow this approach, and it will use the term 'Islamic State' – despite the lack of official acceptance from the Caliphate – to avoid confusion with al-Shabaab.

¹⁴ Somali and Libyan Fighters Killed in Sinjar, [online], 13.01.2015. Source: Hiiraan [02.08.2017.]; 3 ISIS recruits from Edmonton believed killed, [online], 15.01.2015. Source: Hiiraan [02.08.2017.]; Somalia's Shebab loses... (2015).

¹⁵ Somalia's Shebab loses... (2015).

¹⁶ Foreign Fighters. An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq, [online], December 2015. Source: Soufan Group [02.08.2017.]

Caliphate. Some scholars thought al-Shabaab would also pledge its loyalty to the organisation.¹⁷

The Islamic State certainly encouraged the leadership of al-Shabaab to change their alliance. In March 2015, the group's emissary Hamil al-Bushra (the *nom de guerre* used by two media outlets described by Aaron Zelin as "official semi-official accounts" of IS) sent messages to the Horn of Africa. Bushra praised 'brothers in Somalia' and encouraged them to conduct attacks in the region. Bushra asked Ahmad Diriye Umar Abu Ubaidah to pledge loyalty to IS in an audio message on al-Shabaab's official media platform, *al-Kataib*.¹⁸ In May, in a six-minute video that was the first of its kind, five unmasked men of Somali origin speaking in Arabic tried to persuade Somalis and the members of Al-Shabaab, whom they referred to as "truthful mujahedeen" to pledge allegiance to IS.¹⁹ Other videos urged al-Shabaab to join "a coordinated campaign involving militants from various locations in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and West Africa (Boko Haram) in early October 2015".²⁰ In September 2015, according to local sources, Islamic State sympathisers began recruiting young soldiers for the organisation, and at least forty persons, mostly under 18 years of age, disappeared from the port city of Bossaso, Puntland, in Northeast Somalia.²¹

Some al-Shabaab commanders reportedly were ready to shift the allegiance of the movement to the Islamic State. Among them was the powerful Mahad Karate, the head of the infamous intelligence wing of al-Shabaab, *Amniyat*, and one of the most prominent members of the group's Shura. He thought that the Islamic State could provide more extended financial support for the Somali Jihadists.²² In addition, IS could help recruit foreign fighters for whom the name 'Islamic State' sounded more attractive than 'al-Qaeda'.²³ As a U.S. intelligence official noted that many Somalis and foreign fighters "probably look to the group as an inspiration to fight for a cause that goes beyond local issues, and we believe that's the case in Somalia".²⁴

Nevertheless, the emir, Ahmed Diriye Umar Abu Ubaidah, remained loyal to al-Qaeda.²⁵ Al-Shabaab established well-working connections with al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), and AQAP in Yemen was the main channel of weapons and explosives for the Somali radicals. A shifting allegiance would have required new routes and mediators, which seemed to be a risky choice.²⁶ Al-Shabaab remained part of the al-Qaeda network, and subsequent messages from the Caliphate fell on deaf ears. The members of the Shura judged that the unity of al-Shabaab, which guaranteed the survival of the organisation

¹⁷ Somalia's Shebab loses... (2015).

¹⁸ HELLYER, Caroline: ISIL courts al-Shabab as al-Qaeda ties fade away, [online], 23.03.2015. Source: Al Jazeera [02.08.2017.]

¹⁹ KRIEL-LEPOSO (2015): *op. cit.*

²⁰ MAHMOOD, Omar S.: Does the Islamic State threaten al-Shabaab's hegemony in Somalia?, [online], 16.11.2016. Source: ISS Africa [02.08.2017.]

²¹ ISIL is recruiting fighters in Puntland, [online], 09.09.2015. Source: Hiiraan [02.08.2017.]

²² Islamic State or Al-Qaeda? Somalia's Shebab mulls future, [online], 24.04.2015. Source: Hiiraan [07.08.2017.]

²³ Somalia's Shebab loses... (2015).

²⁴ SCHACHTEL, Jordan: Islamic State Builds 'Little Emirate' in Somalia, [online], 25.12.2015. Source: Hiiraan [09.08.2017.]

²⁵ Somalia's Shebab loses... (2015).

²⁶ Islamic State or Al-Qaeda? Somalia's Shebab mulls... (2015).

even in the hardest times, was more important than the struggle of different Jihadists ideologies in the Horn.

