

## Responses to Information Requests

Responses to Information Requests (RIR) respond to focused Requests for Information that are submitted to the Research Directorate in the course of the refugee protection determination process. The database contains a seven-year archive of English and French RIRs. Earlier RIRs may be found on the UNHCR's [Refworld](#) website.

26 November 2013

### SOM104662.E

Somalia: Information on al-Shabaab, including areas of control, recruitment, and affiliated groups (2012-Nov. 2013)  
Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

#### 1. Overview

Al-Shabaab [also spelled al-Shabab; also known as Harakat al-Shabab al-Mujahideen] is a militant Islamist group based in Somalia (Human Rights Watch 16 Apr. 2013; CFR 23 Sept. 2013). Al-Shabaab formally allied itself with al-Qaeda in February 2012 (BBC 24 Sept. 2013a; CNN 23 Sept. 2013; CFR 23 Sept. 2013).

Various sources writing in 2012 and 2013 described the group as "weakened" (CFR 23 Sept. 2013; BBC 23 Sept. 2013; *Africa Confidential* 30 Mar. 2012). Other sources indicated that it had lost a significant amount of territory that it once controlled (ibid. 21 Sept. 2012; CNN 23 Sept. 2013). Nevertheless, the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), a US-based independent, non-partisan think tank and publisher (n.d.), notes that al-Shabaab remains the "principal threat" to security in Somalia (23 Sept. 2013). An African Union (AU) report published in June 2013 described al-Shabaab as "far from being defeated" (13 June 2013, para. 18).

#### 2. Leadership, Membership and Affiliated Groups

Al-Shabaab is led by Ahmed Abdi Godane [also known as Mukhtar Abu Zubair] (BBC 24 Sept. 2013a; ARB June 2013, 19728; Jamestown Foundation 9 Sept. 2013). Sources have provided different estimates of the number of fighters belonging to the group: the CFR reports that there are 5,000 members (23 Sept. 2013). The BBC reports the number of fighters is between 7,000 and 9,000 (24 Sept. 2013a). Finally, Al Jazeera has stated there are "as many as 9,000" (23 Sept. 2013). The group has also reportedly recruited up to 40 Americans (VOA 26 Sept. 2013; CNN 23 Sept. 2013) and "dozens" of Europeans (ibid.). Additionally, *Africa Confidential*, which has published news and analysis on politics, economics and security across Africa since 1960 (n.d.), suggests that because of its formal association with al-Qaeda, al-Shabaab is "well-financed and is absorbing a stream of more committed, if less experienced, fighters" (21 Sept. 2012).

Sources report on Al-Shabaab's internal power struggles in 2012 and 2013 (BBC 24 Sept. 2013a; CFR 23 Sept. 2013). A September 2013 Al Jazeera article suggests that the leadership rivalries allowed Ahmed Abdi Godane to "realign the group's leadership and consolidate his power by killing some of his main opponents" (23 Sept. 2013). The BBC writes that, according to "hardliners," the group purged itself of "'hypocrites' and 'ditherers'," making itself "more cohesive and potent" (23 Sept. 2013).

In June 2013, Sheikh Hassan Dahir Aweys, described as al-Shabaab's "elder statesman," surrendered to government forces (CFR 23 Sept. 2013; BBC 3 July 2013). Aweys' militia, Hisbul Islam, was joined with al-Shabaab in December 2010 (US 30 May 2013; BBC 3 July 2013; *Africa Confidential* 5 July 2013). According to *Africa Research Bulletin* (ARB), Aweys and his faction of al-Shabaab considered the group to be a "nationalist insurgency," while an opposing faction saw themselves as "fighting a global jihad," leading to internal conflicts (June 2013, 19728). Mukhtar Robow [also known as Abu Mansur], formerly the spokesperson of al-Shabaab (BBC 3 July 2013; Jamestown Foundation 9 Sept. 2013), was also reportedly forced to flee to the southwest part of the country where his clan is located (ibid; CFR 23 Sept. 2013; BBC 3 July 2013).

In June 2013, al-Shabaab announced that it had killed two of its senior members, including Ibrahim Haji Jama Mead [also known as al-Afghani] (ARB June 2013, 19728; CNN 1 July 2013; Garowe Online 30 June 2013). Sources indicate that the killings were related to infighting within al-Shabaab (Jamestown Foundation 9 Sept. 2013; CFR 23 Sept. 2013; CNN 1 July 2013). In September 2013, an American al-Shabaab militant, Omar Hammami [also known as Abu Mansoor al-Amriki and "the American"], who was known for creating propaganda videos with English-language rap lyrics, was reportedly killed along with another foreign jihadist due to an internal conflict (Al Jazeera 12 Sept. 2013; CNN 23 Sept. 2013). The BBC reports that the two militants had broken with al-Shabaab earlier in 2013 and were allies of Sheikh Hassan Dahir Aweys (12 Sept. 2013).

