



# Rebranding Al Shabaab: Geopolitics, Greed, Ineptitude and the Losing Battle Against Terror

By Abukar Arman



We live in a world where the most crucial aspects of our lives have become profoundly interconnected and indeed interdependent. And this reality, needless to say, makes international cooperation for security a strategic imperative.

Unfortunately, when it comes to security, and more specifically terrorism and counterterrorism, the marketability of one's expertise mainly depends on one's willingness to unquestionably, embrace the official narrative. In the West and across the Middle East and Africa, the media and pundits have become relentless echo chambers of this master narrative.

How has that master narrative made our world safer in the past two decades? Do we not have more terrorists today than when the global war on terrorism was launched and have not despots and corrupt rulers around the world joined the cause? Is it not time to pose the question: Why is insecurity dealt with as though it exists in vacuum?

Considering the prominence of what I call the dis-strategic approach to fight Al Shabaab, I believe that things are likely to get worse before they start getting better.

## **FGS: An imaginary government**

Almost every aspect of security in Somalia is outsourced to foreign actors with deeply entrenched competing interests. Though their scopes vary, none of these actors are accountable to the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS), which has fostered a condition that entirely lacks strategic cohesion and centralised command and control.

A case in point: The Kenyan Defence Force (KDF) has a free hand in Jubbaland and the Kenyan government has more clout in that federal state than the FGS. (Capturing the port of Kismaayo in Jubbaland from Al Shabaab was a stated goal of KDF when it invaded Somalia in October 2011.)

Similarly, Ethiopia has a free hand in Baay and Bakool regions of the South West federal state. While both Kenya and Ethiopia are part of the African Union Mission in Somalia (Amisom), they have been operating strategically independent of the mission that was endorsed by the United Nations Security Council and funded by the international community. The troops on the ground from Kenya, Ethiopia and Uganda mainly take their orders from their respective governments in Nairobi, Addis Ababa or Kampala.

Like its predecessors, the current FGS has not been able to subdue Al Shabaab, significantly improve security or to implement a robust strategy to claim a monopoly on violence. Around mid-2017, FGS staged a targeted disarmament campaign in Mogadishu that proved to be subjective and problematic as it was interpreted as a sub-clan defanging operation. This ill-advised campaign ignited inter-clan tensions that continue to get worse.

When the dust settled, the FGS reactivated a controversial foreign-driven cooption strategy initiated by the previous government to lure top Al Shabaab militants to defect and join the government. This strategy led to some key government appointments, such as that of [Zakariya Ahmed Hersi](#) - believed to be the man who orchestrated the deadly Garissa University College attack in Kenya - who is now one of the top officials at Somalia's National Intelligence and Security Agency (NISA).

In August 2017, Mukhtar Robow (aka Abu Mansour), who was the former spokesman and a deputy leader of Al Shabaab, defected. For more than a year, Robow was treated like a celebrity who had only played the role of a terrorist on TV. Robow then embarked on a government-funded rebranding campaign. During that period, he met with a number of traditional clan elders, international diplomats, including the British Ambassador, and various government officials and Members of Parliament.

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Initially, the FGS and the international community presented Robow as a model of de-radicalisation; both were eager to allow him to participate in the South West federal state election. When it looked like Robow was winning the election, something suddenly compelled the FGS to pull the rug under him - a process that caused deaths in Baidoa, the arrest of Robow, and the expulsion of the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General which subsequently led to domestic and international [consequences](#).

The irony is that up till now, Al Shabaab has been successfully outperforming the FGS in almost all fronts: in terms of governance and a monopoly on violence in areas which it controls, collecting “taxes” or extortion money without preferring one group or economic class over another, providing humanitarian services, such as distribution of goats and sheep during Eid, and “administering justice”. So effective are Al Shabaab’s courts that people who are in business disputes or those whose houses have been occupied by a member of a strong clan often seek rulings in their courts. Unlike the FGS courts, where such rulings could change so many times due to bribes and counter-bribes, Al Shabaab’s rulings are final. Or, as is widely known, there will be some serious consequences.

Add the controversial arrest of Robow and FGS’ reputation of silencing its opponents by taking draconian measures against them and the government comes across as less democratic than the terrorists they helped rebrand. This could have negative implications on the state-building project in Somalia.

Despite the façade of competence that it projects to those that readily fund its “war against Al Shabaab”, the FGS has been crippled by various projects that auction out Somalia’s natural sources to the highest shady bidder. This is why the FGS has not gained an inch of new territory from Al Shabaab in the past two years.

### **Kenya’s supposed war on terror**

Kenya is only second to Somalia when it comes to being the stage of some very spectacular terror acts by Al Shabaab. These include the Westgate mall attack in September 2013 where 67 people were killed, the Garissa University College attack in April 2015 that claimed the lives of 147 students, and the latest attack in January 2019 targeting the Dusit building complex in Nairobi where more than 20 people died.

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Due to the political fault lines, or the dynamics of colonial legacy, the politics of domination, the ever-mutating geopolitical interests that are often masqueraded as a war against terrorism, Kenya, Ethiopia and Somalia (and rest of the Horn) are likely to remain volatile. And, as if this is not perilous enough, both Kenya and Ethiopia are bent on advancing their own [political, economic, and security interests in Somalia](#) while keeping diplomatic doors open and counting on successive incompetent and corrupt Somali governments that fail to recognise the importance of reconciling within itself and its own people before demanding substantive respect to its sovereignty.