In September 2015, Ahmad Diriye sent an internal memo stating that anyone who defected from the movement and its leadership would be considered a traitor and punished (executed) by *Amniyat*.²⁷ This was no empty threat. As Warner writes, “Amniyat has been known to arrest al-Shabaab members who sympathize with ISS. Moreover, a senior official of al-Shabaab in the Middle Juba region of Somalia, who was known to be sympathetic to the al-Shabaab/Islamic State merger, was ambushed and killed by other al-Shabaab members”.²⁸

The group also detained some foreign fighters. As Ken Menkhaus stated in an interview, “the fact that they (al-Shabaab) appear to have arrested foreigners in southern Somalia, suggest that there also might be a Somali versus non-Somali dimension to it that we have already seen in the past with Al-Shabaab”.²⁹

Finally, Ayman al-Zawahiri, the leader of al-Qaeda, accepted the allegiance that Ahmad Diriye had pledged in the previous year.³⁰ Although some al-Qaeda-linked websites had praised the new leader, it was the first high-level message to the Somalis after the death of the previous emir, Abu Zubeyr Godane.³¹ Menkhaus judged the media reactions of al-Qaeda and its affiliates extremely slow and rudimentary, compared to IS.³²

The split

Although Diriye and the members of al-Shabaab’s Shura made their positions clear, the month-long internal debates and the comprehensive propaganda of the Islamic State were not without results. IS grew more popular among foreign fighters, and many Somalis thought the Caliphate could bring a fresh impetus. Leaflets, saying “We support the Islamic State!” and “We are the sons of the caliphate!” appeared in al-Shabaab’s stronghold of Jamame, Lower Shabelle, encouraging pro-al-Qaeda factions to shift their allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. In mid-October, al-Shabaab detained thirty warriors suspected of leaning towards IS in Jilib, an al-Shabaab bastion in the Middle Juba region.³³

The breakthrough for the Islamic State in East Africa came two weeks later. In the last days of October 2015, an audio message circulated on Somali websites. In the recording, which was first published on *YouTube*, Sheikh Abdulqadir Mumin, one of spiritual leaders of al-Shabaab (but not *the chief spiritual leader*) and its commander in Puntland region, declared his allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Approximately twenty warriors accom-

²⁷ WARNER, Jason: Sub-Saharan Africa’s three “new” Islamic State affiliates, [online], 24.01.2017. Source: Hiiraan [07.08.2017.]

²⁸ WARNER (2017): *op. cit.*

²⁹ Al-Qaida or Islamic State? Issue Simmers Within Al-Shabab, [online], 01.10.2015. Source: Hiiraan [08.08.2017.]

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Al-Qaeda backs new Somali Shebab chief: statement, [online], 09.09.2014. Source: Deccan Chronicle [08.08.2017.]

³² Somalia’s Shebab... (2015).

³³ Somalia: Fissures emerge within Al Shabaab for merger with ISIL, [online], 15.10.2015. Source: Garoweonline [09.08.2017.]

panied him.³⁴ The declaration gained significant media coverage and spurred speculations that it could mean a wider break within the movement. It became clear in weeks, however, that Mumin led only a small and marginal faction, and they had to escape into the Northern Galgala Mountains to avoid the agents of *Amniyat*.

Abdulqadir Mumin was born in the Puntland region of Somalia around 1950. According to various sources, he moved to Europe in the 2000s and spent years in Sweden and in the U.K. He acquired British citizenship and quickly gained reputation as an extremist imam. “Monitored by MI5, Britain’s domestic intelligence agency, Mumin is thought to have known Mohamed Emwazi, the IS executioner nicknamed ‘Jihadi John’, and Michael Adebolajo, one of two people convicted over the 2013 murder of British soldier Lee Rigby in London.”³⁵ Because of the increasing pressure from security services, Mumin returned to Somalia in 2010 to fight against ‘Crusaders’ and joined al-Shabaab. In the first two years he worked closely together with the core leadership of the group. He was chosen to deliver a speech at al-Shabaab’s official memorial ceremony for the late Osama bin Laden in May 2011. In the next months, when AMISOM and the Somali National Army started new offensives against the Jihadists in and around Mogadishu, he played an important role in al-Shabaab’s attempt to reach out to local communities and clan elders. Mumin and other Jihadist officials from al-Shabaab’s shadow government (like the governor of the Banadir region, Muhammad Hasan Umar Abu Abd al-Rahman) met with local community and clan leaders, businessmen, imams and poets in the suburbs and the countryside around Mogadishu to gain their support against African Union peacekeepers and the federal government. Mumin regularly appeared in *al-Kataib* where he spoke about religious issues, the interpretation of Jihad, and he encouraged the Somalis to join and support the fight of al-Shabaab.³⁶ Because he was coming from the Ali Saleban/Majeerten/Darod clan,³⁷ he was sent to the relatively remote Northern Puntland region in 2012 to recruit new warriors. It was far from al-Shabaab’s primary area of operation, and the organisation had two aims: to secure its main channel of supplies from Yemen and establish/strengthen a new safe haven for its operations. When its military leader of Galgala Mountains, Mohamed Said Atom surrendered to the government in 2014, Mumin took control of the al-Shabaab-affiliated outposts and tried to organise the fight against Garowe.³⁸ Nevertheless, it became clear soon that Mumin had only a very limited battlefield experience and he was much better in preaching than designing and leading military operations, as he could not reach significant success against the Puntland security forces.

