

# Terrorism Monitor

In-depth analysis of the War on Terror

VOLUME XV, ISSUE 5

p.1

*Alexander Sehmer*

**BRIEFS**

p.3

*Animesh Roul*

**Myanmar's Muslim Insurgency Gaining Prominence With Jihadist Groups**

p.5

*Rafid Jaboori*

**Islamic State's Deir al-Zour Offensive Puts the Syrian Regime Under Pressure**

p.7

*Michael Horton*

**Al-Shabaab: Why Somalia's al-Qaeda Affiliate Wants Puntland**

## SOMALIA: ONE STEP CLOSER TO DEFEATING AL-SHABAAB

*Alexander Sehmer*

In the build up to his election as Somalia's president, Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed announced he would invite al-Shabaab for a "sit down and discussion" ([Twitter](#), January, 28). His rhetoric toward the group since then has been less welcoming. The new president, known as Farmaajo, appears confident that he could be the one to bring an end to the al-Qaeda affiliate's violent insurgency. Indeed, there is much that is in his favor.

Farmaajo was elected by legislators in the second round of voting on February 8 ([Africa News](#), February 8). The result was something of a surprise — he had come second in the first round of voting, trailing behind the then-incumbent Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, and lacked the kind of regional support bases enjoyed by his rivals — but was welcomed by Somalis and the international community.

At his inauguration on February 22, Farmaajo vowed to build Somalia's military capacity and continue the fight against al-Shabaab ([Mareeg](#), February 22). Earlier, he

told politicians and diplomats that the group could be broken in the next two years ([Horseed Media](#), February 19). Despite this, his pre-election appeal to al-Shabaab has not been entirely forgotten.

Al-Shabaab, meanwhile, has vowed its fight against the United Nations-backed government will continue, branding Farmaajo, who has dual U.S. and Somali citizenship, an "American puppet" ([Mareeg](#), February 27).

The group continues to menace the country. There have been several attacks in Mogadishu, and this month militants seized the town of El Baraf in the Middle Shabelle region as the army and African Union (AU) forces pulled back ([Garowe Online](#), March 8). While al-Shabaab has suffered setbacks in the south at the hands of the AU's forces in the country, it continues to make ground further north in Puntland (see [Terrorism Monitor](#), March 10).

Farmaajo's claims that he will be able to bring peace to Somalia, however, may not be entirely without foundation. The election results suggest he has broad political support and may be able to build trust between Somalia's clans. His previous performance as prime minister between 2010 and 2011, though short-lived, suggests he knows how to bring his financial house into order —

that could help him cut corruption, but crucially also ensure that soldiers' salaries are paid regularly and on time. That would go a long way to boosting morale in the fight against al-Shabaab.

Somalia is in the midst of a severe drought. There are rumblings from the UN that this has increased the need to engage with al-Shabaab, since the group controls areas of the country badly in need of aid ([Daily Nation](#), January 25).

In reality, talks with the group are unlikely, though Farmaajo's election may well have brought Somalia at least a step closer to defeating al-Shabaab.

## **PHILIPPINES: ISLAMIC STATE A POTENTIAL UNIFYING FACTOR FOR MILITANTS**

*Alexander Sehmer*

The Philippines Islamist group Abu Sayyaf has killed a 70-year-old German man it held captive for three months, the latest in a series of beheadings that have highlighted fears the southern Philippines is fast becoming a regional center for Islamist militancy.

Abu Sayyaf posted a video of the killing of Jurgen Kantner on Telegram on February 27, beheading him on camera over an unmet \$780,000 ransom demand ([Inquirer](#), February 27). Kantner was taken captive in November last year after militants attacked his yacht off the coast of Sulu. His remains have now been recovered by the Philippines military, reportedly left in an area between Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) camps in Kagay and Sitio Talibang ([Inquirer](#), March 5). Last year, the group beheaded two Canadian hostages, John Ridsdel and Robert Hall.

The killings are reminiscent of the grisly on-camera beheadings carried out by Islamic State (IS). Nevertheless, the Abu Sayyaf faction behind the beheadings is not thought to be closely ideologically aligned with IS, despite its occasional use of the IS flag. Instead, it is the Basilan-based Abu Sayyaf faction led by Isnilon Hapilon that is close to IS.