According to the report of a fact-finding mission to Mogadishu conducted by the Danish Immigration Service and the Norwegian Country of Origin Information Service (Landinfo) in April and May 2013, al-Shabaab has informants in the police forces, intelligence agencies, and the military, who co-operate for primarily economic reasons (Denmark and Norway May 2013, 7). Additionally, sources indicate that defectors from al-Shabaab are integrated into the security forces, creating a risk of infiltration (UN 13 May 2013; *Africa Confidential* 30 Mar. 2012).

### 3. Areas of Control

Sources indicate that al-Shabaab lost control of several cities and towns in 2012 to forces allied with the federal government, including Baidoa, Afgoye, Merca, Kismayo, and Wanla Weyn (US 30 May 2013; BBC 24 Sept. 2013b). The port city of Kismayo had been known as a primary source of income for al-Shabaab (Denmark and Norway May 2013, 23; *Somalia Report* 11 June 2012; US 30 May 2013). The US Department of State's *Country Reports on Terrorism 2012* also indicates that Somali government forces, in partnership with the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) and neighbouring countries, also recaptured the south-central strongholds of Afmadow, Balad, Lanta Buuro, Miido, and Jowhar (ibid.). The same report adds that, in 2012, al-Shabaab maintained control of "large sections of rural areas in the middle and lower Juba regions, as well as Bay and Bakol regions" (ibid.).

Armed Conflict Location and Event Dataset (ACLED), which monitors and publishes data on dates and locations of reported incidents of political violence in over 50 developing countries (n.d.), reports that, by early 2013, forces allied with the government had "re-taken all major urban centres in south-central Somalia" (Apr. 2013, 2). However, according to a 2013 article published by the UN's Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN), the group "still controls large swaths of the country" (UN 13 May 2013). Sources noted in 2013 that al-Shabaab remains in control of rural areas (BBC 24 Sept. 2013a; ACLED Apr. 2013, 2). An African Union (AU) report published in June 2013 states that the group continues to operate in the Juba valley in particular and uses the towns of Jamaame, Jilib and Bua'ale as "launching pads" (13 June 2013, para. 19). ACLED names the town of Jilib as the new site of al-Shabaab headquarters (Apr. 2013, 2). Al-Shabaab also re-captured the town of Hoddur [also spelled Hudur] immediately after Ethiopian forces withdrew from it (Denmark and Norway May 2013, 42; ACLED Apr. 2013, 3; AU 13 June 2013, para. 17). According to the AU report, al-Shabaab fighters "have melted into various communities in different regions, seeking to exploit clan rivalries and political disagreements, as well as the absence of effective local administrations and the attendant lack of social services in certain areas" (ibid., para. 18).

Various sources emphasize that al-Shabaab continues to operate in territory that has officially been recaptured by government allies, including Mogadishu (ACLED Apr. 2013, 3; Jamestown Foundation 14 June 2013). The Jamestown Foundation, a Washington-based think tank whose mission is to "inform and educate policy makers and the broader community about events and trends in those societies which are strategically or tactically important to the United States" (n.d.), reports that, in May 2013, a senior al-Shabaab leader stated during a radio interview with a pro-Shabaab station that the group was still in control of some southern districts of Mogadishu during the night, namely the districts of Huriwaa, Yaqshid, and Dayniile (Jamestown Foundation 14 June 2013). The same source adds that the district of Dayniile remains an al-Shabaab stronghold in Mogadishu and is also the home of one of the group's spokespersons (ibid.). ACLED similarly indicates that al-Shabaab continues to maintain a presence in Heliwa, Yaqshid, Wardighley, and Dayniile districts in particular (Apr. 2013, 3). The Danish and Norwegian fact finding mission report indicates that members of al-Shabaab can be found everywhere in Mogadishu, but its influence is stronger in certain parts of the city (Denmark and Norway May 2013, 6). The same report indicates that in Merka, which is controlled by AMISOM and government forces, al-Shabaab continues to stage "small scale hit and run attacks" by throwing hand grenades to kill people (ibid., 40).

