Book review

by Anthony Mpiani

Al-Shabaab poses a security threat to the global community. The group's etiology, ideology, recruitment strategies and criminal activities have received some scholarly attention (Marchal, 2010; Menkhaus, 2008; Pape, 2010; Vidino, Pantucci and Kohleman, 2010). Although these studies offer valuable insights into Al-Shabaab, Hansen's (2013) book identifies and addresses some significant gaps in the existing literature. Contrary to the claims that Ethiopia's invasion of Somalia between 2006 and 2007 led to the formation of Al-Shabaab, that the organisation has a local focus, and that it has been static over the years (see Marchal, 2010; Menkhaus, 2008; Pape, 2010), the book argues that large-scale corruption and misuse of funds by the Western-backed government of Somalia created fertile grounds for the group's formation. It demonstrates that Al-Shabaab is a product of the import of Al-Qaeda's ideology into Somalia. It further shows that Al-Shabaab has not been a static organisation and that it has international connections with other terrorist groups. Generally, the author provides a comprehensive and nuanced analysis of Al-Shabaab's history, ideology, recruitment strategies, successes and failures from 2005 to 2012. This exceptionally well-researched book is divided into nine complementary chapters.

The first chapter introduces Al-Shabaab. It explains why the group is significant, provides insights into the circumstances that promoted its formation, justifies why the study was conducted and highlights some methodological challenges the author encountered. Employing a historical approach, the author shows that Al-Shabaab was started by 33 Somali–Afghan war veterans, who returned to Somalia with jihadist ideologies. He argues that the global Islamic rhetoric, the large-scale corrupt activities of the warlords and the Transitional Federal Government (TFG), as well as the failure of the United Nations Development Program to pay the local people it recruited and trained as police, precipitated the formation of Al-Shabaab. He states that the group is attractive to foreign jihadists due to its religious (Islamic) rhetoric and financial motivation. The second chapter sets the stage by interrogating the political and religious developments that gave birth to Al-Shabaab. According to Hansen, Siad Barre's regime failed to provide political and social security to Somalis. Therefore, religious organisations at the time carried out charitable activities and assisted Somalis in fighting injustices. This created a positive image for religious leaders. Consequently, there was a religious resurgence marked by two developments: the resurfacing of new Islamist organisations and the increase in the use of religious titles and symbols.

Chapter three thoroughly examines the existing contradictory accounts on the origins of Al-Shabaab. While Hansen acknowledges that some of these accounts contain a few grains of truth, he argues that others are totally disingenuous. The confusion, he claims, stems from the fact that people could not differentiate the "real" Al-Shabaab from similar groups that existed during its formation. The first expansive phase of Al-Shabaab (2005–2006) is covered by the fourth chapter. It is shown that the political developments in mid-2000 contributed to the expansion of Al-Shabaab's network. The Western-backed TFG became unpopular and Al-Shabaab capitalised on its weakness to project its image. At the same time, ethnic divisions led to the conversion of extant Sharia Courts (IS) into the Islamic Court Union (ICU) in which Al-Shabaab members received high positions, became connected to the business community and acquired access to funding for the group's activities. The

fifth chapter examines how Al-Shabaab reorganised itself and executed fatal attacks in 2007. It also discusses Ethiopia's military intervention, which led to a temporary defeat of Al-Shabaab, restoring normalcy in Somalia in 2007.

Chapter six focuses on Al-Shabaab's governance of its controlled territories. Hansen notes that the group had regional administrative centres (Wilaayada) in the cities. Territories outside regional centres, however, were administered by clan militias. The governorate carried out development works and provided Islamic education to its members. The challenges faced by Al-Shabaab from 2010 and beyond are discussed in the seventh chapter. The author elucidates the extent to which the Ramadan offensive in 2010 created mistrust in the group and how that impacted on it afterwards. The eighth chapter captures Al-Shabaab's losses and successes from 2005 to 2012. For example, it is documented here that Al-Shabaab has established links in Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania and Ethiopia. Hansen finally concludes (in the ninth chapter) that Al-Shabaab still exists, that it holds some territories, that it is profitable, that it has international links, that it is viewed positively by some Somalis and that it will only collapse if it tarnishes its image by acting contrary to the expectations of its supporters.

A strength of this book is that it provides a detailed account on Al-Shabaab. It draws on a thoughtful triangulation of primary data sources (such as interviews) and secondary sources (including publications by Al-Shabaab and other relevant extant literature) to provide a holistic analysis, which helps readers obtain a nuanced understanding of the origin, structures, activities and current status of Al-Shabaab. Besides the in-depth information provided on the group, Hansen painstakingly chronicles the life stories of Al-Shabaab's core leaders (such as Robow and Shongola) for readers to understand how one's socio-economic circumstances could predispose them to criminality. Additionally, the book dazzlingly shows the extent to which cultural, political, social and economic factors shape the security landscape in Somalia. What is intriguing is how Al-Shabaab employs clan loyalty as a tool for maintaining its existence. The revelations about Al-Shabaab suggest that terrorism is a multi-causal phenomenon. Furthermore, the book demonstrates how technology (especially the Internet) promotes the activities of terrorist organisations. The findings on Al-Shabaab's use of the Internet are consistent with studies showing that technology has some impact on terrorism (Rudner, 2017; Adams, 2014; Janbek and Williams, 2014).

Despite the strengths discussed above, the book has a few weaknesses that are worth mentioning. Most notably, the author provides readers with few of the responses from his interviews. His endnotes suggest that he conducted over 40 interviews. Only a handful, however, are cited in the book. A few more citations would have strengthened his arguments. Also, Hansen notes that governance was problematic for Al-Shabaab. Yet, he does not explain how it contributed to the group's decline. If he had focused more on Al-Shabaab's governance structure, readers would have been able to compare it with the TFG and determine if Al-Shabaab was indeed an alternative. In addition, the role of women in Al-Shabaab seems not to have been afforded significant scrutiny by the author. Women perform several functions to ensure the continuity of Al-Shabaab (Donnelly, 2018). Nonetheless, readers are provided with little information on their contributions to the group. Accordingly, the book creates an impression that Al-Shabaab is an all-male terrorist organisation. Furthermore, the author sometimes appears to be speculative in some of his arguments. Aden Hashi Ayro and Muktar Robow were central members of Al-Shabaab, who established contacts with Al-Qaeda. In describing how they linked up with Al-Qaeda, Hansen writes: '[I]t is likely that international jihadists [Al-Qaeda members] fought side by side with them [in the Battle of Dolow city], and this might have been the occasion when the two first established contact with Al-Qaeda' (p. 22). This statement, however, is not backed by any evidence. Moreover, Hansen briefly analyses how Al-Shabaab generates funds internally for its activities. It would have been equally

interesting if he had examined the group's external sources of funding as well. March (2011) has, for example, documented that Al-Shabaab liaises with local importers, who receive goods from their sympathisers in the diaspora, sell it and give the money to the organisation. Finally, given the fact that Al-Shabaab controls some territories in Somalia, it would have been a good idea if Hansen had examined the possibility of power sharing between the (legitimate) government of Somalia and the insurgent group.

Overall, the book is very insightful as it provides answers to some of the questions that society asks about Al-Shabaab. It also unveils the power dynamics underlying the Somali security landscape and helps readers appreciate the multi-causal and multifaceted nature of terrorism. The book is a must-read for scholars and experts who are interested in contemporary conflicts, African politics and political Islam.

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