Hapilon swore allegiance to IS in 2014 and was named as a regional emir in an IS video last year. The declaration of a Southeast Asian caliphate has yet to follow. Hapilon's southern Philippines would seem the most likely choice for such a caliphate, despite apparent competition from Indonesia's Jemaah Ansharut Tauhid and the much-diminished Mujahidin Indonesia Timor, both of which have courted IS ([Straits Times](#), February 15, 2016).

Hapilon's faction is apparently attempting to join up with other local jihadists to form a single group called Dawlatul Islamiyah Waliyatul Masrik ([Manila Standard](#), February 19). Hapilon himself appears capable of navigating the various Abu Sayyaf factions, as well as able to reach out to Malaysian and Indonesian jihadists ([TV5](#), January 29). The death of a Moroccan fighter in a clash with the military in April last year suggested the Abu Sayyaf commander's affiliations could go even further

afield. ([Philippine Star](#), April 15, 2016). The man, named as Mohammad Khattab, had reportedly been training Hapilon's group on how to conduct suicide bombings.

Concerned that IS could set up in his country, President Rodrigo Duterte vowed to stamp out Abu Sayyaf within months of taking office. That appears far off, but the military continues its campaign, reportedly wounding Hapilon in a clash on March 7 in Lanao del Sur ([SunStar Manila](#), March 8).

Hapilon's faction is not the only group in the Philippines to have declared allegiance to IS — nor does it necessarily have the closest connections to the leadership in Iraq and Syria — but for now he has the group's endorsement and the worry is that other local groups may unite behind him.

## Myanmar's Muslim Insurgency Gaining Prominence With Jihadist Groups

*Animesh Roul*

Recent militant violence targeted at Myanmar's border guard police in Rakhine State, which borders Bangladesh on Myanmar's coast, has seen the emergence of what appears to be a new Islamist group with cross-border links.

The fighting has once again focused international attention on the situation of the Rohingya, a stateless Muslim community denied citizenship by both Myanmar and Bangladesh, and the decades-old conflict between them and ethnic Rakhine Buddhists.

That attention is not limited to Western governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), however. Instead, it is increasingly providing political fodder for jihadist groups elsewhere, whose proclamations of solidarity risk sparking a renewed Muslim insurgency in the beleaguered Southeast Asian nation.

### Aqa-Mul Mujahidin

Fighting in Rakhine state flared up on October 9, 2016 when suspected Islamist militants attacked three border police outposts in Maungdaw and Rathedaung localities. The subsequent violence continued for days.

Media sources reported nine border policemen were killed and as many attackers died in the ensuing gun battles, with the militants stealing large numbers of arms and ammunition from the border police headquarters in Maungdaw town ([Myanmar Times](#), October 10, 2016). Similar attacks in the same area left four more police dead on October 11 ([Irrawaddy](#), October 11, 2016). Violence erupted again on November 12-13 when armed militants launched a surprise attack on a military convoy during a clearance operation in Ma Yinn Taung village in Maungdaw town. Two security personnel, including a senior army officer, were killed in the ambush. Several suspected militants were also killed ([Frontier Myanmar](#), November 13, 2016).

Subsequently, the government backed counter-insurgency operations in the area, sparking an escalation of armed clashes that claimed the lives of nearly 70 suspected Rohingya militants and 17 security force personnel (Channel News Asia, November 15, 2016).

Though, initially, no organized Islamist group claimed responsibility for the October attacks on the border posts, the Myanmar government investigation blamed the violence around Maungdaw on a previously unknown group, Aqa-Mul Mujahidin (AMM) (Myanmar Times, October 17, 2016).

Government investigations, based on statements from arrested militants and confiscated jihadist videos, suggest an operational link between AMM and Pakistan and Bangladesh based Rohingya Islamists with past ties with the Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO) and Harkatul-Jihad-al-Islami Arakan (HuJI-A), the two largest militant formations advocating for the Rohingya's political situation. It is presently unclear if AMM is simply another name for or a new incarnation of the Harkah al-Yaqin (HaY-Arakan Faith Movement). Media reports suggest these two could be same group, or that HaY could be a front of AMM (Indian Express, January 8; Dhaka Tribune, January 10)).