After the first wave of sensational reports and great expectations, it was quickly to be realised that the declaration of Mumin was more a symbolic one. Even most of his own warriors rejected joining the new movement: as we mentioned, only around 20 from his

³⁴ SHEIKH, Abdi: Small group of Somali al Shabaab swear allegiance to Islamic State, [online], 23.10.2015. Source: Hiiraan [08.08.2017.]

³⁵ Who is this Islamic State’s Abdulqadir Mumin in Somalia?, [online], 02.09.2016. Source: The East African [08.08.2017.]

³⁶ From al-Shabab to the Islamic State: The Bay’a of ‘Abd al-Qadir Mu’min and Its Implications, [online], 30.10.2015. Source: Hiiraan [08.08.2017.]

³⁷ YUSUF, Zakaria – KHALIF, Abdul: The Islamic State Threat in Somalia’s Puntland State, [online], 17.10.2016. Source: Crisis Group [08.08.2017.]

³⁸ WARNER (2017): *op. cit.*

original 300 fighters chose the Islamic State. In addition, some experts warned that “there is no doubt that al-Shabaab, whatever internal wrangling is currently going on, remains a deadly force within Somalia and in neighbouring Kenya”.³⁹ Al-Shabaab’s governor in the Lower Shabelle region, Abu Abdalla, sent a message that “if anyone says he belongs to another Islamic movement, kill him on the spot [...] We will cut the throat of any one [...] if they undermine unity”. He also added that “the world wanted us to be divided [...] This is [to remain loyal to al-Qaeda] a collective decision, and anybody who wants to join another Islamic group must leave the country to meet them where they are”. Diriye commented as: “I swear by the name of God we will not tolerate the acts of saboteurs.”⁴⁰ The official spokesperson of al-Shabaab, Sheikh Mahmud Ali Dheere made similar statements.⁴¹

Subsequently, on 16 November, another allegedly pro-IS commander, Sheikh Bashir Abu Numan, and eight other fighters died in a factional clash near the town of Saakow.⁴² Near Buale, al-Shabaab arrested five other IS sympathisers.⁴³ At the end of November, al-Shabaab cleric and deputy governor of the Juba region Sheikh Hussein Abdi Gedi and four other members died in an ambush near Gududley. According to rumours, Gedi and his mates seceded from al-Shabaab and tried to persuade others to join Mumin’s fraction. It was the third attack against fighters thought to be the supporters of IS.⁴⁴

In the first days of December, *Amniyat* killed a Sudanese pro-IS commander, Mohammed Makkawi Ibrahim, who had taken part in the killing of a USAID representative and his driver in Khartoum in 2008.⁴⁵ Foreigners who remembered the inner purge of al-Shabaab in 2013, which also had ideological reasons and was aimed mainly at foreign fighters, defected to the government forces, fearing that they would be killed by their former colleagues on suspicion that they are IS supporters.⁴⁶

But *Amniyat* could not hunt down everybody. On 7 December, the Somali National Intelligence and Security Agency (NISA) claimed that Al-Shabaab’s Lower Juba commander, Mohamed Dulyadin Kuno Gamadheere – a Kenyan–Somali considered to be the mastermind behind the 2015 Garissa attack in Kenya that claimed almost 150 lives, and a close confidant of Sheikh Mumin – had pledged allegiance to the Islamic State in late November. This appeared to be confirmed after Kuno’s militant group captured the strategic town of Dhobley in the Lower Jubba region on 9 December (according to other sources, it was actually not Dhobey, but Tuulo Barwaqo).⁴⁷

³⁹ OLADIPO, Tom: Al-Shabab wants IS to back off in East Africa, [online], 24.11.2015. Source: Hiiraan [08.08.2017.]

⁴⁰ Somalia’s Al-Qaeda branch warns members against joining IS, [online], 24.11.2017. Source: Hiiraan [08.08.2017.]

⁴¹ Fight Between Rival Al-Shabab Factions Kills 9, [online], 12.11.2015. Source: Hiiraan [08.08.2017.]

⁴² MARUF, Harun: Al-Shabab Official Threatens Pro-Islamic State Fighters, [online], 25.11.2017. Source: Hiiraan [08.08.2017.]

⁴³ AGNON, Shmuel Yosef: Al Shabaab Militants Execute 5 pro-ISIL Members in Lower Jubba, [online], 23.11.2015. Source: Intelligencebriefs [09.08.2017.]

⁴⁴ Suspected Leader of Pro-IS Al-Shabab Faction Reported Killed, [online], 23.11.2015. Source: Hiiraan [09.08.2017.]

