BOOK REVIEW

Stig Jarle Hansen. *Al-Shabaab in Somalia: The History and Ideology of a Militant Islamist Group*. London: Hurst and Company, 2016. xvi + 213 pp. Foreword. Chronology. Glossary. Notes. Bibliography. Index. $21.95. Paper. ISBN: 978-0190264826

Stig Jarle Hansen, in a revised paperback version of his 2013 publication *Al–Shabaab in Somalia: The History and Ideology of a Militant Islamist Group*, explores "how international ideology and local dynamics fused to produce one of Somalia's most efficient political organizations" (vii). In nine chapters and a postscript, Hansen outlines the place of Islamic religion in the group's emergence (Chapter 2), its expansive phases and accomplishments from 2005 to 2010 (Chapters 3 through 6), and its travails and defeats (Chapters 7 and 8). In Chapter 9 and the postscript, he assesses the group's endurance despite its internal divisions and a series of defeats by the combined forces of the Somali transitional government and its allies from Ethiopia, Kenya, the African Union, and the United Nations. Hansen relies on extensive field research, the result of multiple visits to Somalia and numerous field interviews with leaders of al-Shabaab, officers of the African Union Mission in Somalia, and officials of the Transitional Federal Government, as well as with academics and Somali citizens, to draw interesting insights about al-Shabaab's origin, ideology, expansion, and "connection" with regional and global al-Qaeda groups, as well as its connection to local aspirations.

Hansen argues that al-Shabaab's international connections were strong from the beginning, although it has struggled to maintain ideological unity while coping with internal division (12). He locates the origin of al-Shabaab in the activities of a loose network of defensive jihad veterans of the Afghan war (1979–1989). These veterans, who on return to Somalia advocated a wider *ummah* (Muslim community) against Western intrusion in Somalia, inspired the Somalis who later became al-Shabaab's leaders. Their message drew a new generation of Somalis into defensive international jihad, particularly after the 9/11 attacks, when the United States attacked Afghanistan in search of al-Qaeda and its affiliates. Locally, clan politics and the clashes between warlords and the transitional government of Somalia resulted in fierce wars and insecurity. The conflicts in Somalia were multipolar; warring parties and affiliations were not clear. A variety of factions, including criminal groups, were fighting for a variety of targets, and these wars led to losses

https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2018.118 Published online by Cambridge University Press

on all sides. It was out of this chaos that al-Shabaab would later emerge from a loose group of Islamic-inspired groups, including al-Ittihad al-Islamiya (AIAI). These groups merged to form the Islamic Court Union (ICU), an alternative administrative system to the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) which occupied northern Somalia.

Hansen notes that within the ICU, al-Shabaab was considerably influential. ICU was a product of the loosely formed Sharia Courts. Alongside the ICU, al-Shabaab trained local members and mobilized foreign fighters, most of whom returned to Somalia as militants for al-Shabaab. During this time, the al-Shabaab membership was not clearly delineated. The ensuing confrontations between the Sharia Courts and the Ethiopian forces destabilized the Sharia forces and resulted in heavy defeats for al-Shabaab, leading to the reconfiguration of the organization and identification of a clear-cut membership. It also moved the group, between 2009 and 2010, from a guerrilla movement which primarily used suicide attacks to an organization with territorial control of a large part of southern Somalia. Al-Shabaab's most important victory was the seizure of Kismayo, a port city from which it collected taxes and import duties and which it used as a base for importing weapons.

Following the Djibouti agreement, which achieved the withdrawal of Ethiopian forces, al-Shabaab experienced a golden age as it won more territories—specifically Baidoa, Jowhar, and Beled Weyne—and established a local governance structure to oversee its conquered territories. However, after the August 2011 Ramadan offensive (attacks on TFG during Ramadan), al-Shabaab's victories were overturned by the powerful forces of the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM). AMISOM and TFG forces defeated the group in subsequent attacks, handing the organization its most serious defeats since 2006. These defeats also exposed the lack of unity within the group; its leader, Ahmed Abdi Godane, began to face internal opposition and responded by targeting his rivals for punishment or death. Al-Shabaab also withdrew from more cities that had been under its control, but at the same time increased its terrorist attacks, a point that the attack on Westgate Mall aptly proves. Al-Shabaab still poses a major threat to Somalia even though it is now a weaker organization.

While Hansen provides substantial information about the group's history, ideology, and trajectory, the extent to which al-Shabaab is affiliated with other terrorist groups as well as its internal or external jihadist involvement is still not clear. Hansen is skeptical of al-Shabaab's link to al-Qaeda and other global terrorist networks. Most of the links drawn between al-Shabaab and all other Islamic groups, including al-Qaeda, AQIM, AQAP, al-Qaeda in the Middle East, and others, are either as "declarations of loyalty" (2) or a "matter of speculation" (127, 139). While the group may in fact be connected to any or all of these other organizations, the strength of their bond is more in their mimicry of the leading Islamic group, which at first was al-Qaeda, followed by ISIS later on; it is not certain that the group is a part of the global jihadi movement coordinated to conquer the West.

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Also, al-Shabaab is perceived by the local population as a fair and just organization, in contrast to the Somali state. While it is true that the group later turned violent, this should not be considered strange, given that the group members had been victims of violent attacks by the combined forces of the state and its regional and international allies. If the origin, dynamics, and transmutations of al-Shabaab are taken into consideration, it may be understood as an organization that is not only involved in violent activities. According to Hansen, "Al Shabaab leadership's ideology and its well-developed problem solving mechanism" "made it the most unified actor in southern Somalia" (72). The organization showed it could govern while implementing a more transparent form of justice; this is an area where the Somali government, backed by external powers, had failed (72). However, this important factor, Hansen carefully notes, has been overlooked by most observers except for the Somalis themselves.

The depth with which the text explores the complexity of the al-Shabaab movement is useful for gaining insights into the multi-faceted world of ideological movements in Africa. This book is informative for all readers wishing to understand the intricacies of Islamist organizations, but especially for students, commentators, and policy analysts.

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doi:10.1017/asr.2018.118

For more reading on this subject, see:

Adepoju, Aderanti. 1982. "The Refugee Situation in the Horn of Africa and Sudan." *Issue: Quarterly Journal of Opinion* 12 (1-2): 29–34. doi:10.1017/S1548450500002973.

Ingiriis, Mohamed Haji. 2018. "From Pre-Colonial Past to the Post-Colonial Present: The Contemporary Clan-Based Configurations of Statebuilding in Somalia." *African Studies Review* 61 (2): 55–77. doi:10.1017/asr.2017.144.