Meanwhile – and perhaps in a way that is less covert than Ethiopia’s cooperation with Al Shabaab (elaboration below) – KDF has been executing Kenya’s plan to unilaterally establish a buffer zone in an area that technically annexes Somali territory. KDF has been providing support to Jubbaland’s leaders who implicitly endorse the wall that Kenya says it is building along the Kenya-Somalia border. Kenya has also controversially laid claim to a section of Somalia’s maritime border, a triangle rich in oil; this case is currently before the [International Court of Justice](#). And in recent months, Jubbaland’s leadership has technically severed its relationship with the FGS.

Moreover, it has been alleged that KDF operates an illegal enterprise with Al Shabaab and corrupt Somali officials. As recent reports have revealed, [KDF is “in business”](#) with the terrorist

organisation. It helps them in “tax collection” at checkpoints and in smuggling contraband. A 2015 report titled [“Black and White: Kenya’s Criminal Racket in Somalia”](#), stated that KDF was involved in a \$400-million sugar and charcoal smuggling scheme that funded Al Shabaab militants in Somalia. The report further claimed that profits from this illicit trade were being split between the Jubbaland administration of Ahmed Madobe (whose militia fought alongside KDF as they marched towards Kismaayo), KDF officials and Al Shabaab.

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These realities have corroded Kenya’s goodwill capital.

### **Ethiopia’s counterproductive intelligence**

Unlike Kenya, much of Ethiopia’s insecurity is the side effect of authoritarian rule of the previous regime and the brutality of its security forces. It is worth noting that it was US-backed Ethiopian forces that pushed the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC) out of Mogadishu in 2006; later on Al Shabaab forced the Ethiopian forces out of Somalia and took control of large swathes of central and southern Somalia, including the capital. This begs the question: How did Ethiopia manage to escape Al Shabaab’s wrath despite being the country that destroyed the UIC and that carried out [the most brutal occupation](#) in Somalia’s history between 2007 and 2009?

The answer partially lies in the fact that there is not a single clan-based faction or armed religious sect in Somalia that the previous Ethiopian regime did not arm, fund and supply subjective intelligence data to in order to eradicate their rival groups. This divide-and-rule strategy has proved to be counterproductive and has led to the growth of armed groups that were previously unarmed.

Back in 2007, shortly after the Ethiopian invasion of Somalia, the RAND Corporation published a book titled [Building Moderate Muslim Networks](#). The book offered what many policymakers in the West considered a viable strategy in countering extremism and curtailing terrorism: to arm, empower, and boost the image of “Sufi Muslims” who were willing to fight against the “Salafi jihadis” who were coming to destroy the graves and tombs of their holy men. Ethiopia became the testing ground; hence the growth of Ahlu Sunna WalJama’a (ASWJ), a paramilitary religious group of various shades that operates in some parts of Somalia.

But ASWJ could not be trusted to become a powerful faction with one common objective and command structure. After all, legendary freedom fighters, such as Sayyid Mohamed Abdulla Hassan of Somalia, Omar Mukhtar of Libya and the Mahdi Muhammad Ahmed of Sudan were all Sufis. Therefore, ASWJ had to be supported along sub-clan basis in order to ensure perpetual fragmentation and to sow seeds of mistrust. This was not too difficult for Ethiopia; it was already using a similar strategy against warlords, Al Shabaab, and the Ras Kamboni militia, a defunct extremist group.

### **The transnational threat pretext**

For terrorism to be curtailed, the local and the international press must scrutinise the official narrative in order to get to the bottom of the dynamics at play; it is the only way to filter out real terrorism from geopolitical gambits.

You may recall that back in 2002, a group calling itself the [Army of Palestine](#) fired anti-aircraft

missiles at an Israeli airplane in Kenya, using two shoulder-launched missiles, only to miss and abandon their valuable arsenal for the Kenyan police to discover before the same group re-emerged in a suicide car bomb attack on a hotel ( Paradise Beach resort, Kikambala) populated by Israeli nationals, [claiming the lives of nine Kenyans and three Israeli tourists](#). The Army of Palestine has since ridden off into the horizon, never to be heard from again.

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Seventeen years later, we have Al Shabaab using radicalised Kenyans, [claiming responsibility for the DusitD2 Hotel](#) terror attack and stating it “was retaliation for US President Donald Trump’s decision to declare Jerusalem the capital city of Israel”.

Of course the statement does not answer the critical questions that come to mind: What took them this long? Why this particular target? What does Kenya have to do with a decision made by the U.S. and Israel? But it does establish a sound pretext for Israel—which has been actively expanding its influence in Africa—to establish a military presence in the Horn in order to stop Al Shabaab’s transnational threats in their tracks.

### **Commonsensical counterterrorism**

Globally, as well as regionally, when it comes to understanding the causes and effects of terrorism, most have surrendered their commonsense and capacity to think critically to their respective authorities, who often subjectively frame their perceptions. Frightened minds naturally lend their full trust to and seek protection from the authorities, even when these authorities have nothing more than a false sense of security to offer.

Cooperation must be based on good faith and willingness to explore data beyond the fear of discovering other issues that may challenge our preconceived realities. When collaborating nations submissively get locked into a single story or an officially packaged master narrative that terrorists are only driven by religious extremism and that they are better dealt with when dead, one must take a quick scan through the rear view mirror of history.

Sustainable security will remain a pie in the sky as long the international community continues its Amisom-focused stabilisation initiative at the expense of rebuilding robust Somali military and security forces that are capable of keeping extremists at bay and securing Somalia’s borders.

And Somalia and its neighbours will not vanquish terror while Kenya, Ethiopia and their allies remain knee-deep in Somalia’s internal political affairs and continue to exert influence on various Somali “leaders” by fuelling factional or clan-based politics.

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