⁴⁵ AGNON, Shmuel Yosef: Islamic State Takfiri Militant Group Blames Al Shabaab Terrorists For Killing Jihadi Defectors in Somalia, [online], 13.12.2015. Source: Intelligencebriefs [09.08.2017.]; Sudanese USAID employee assassin killed by al-Shabaab in Somalia, [online], 05.12.2015. Source: Sudantribune [09.08.2017.]

⁴⁶ 200 Al-Shabab Fighters Pledge Allegiance to ISIS, [online], 25.12.2015. Source: Hiiraan [09.08.2017.]

⁴⁷ Al-Shabaab commander’s pledge to Islamic State amid in-fighting moderately reduces terrorism risks to Kenyan border region, [online], 09.12.2015. Source: Hiiraan [09.08.2017.]; Somalia: Pro-ISIL fighters take town near Kenyan border, [online], 09.12.2015. Source: AllAfrica [09.08.2017.]

According to media reports, Kuno defected with 1,200 fighters, including the members of the elite Kenyan operations unit Jaysh Ayman. It was feared by FGS that Kuno would establish a working link with Sheikh al Somali, a pro-IS radical preacher in Kenya.⁴⁸

Other sources denied Kuno's betrayal though. Matt Bryden, the director of Sahan Research wrote that he had not seen any credible information about Kuno's move and the fact that al-Shabaab praised him after his death contradicted his purported alliance with Mumin.⁴⁹ The alliance of Mumin and Kuno would have been a huge symbolic blow for Ahmad Diriye and Mahad Karate. Kuno knew and controlled almost all al-Shabaab operations in Kenya, so his defection threatened the biggest achievement of al-Shabaab: its regionalisation and new bridgeheads in Kenya.

On 11 December, Jihadist militants seized the village of Tuulo Barwaqo, over 120 kilometres Northwest of Kismayu, the capital of Jubaland. The militants insisted that they were IS loyalists who had replaced the Jubaland authority in the area. The chief of the village, who represented the Jubaland Interim Administration (JIA) and other officials fled when they heard that IS fighters were heading towards the area.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, the strength of this group must have been limited, because JIA forces recaptured Tuulo Barwaqo without fight within four days.⁵¹

The in-fighting within the Jihadist movement continued and distrust among members reached the highest level. Foreign fighters, some of whom had spent six or seven years fighting in the Horn of Africa, now were considered unreliable by the Somalis. Dozens of them left al-Shabaab and joined the Islamic State or surrendered to the government. As one of them told reporters, "some mujahedeen fighters are now preferring to fall into the enemy's hands instead of meeting death in the hands of brothers [...] they have no choice".⁵²

Two months after the split between Diriye and Abdulqadir Mumin, the Islamic State in Somalia seemed to be an emerging power. Mumin's fraction and al-Qaeda-loyal al-Shabaab warriors clashed in Timirshe, Bari region. Al-Shabaab wanted to expel the Islamic State's troops from the area to prevent the arrival of fresh supply of weapons and fighters from Yemen.⁵³

The fact that al-Shabaab warriors chose the Islamic State not only in the distant and safe North – far from *Amniyat* – but also some in the Southern core of the movement demonstrated that a wider rift within al-Shabaab was a real threat. There were Islamic State supporters not only in the Galgala Mountains, but also in the Kenyan–Somali border area. According to Joseph Boinett, the Inspector General of the National Police Service of Kenya, Islamic State sympathisers launched two attacks in Mandera county, Kenya, killing one soldier and two civilians, which was the first reported attack of the group.⁵⁴ According to

⁴⁸ Garissa massacre planner Mohamed Kuno joins ISIS, [online], 09.12.2015. Source: Hiiraan [09.08.2017.]

⁴⁹ The author's interview with Matt Bryden, September 2017.

⁵⁰ Fear as Islamic State fighters 'invade' village in Somalia, [online], 11.12.2015. Source: Hiiraan [09.08.2017.]

⁵¹ Somalia forces recapture village from militants, [online], 12.12.2015. Source: Hiiraan [09.08.2017.]

⁵² Tensions rise as al-Shabaab foreign fighters consider supporting Isis, [online], 09.12.2017. Source: Hiiraan [14.08.2017.]

⁵³ Somalia: Pro-ISIL militants, Al Shabaab clash in deadly Puntland infighting, [online], 24.12.2017. Source: Garoweonline [14.08.2017.]

⁵⁴ 200 Al-Shabab Fighters Pledge Allegiance... (2015); Al Shabaab now split in two and competing to show lethality, IG Boinnet says, [online], 24.12.2015. Source: Hiiraan [09.08.2017.]