Sources reported in 2013 that al-Shabaab had increased its presence in northern Somalia (US 30 May 2013; ACLED Apr. 2013, 3; *Africa Confidential* 11 Jan. 2013). The US Department of State's *Country Reports on Terrorism 2012* indicates that the group was active along the Golis mountains, where it attacked Puntland security forces, and in the larger urban areas of Puntland (30 May 2013). ACLED states that in northeastern Somalia, al-Shabaab has been establishing bases in "the rural and relatively inaccessible region of Bari" (Apr. 2013, 3). *Africa Confidential* reports that al-Shabaab has "recently invested resources and people" in Puntland outside of Galkayo and Bossaso (11 Jan. 2013).

### 4. Incidents of Violence

Amnesty International (AI) reports that al-Shabaab claimed responsibility for killing or injuring hundreds of people through suicide attacks in 2012 (2013). *Country Reports on Terrorism for 2012* states that, in 2012, "al-Shabaab and other violent extremists conducted suicide attacks, remote-controlled roadside bombings, kidnappings, and assassinations of government officials, journalists, humanitarian workers, and civil society leaders throughout Somalia" (US 30 May 2013). Similarly, ACLED reported in April 2013 on an increase in

guerrilla-style tactics on both military and civilian targets, including hit-and-run attacks; remote and improvised explosive devices; and suicide bombings in territories which have been recently seized from al-Shabaab. (Apr. 2013, 3)

Other sources also mention that al-Shabaab has increasingly favoured guerilla warfare tactics (Jamestown Foundation 14 June 2013; BBC 24 Sept. 2013a; *Africa Confidential* 21 Sept. 2012). According to ACLED, the group remains "organisationally viable and is adapting its reduced capacity to new theatres of violence" (Apr. 2013, 3). For its part, the BBC reports on "fairly frequent" suicide attacks by al-Shabaab in Mogadishu and "elsewhere" (24 Sept. 2013a). According to the Danish and Norwegian fact-finding mission, al-Shabaab primarily targets government officials, AMISOM, employees of international organizations, and people they believe to be spies (Denmark and Norway May 2013, 6-7). An international NGO interviewed during the fact-finding mission indicated that al-Shabaab does not kill civilians "indiscriminately," but that it "does not mind if civilians are killed" during large-scale attacks (ibid., 7).

Sources indicate that al-Shabaab was responsible for, or claimed responsibility for, the following incidents:

- In April 2012, the national theatre in Mogadishu was bombed while the Prime Minister and other government officials were attending a ceremony (US 30 May 2013; *Toronto Star* 5 Apr. 2012). At least eight people were killed, including the head of the Somali Olympic Committee and the Somali Football Federation chief (ibid.; US 30 May 2013; AI 2013).
- In September 2012, a suicide attack at a Mogadishu restaurant caused the deaths of at least 14 people (US 30 May 2013; *Africa Confidential* 21 Sept. 2012; Human Rights Watch 16 Apr. 2013). Three journalists were among those killed (ibid.; US 30 May 2013).
- In April 2013, fighters attacked Mogadishu's courthouse complex, killing at least 30 people (BBC 24 Sept. 2013b; Jamestown Foundation 14 June 2013; Human Rights Watch 16 Apr. 2013). According to Human Rights Watch, an al-Shabaab spokesperson told the media that "the court was a legitimate military target as they were ruling contrary to Sharia" (ibid.).
- In May 2013, a suicide bomber drove into a government convoy transporting a Qatari aid delegation, killing eight people (Jamestown Foundation 14 June 2013; *The Telegraph* 5 May 2013; Garowe Online 5 May 2013). At least eighteen others were also wounded in the explosion (ibid.; *The Telegraph* 5 May 2013).
- In June 2013, seven militants stormed the UN compound in Mogadishu (ARB June 2013, 19727; *Foreign Policy* 7 Oct. 2013). They reportedly killed eight UN employees and at least five Somali nationals (ibid., *The Canadian Press* 20 June).
- In September 2013 in Nairobi, Kenya, militants attacked a shopping mall, taking hostages in a four-day siege and killing at least 67 people (*The Star* 29 Sept. 2013; CNN 24 Sept. 2013).
- In October 2013 in Beledweyne, a suicide bomber blew up a restaurant, killing at least 15 people (*The New York Times* 19 Oct. 2013; BBC 19 Oct. 2013; Garowe Online 19 Oct. 2013) and as many as 25 (ibid.; *The New York Times* 19 Oct. 2013). An al-Shabaab spokesperson reportedly stated that the targets were Ethiopian and Djiboutian soldiers (ibid.; BBC 19 Oct. 2013).