Kenyan security services, by the end of December 2015, at least 200 fighters left al-Shabaab for the Islamic State in the border region.⁵⁵

In January, IS continued its media-campaign for al-Shabaab. The Somali fighters of the Islamic State in Libya sent a message to their brothers in the Horn to join the Caliphate: “To the mujahideens in al-Shabaab, we call upon you to put aside your pride and arrogance and your blind following of your leaders who lack wisdom. [...] O mujahideen in Somalia, o mujahideen who give bayah (allegiance) to the caliphate. Congratulations. We love you for the sake of Allah [...] We call upon you to be steadfast, to be firm, to always be strong and know that Allah is with you.”⁵⁶

After the honeymoon

Mumin and other commanders spent the next few months reorganising their supporters and building up the new movement which, under the shadow of *Amniyat*, was a slow process. In April, a new IS affiliate called Jabhat East Africa (JEA) pledged allegiance to the Caliphate, rejecting the approach of al-Shabaab and its allies in the Horn. According to its declaration “we in Jahba[t] East Africa are advising all East Africans to leave al-Shabaab and their sponsor groups, like Al-Muhajiroun, Al-Hijra and Ansar Islam [...] Like Al-Shabaab the sponsor groups have not understood the binding obligation of the Khalifah (caliphate) [...] We are telling the mujahideen in East Africa that al-Shabaab has now become a psychological and physical prison [...] To pledge bayah to Caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi is freedom for the mujahideen in East Africa and opportunity to wage jihad according to the Sunnah against the enemies of Allah.”⁵⁷

The relationship between ISS and JAE was not entirely clear; there was some overlap and, as with other IS groups, JAE was organised on a territorial basis and aimed at the young people of the wider region – Somalia, but more Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda. Jabhat East Africa was more a new ideological movement than a potential insurgency. According to Jason Warner, the group had limited operational capacities and its leader, Mohamed Abdi Ali, was arrested by Kenyan security forces in May 2016.⁵⁸

Thus, the first physical attack claimed by ISS took place only in April 2016, when they hit an AMISOM vehicle in the Taridish area of Mogadishu with an IED.⁵⁹ Although this garnered extensive media attention, “setting off an IED is hardly a major achievement in Somalia. [...] But it does testify to the presence of Islamic State sympathizers on the ground in Somalia, and the potential for the group to inspire fissures among al-Shabab fighters and sympathizers.”⁶⁰ Two weeks later, the Islamic State’s official media outlet, Amaq

⁵⁵ 200 Al-Shabab Fighters Pledge Allegiance... (2015); Al Shabaab now split in two and competing to show lethality... (2015)

⁵⁶ ISIS call for al-Shabaab fighters to defect and join them in Somalia as Islamic State tries to expand in Africa, [online], 12.01.2016. Source: Hiiraan [14.08.2017.]

⁵⁷ DEARDEN, Lizzie: Isis: New terrorist group Jahba East Africa pledges allegiance to “Islamic State” in Somalia, [online], 08.04.2016. Source: Independent [28.08.2017.]

⁵⁸ WARNER (2017): *op. cit.*

⁵⁹ COREY, Charlton: ISIL claims responsibility for bombing of African Union vehicle in Mogadishu marking its first ever attack in Somalia, [online], 25.04.2016. Source: Dailymail [14.08.2017.]

⁶⁰ WINSOR, Morgan: ISIS In Somalia: Islamic State Claims First-Ever Attack In Mogadishu While Courting Al-Shabab, [online], 26.04.2016. Source: Ibitimes [29.08.2017.]

News Agency, published a report about the second attack of ISS in Mogadishu against NISA forces.⁶¹ SNA forces killed twelve ISS fighters, including foreigners, in Janale, Lower Shabelle.⁶²

Abdi Hassan Hussein, the former director of the Puntland Intelligence Agency, noted that the number of Mumin followers had increased from 20–30 to 100–150. According to Hussein, “they received military supplies from Yemen – weapons, uniform, ISIS sent trainers who inspected their bases, and they have started sending financial support. The weapons shipment was delivered by sea from Mukallah city in Hadramouth; it arrived from the Red Sea coast of Somalia in February and March this year”.⁶³ The former director blamed the Somali Government for not taking seriously the threat ISS posed to the country.

In June, Somali Jihadists – both al-Shabaab and IS – suffered a great setback: Jubaland security forces killed Mohamed Kuno in an ambush in Kismayo.⁶⁴ Interestingly, on pro-al-Shabaab Andalus Radio, a commander subsequently stated that “avenging the death of our scholars and leaders is a binding obligation on our shoulders that we will never relinquish nor forget no matter how long it takes”.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, the death of its most experienced and sophisticated (potential) commander in the South degraded the pro-IS fraction’s capabilities.

In early September, four members of ISS were arrested in Bay Region by SNA.⁶⁶ According to the security forces of South–West Interim Administration (SWIA), among them was the regional commander of ISS.⁶⁷ Mumin’s faction later published a new video in which around seventy masked men – both Somalis and foreigners – speaking in Somali, English, Swahili and Arabic encouraged the audience to carry out a Jihad against the government and its supporters. The fighters celebrated Eid Adha. According to sources close to Garoweonline, the venue was bin Ja’el, a valley located east to the port city of Bossasso. One member of the group said in English that “the Caliphate of Prophet-hood came into effect now and it’s spreading everywhere and it’s in Somalia now”.⁶⁸

Nevertheless, almost a year after its establishment, these results and the visibility of the organisation remained limited. Mumin’s support came mainly from his own Ali Saleban/Majerteen sub-clan. Recruitment was so slow, that according to reports, he had to kidnap young boys for his movement.

Mumin tried to strengthen his movement through two initiatives. First, he promised reduced taxation and more focus on holy war instead of the never-ending political (clan) struggle in Somalia. ISS also promised less corruption and fewer abuses. This moderate approach provided some supports for ISS.⁶⁹

⁶¹ Islamic State says it carried out 2nd attack in Somalia, [online], 06.05.2017. Source: Idalenews [28.08.2017.]

⁶² Somalia army kills 12 Islamic State militants, [online], 05.05.2017. Source: Hiiraan [28.08.2017.]

⁶³ Intelligence Official: Islamic State Growing in Somalia, [online], 05.05.2016. Source: Hiiraan [28.08.2017.]

⁶⁴ Garissa university attack plotter Mohammed Kuno ‘dead’, [online], 01.06.2016. Source: BBC [28.08.2017.]

⁶⁵ Al-Shabaab confirms death of Dulyadayn, [online], 18.06.2016. Source: Goobjoog [28.08.2017.]

⁶⁶ Four IS fighters arrested in southwest Somalia, [online], 04 09 2016, Source: Hiiraan [29.08.2017.]

⁶⁷ Somalia: ISWA parades captured ISIL commander in Baidoa, [online], 02.09.2016. Source: AllAfrica [29.08.2017.]

⁶⁸ ISIS in Puntland releases new video declaring Caliphate in East Africa, [online], 19.09.2016. Source: Garoweonline [29.08.2017.]

⁶⁹ VOGT, Heidi: Islamic State in Africa Tries to Lure Members From al-Shabaab, [online], 28.10.2016. Source: Hiiraan [29.08.2017.]

The organisation launched its first large-scale military operation in Qandala, in the Bari region of Puntland, in late October 2016. Approximately 100 ISS soldiers captured the city without any resistance.⁷⁰ This marked the first time that the group managed to conquer territories in the Horn. Their strategic aims were both ideological and practical. They wanted to demonstrate that ISS could control the area, a precondition for establishing an ‘Islamic State’ in Somalia. In addition, the port of Qandala could serve as a communication and supply centre for the wider Middle East region.⁷¹

Qandala was also inhabited by Mumin’s Ali Saleban clan, so the emir could count on the support of his clansmen. As the Crisis Group’s analysts Zakaria Yusuf and Abdul Khalif pointed out, clan factors could play a decisive role. They emphasised that “the largest active clan militia is led by the former Bari region governor, Abdisamad Mohamed Galan, an outspoken critic of the current Puntland administration. He hails from the same clan family as Sheikh Mumin and enjoys the support of other minority clans. He and other armed clans in the Bari region operate largely outside the control of the Puntland government”.⁷² Therefore, Galan could provide military, political and logistical support for the movement. Local elders tried to persuade ISS fighters to leave the city though, so it is hard to judge how firmly the Ali Saleban clan supported Mumin.⁷³

Qandala thus demonstrated the weaknesses of ISS. Although Mumin wanted to conduct a Universalist movement, ISS failed to break free from clan dynamics. This limited its ability to build a wider national network.⁷⁴ The capture of the small port city relied not on the strength of ISS, but on the temporary weakness of Puntland. The forces of Garowe⁷⁵ were “severely overstretched, policing the long frontier with South and Central Somalia, keeping an eye on rebellious clans in Sool and Sanaag (regions also claimed by neighbouring Somaliland), or battling hostile armed groups in Galkayo (against GIA⁷⁶ forces), in Galgala Mountains (against Al-Shabaab) and in Qandala (against Galan’s militia)”.⁷⁷

The Puntland authorities also responded very slowly. Although the president of Puntland, Abdiweli Mohamed Ali Gaas, declared war against ISS in early November,⁷⁸ with the exception of a small raid by the Puntland Maritime Police Forces (PMPF) on 10 November,⁷⁹ he took no significant military steps against the Jihadists in Qandala. Only at the end of November, after negotiations between Puntland forces and militias from the Ali Saleban clan did fighters start their move towards the port.⁸⁰ Roadblocks erected by ISS and the fear of alienating the Ali Saleban clan made it a slow process though.⁸¹

⁷⁰ IS Militants Seize Town in Somalia’s Puntland, [online], 26.10.2016. Source: Hiiraan [29.08.2017.]

⁷¹ MAHMOOD (2016): *op. cit.*

⁷² YUSUF–KHALIF (2016): *op. cit.*

⁷³ IS Militants Seize Town... (2016).

⁷⁴ MAHMOOD (2016): *op. cit.*

⁷⁵ The capital of Puntland.