## 5. Treatment of Civilians, including Recruitment

According to ACLED, there has been an increase in arrests, detention and executions of civilians in al-Shabaab territory for alleged spying (Apr. 2013). Amnesty International reports that al-Shabaab continues to torture and kill alleged spies, noting that, in July 2012, its militants shot and killed three men in Merka who were accused of spying for American and British intelligence agencies (2013). The US Department of State reports that in June 2012, at least 13 men and women in the Galgaduud and Hiraan regions [central Somalia] were beheaded after being accused of collaborating against al-Shabaab (US 30 May 2013). It notes that many of al-Shabaab's killings are "beheadings, stonings, or other horrific public events designed to instil fear and obedience in communities" (ibid.). Sources also indicate that al-Shabaab continues to kill defectors (Denmark and Norway May 2013, 13; *Africa Confidential* 30 Mar. 2012).

Al-Shabaab enforces its own interpretation of Sharia law, which is described as "harsh" by some sources (CFR 23 Sept. 2013; Human Rights Watch 21 Feb. 2012). Other sources describe al-Shabaab's version of Sharia as "strict" (BBC 24 Sept. 2013a; *Compass Direct News* 9 Feb. 2012). Sources indicate that it has banned music and films (CFR 23 Sept. 2013; Freedom House 2013). The US Department of State's *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2012* indicates that al-Shabaab punished civilians for smoking, listening to music, playing soccer, and not wearing a hijab (19 Apr. 2013, 8). Freedom House indicates that "people convicted of theft or other minor crimes are flogged or have their limbs amputated, usually in public" (2013). Amnesty International reports that a woman was abducted and beheaded in August 2012 near Baidoa, several days after al-Shabaab had ordered her to stop selling tea to government forces in the area (2013).

Sources indicate that, in 2012, al-Shabaab banned the following humanitarian organizations from operating in areas under its control:

- International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in January (AI 2013; AFP 13 Mar. 2012)
- Save the Children in March (ibid.; AI 2013)
- Islamic Relief Worldwide in October (ibid.; Freedom House 2013).

Freedom House notes that 16 international organizations had already been banned in 2011 (2013). Sources also report that a Christian who had converted from Islam was beheaded by al-Shabaab in January 2012 (ICC 11 Feb. 2012; *Compass Direct News* 9 Feb. 2012). The Christian reportedly worked for a banned Christian humanitarian organization (ibid.).

Human Rights Watch reports that al-Shabaab has recruited children and teachers from schools in areas under its control and has banned subjects such as English and science, killing teachers who resisted (21 Feb. 2012). According to *Somalia Report*, al-Shabaab typically removes all the teachers from schools and madrassas under its control and replaces them with instructors who "indoctrinate" children into their ideology, focusing on jihad against "infidels" (7 May 2012).

### 5.1 Recruitment

A representative of the UN Department of Safety and Security (UNDSS) told the Danish and Norwegian fact-finding mission in May 2013 that there were fewer reports of forced recruitment by al-Shabaab than previously, but that this did not mean that there was actually less forced recruitment (Denmark and Norway May 2013, 13). A representative of a UN agency in Nairobi interviewed by the fact finding mission said that forced recruitment was no longer occurring in Mogadishu because it is no longer under the control of al-Shabaab (ibid.). The same UN source indicated that, in areas that the group still controls, it continues to undertake "round-ups" of people to recruit fighters (ibid., 36).

Sources report that al-Shabaab continues to recruit children (AI 2013; *Somalia Report* 7 May 2012). According to a representative of the Danish Refugee Council, who was interviewed by the Danish and Norwegian fact-finding mission, in the previous six months, al-Shabaab had recruited approximately 100 fighters per month in south-central Somalia, the majority of whom were children (Denmark and Norway May 2013, 38). The report of the UN Secretary-General on children and armed conflict in 2012 indicates that 1,789 cases of recruitment and use of children were recorded in Somalia in 2012 (UN 15 May 2013, para. 122). According to an article on al-Shabaab's forced recruitment of child soldiers, published by *Somalia Report*, al-Shabaab recruits children not only by kidnapping them and threatening them with violence, but also by "indoctrinating" them through a system of rewards and bribes (7 May 2012).

Sources indicate that child soldiers are often sent by al-Shabaab to the front lines of fighting (ibid.; AI 2013; Human Rights Watch 21 Feb. 2012). Girls are kidnapped and forcibly "married" to al-Shabaab fighters, and are also used for fighting and domestic tasks (ibid.; *Somalia Report* 7 May 2012).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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