⁷⁶ Galmudug Interim Administration.

⁷⁷ YUSUF–KHALIF (2016): *op. cit.*

⁷⁸ Puntland president declares war on Islamic State, [online], 04.11.2016. Source: Hiiraan [30.08.2017.]

⁷⁹ Somalia: Puntland forces raid militant bases in Qandala city, [online], 10.11.2016. Source: AllAfrica [30.08.2017.]

⁸⁰ HASSEN, Abdiqani: Somali forces approach port town, ready to attack Islamic State, [online], 29.11.2016. Source: Hiiraan [30.08.2017.]

⁸¹ Somalia: Puntland forces approach Qandala, led by Bari Governor, [online], 03.12.2016. Source: Garoweonline [30.08.2017.]

The first direct clash between Puntland forces and ISS happened in Bashashin village, 50 kilometres west of Qandala, when regional troops stopped to dismantle landmines planted by Jihadists.⁸² The fighting continued in the coming days, and it is unclear when the Puntland forces liberated the city.⁸³ According to Shabellenews, NATO warships patrolling the coast of Somalia were also involved in the battle.⁸⁴ By 7 December, Mumin's forces withdrew to the nearby mountains and the Bin Ja'ael valley.⁸⁵

After Qandala

The recapture of Qandala demonstrated the limited military potentials of ISS well. Mumin took a risk and he lost. By the time of concluding this analysis (30 October 2017), almost one year after the Qandala operations, the conquest of the port was the only big military achievement of pro-IS fractions in the Horn and the only step towards the control of a bigger area, a basic condition for the establishment of a de facto Islamic State. But ISS could hold its position only for a month and it seemed that its military power and public support were not enough to maintain its rule.

As Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Nathaniel Barr stated, "IS managed to establish only a small and tenuous foothold in Somalia".⁸⁶ A report in *Hiiraan* went further, noting that "arguably, Mumin's biggest success is his designation by the U.S. as a serious terrorist threat – making him the potential target of a drone strike".⁸⁷ In the same paper, Matt Bryden argued that IS "prospects for expansion are limited".⁸⁸

Yet by the end of November 2016, according to the analysis of Omar Mahmood, ISS had launched ten attacks in Somalia, mainly in Mogadishu and in the North. As Mahmood emphasised, "it is unclear if these cells maintain links and function as a cohesive unit, or even receive any assistance from the Islamic State. More likely, they represent a collection of disparate but ideologically aligned al-Shabaab defectors, operating in distinct geographic zones".⁸⁹ This situation has not changed in recent months: the Islamic State in Somalia remains a loose (sometimes hardly existing) network of militias.

Puntland forces continued the operations against ISS in early 2017, destroying some military bases in the North.⁹⁰ In January, Puntland forces paraded with the captured weapons and explosives of ISS in Bossasso, while President Gaas visited the liberated city.⁹¹ In early

⁸² MARUF, Harun: Somalia security forces and IS fighters directly clash for first time, [online], 03.12.2016. Source: Hiiraan [30.08.2017.]

⁸³ Somalia: Puntland forces haven't recaptured Qandala, says security official, [online], 05.12.2016. Source: Garoweonline [30.08.2017.]

⁸⁴ Puntland army launch anti-ISIL offensive in Qandala, [online], 03.12.2016. Source: Baydhabo [30.08.2017.]

⁸⁵ Somalia: Puntland security forces recaptured port town from ISIS, [online], 07.12.2016. Source: Garoweonline [30.08.2017.]

⁸⁶ GARTENSTEIN-ROSS, Daveed – BARR, Nathaniel: How al-Qaeda Survived the Islamic State Challenge, [online], 01.03.2017. Source: Hudson [29.08.2017.]

⁸⁷ Who Is The US-Designated 'Terrorist' Leading ISIS in Somalia?, [online], 02.09.2016. Source: Hiiraan [29.08.2017.]

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ MAHMOOD (2016): *op. cit.*

⁹⁰ HASSAN, Mohamed Olad: Regional Somali forces 'destroy' Islamic State base, [online], 19.12.2016. Source: Hiiraan [30.08.2017.]

⁹¹ Somalia: Puntland parades weapons seized from IS fighters, [online], 11.01.2017. Source: Garoweonline [30.08.2017.]

February, the residents of Karin, a small village 35 kilometres outside of Bossasso, reported that they found the decapitated bodies of three men believed to have been kidnapped by pro-IS fighters days earlier.⁹² A week later, ISS claimed responsibility for the attack on the Village Hotel in Bossasso, in which Jihadists killed four soldiers on the national election's day.⁹³ On 28 March, a roadside bomb hit the convoy of Puntland forces near Qandala, killing a soldier and wounding another. Garowe blamed ISS for the attack.⁹⁴ In mid-April, fighters who were believed to be pro-IS sympathisers captured a small village, Dasan near Qandala and then suddenly deserted it.⁹⁵

One month later, ISS conducted its first reported suicide bombing in Somalia. Its fighter tried to attack a hotel in Bossasso which was frequently visited by government officials, but according to the local police chief "security forces stopped the suspect when he approached, but he detonated himself leaving five people dead. One of the security officers and four civilians were killed in the blast".⁹⁶

These attacks had limited effects. According to the senior military officer of the Puntland force, Ahmed Mahmoud Yusuf, the number of ISS fighters was only around seventy at that time (much less than a small-clan militia) and they survived only by stealing from the local population.⁹⁷ Other experts were not so optimistic. Matt Bryden estimated that ISS still had at least 200–300 men, and although Puntland "does have a well-trained and relatively cohesive paramilitary force in the Darawish, and it has an effective command strike force in the Puntland security forces [...] But clearly fighting both to the west and east of Bossasso it found itself on the defensive".⁹⁸

Summary – Moving towards 'al-Shabaabisation'?

The two-year history of the Islamic State in Somalia is not, however, a success story. ISS failed to break through in the Horn, and its biggest success is that it has survived. As Stig Jarle Hansen pointed out, the Islamic State "has achieved a number of symbolic victories – a pledge of allegiance from Boko Haram in Nigeria, the loyalty of at least one faction of the militant group al-Mourabitoun in Mali, and the support of a few minor al-Shabab sellouts like Mumin – but it has failed to displace al Qaeda as the continent's premier Jihadist franchise".⁹⁹

Moreover, since the battle for Qandala, reports indicated that ISS has changed tactics. Because it lacks the capacity to control territories, the Islamic State in Somalia uses the current tactics, techniques and procedures of al-Shabaab. It conducts small-scale terrorist

⁹² Pro-ISIS militants abduct and behead three outside Qandala, [online], 01.02.2017. Source: Hiiraan [30.08.2017.]

⁹³ Somalia: ISIL claims responsibility for attack on Village Hotel in Bosaso, [online], 08.02.2017. Source: Garoweonline [30.08.2017.]

⁹⁴ One soldier killed, one wounded by roadside bomb in Somalia's Puntland, [online], 28.03.2017. Source: Reuters [31.08.2017.]

⁹⁵ Somalia: Militants linked to ISIS briefly size village near Qandala, [online], 16.04.2017. Source: Garoweonline [31.08.2017.]

⁹⁶ Islamic state claims first suicide attack in Somalia, kills 5, [online], 24.05.2017. Source: Hiiraan [31.08.2017.]

⁹⁷ Somalia: ISIS fighter surrenders to Puntland authorities, [online], 06.06.2017. Source: Garoweonline [31.08.2017.]

⁹⁸ MARUF, Harun: Somali Officials Condemn Attacks, Vow Revenge, [online], 09.06.2017. Source: VOA [31.08.2017.]

⁹⁹ HANSEN, Stig Jarle: The Islamic State Is Losing in Africa, [online], 13.12.2016. Source: Foreign Policy [01.09.2017.]

and guerrilla attacks against relatively soft targets. Mumin appears to have accepted the reality of the situation and started a more systematic build-up of an insurgency movement.

This realistic approach, ironically, could mean the end of his movement. After a decade of a prolonged Jihadist insurgency, the Islamic State brought fresh air to the fight against “crusaders and their puppets”, aiming the purification of the movement from the ‘Somali’ elements (clannism, corruption, alienation of the local population by taxation, forced recruitment and atrocities) and offering better living circumstances to the Somalis. Although this agenda was extremely optimistic, and ISS had modest capacities to realise it, many weary Islamist fighters were ready to support the group. The use of clans, terrorist attacks against Somali targets, taxing and looting the local population, and other such measures might mean in the long term, that ISS could degrade, losing its foreign recruitment and the chance for wider financial support. Mumin neglected his own ideological agenda, and therefore, it is unlikely that ISS will reach even the level of successes al-Shabaab did.

As of October 2017, though, the agenda of ISS had not entirely failed. There were reports about the inner clashes of Somali Jihadists in the South, which demonstrate that the debate between pro-IS sympathisers and hard-core al-Qaeda supporters is not over, even in the core areas and groups of al-Shabaab.¹⁰⁰ The continued IS propaganda to gain the support of low- and mid-ranking fighters¹⁰¹ also shows that a pro-IS change in the leadership of the movement could mean a general shift to the Islamic State. Sympathy for the Caliphate might be wider than it seems. Diriye has been strong and determined enough to hold together his movement, however, the members of the Shura have remained unified, which was and perhaps is the biggest weapon of al-Shabaab.

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¹⁰⁰ WABALA, Dominic: Al-Shabaab in a major split over mistrust, [online], 13.08.2017. Source: Hiiraan [01.09.2017.]

¹⁰¹ MAHMOOD (2016): *op. cit.*

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