### **Inciting Others**

Graphic details of the October violence and subsequent flare ups are making the rounds on popular video and message-sharing websites. One such video featured AMM or HaY's leader Hafiz Tohar (a.k.a. Ataullah, Havis-toohar or the Arabic nom de guerre, Abu Ammar Junooni) declaring jihad on Myanmar and urging Rohingya Muslims to join the struggle. [1] Tohar, who speaks in an Arabic-laced local Bengali dialect, has made several similar statements and propaganda videos since October 2016, highlighting the plight of Rohingya Bengalis and the military excesses of the Myanmar government on the local community. [2]

Although his statements mention jihad and Islam and are ostensibly aimed at enticing fellow radicalized Rohingyas to fight against the Myanmar government, they do not boast of transnational jihadist links or talk about support from abroad. Instead, Tohar is at pains to paint the violence as part of an indigenous rebellion. However, a recently-conducted study corroborated some of the government's claims about AMM's and HaY's in-

ternational links, showing how the newly emerged group, under Tohar's leadership, has the backing of a section of a radicalized Rohingya diaspora based in Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Bangladesh (ICG Report No. 283, December 15, 2016).

As indicated in the study, the group was established after the June–October 2012 riots and sectarian violence. Further highlighted is HaY's connection with a committee of Rohingya migrants based in the Saudi Arabian cities of Mecca and Medina and the training Tohar and his band of fighters received under the supervision of Rohingya jihadist veterans trained in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

By mid-January 2017, media investigations and interviews with members of HaY showed the group was responsible for the series of attacks on the border police outposts in October. In one of the interviews, the leaders of HaY denied being a terrorist group as portrayed by the Myanmar government, claiming instead they were a "revolutionary group waging a movement against the oppression of Rohingya Muslims by the Myanmar government" (Dhaka Tribune, January 10).

### **Assistance and Training**

Subsequent interrogations of captured HaY members have brought to light the inner workings of the group, including details of its core members. Tohar reportedly attended a six-month Taliban training course in Pakistan and frequently visited Myanmar from a village near Teknaf in Bangladesh in order to organize an armed insurgency. Another main member of the group, named Kalis, is a Pakistani who attended militant training in Pakistan before moving to Bangladesh and then to Nakhuya village in Myanmar. Three other members — named in intelligence reports as Ibrahim, Aza and Ayatullah — spent time in Kutabaloun refugee camp in Bangladesh (Press Release, President Office, Myanmar, October 13, 2016).

As far as training and indoctrination of AMM or HaY leaders is concerned, reports suggest well entrenched links to Pakistan and Bangladesh, with AMM having its origins in the HUJI-A and the patronage of Abdus Qadoos Burmi, the Pakistan-based HUJI-A leader. Burmi works closely with the Pakistani Taliban, Jamaat ud Dawa (JuD) and other militant formations sympathetic to the Rohingya's cause (Mizzima, October 19, 2016).

JuD's involvement, in the guise of providing humanitarian assistance to Rohingya refugees, is well documented. Media reports claim the post-2012 riots in western Myanmar provided ample opportunity for JuD and its Falah-e-Insaaniyat foundation to organize fund raising and capacity-building campaigns under the banner of the Difa-e-Arakan conference in Pakistan (Hindustan Times, Jan 31, 2013, Geo TV, Pakistan, July 2012).

Neighboring Bangladesh, though cautious about the militant spillover through its porous borders, was unable to prevent military and religious training with local armed groups in the remote hill tracts of Chittagong or Cox Bazar area, or restrict cross-border activity that took place largely under the guise of refugee movement (Dhaka Tribune, April 15, 2015).

### **Recognition Abroad**

The Rohingya's plight has gained increasing international attention, but it has also proved a focus for Islamist sympathizers, generating immense support from jihadist groups and individuals around the world. Abdul Razak Ali Artan, the Ohio State University attacker, cited Rohingya issues in a Facebook post attempting to justify his actions. The Afghan Taliban, meanwhile, have also issued statements concerning the "genocide" against the Muslims of Myanmar (al-Emarah, November 30, 2016).

The regional wings of global jihadist groups such as Islamic State (IS) and al-Qaeda have also proclaimed support for Rohingya Muslims and attempted to exploit the situation in their favor.

IS' propaganda magazine *Dabiq* (Issue 14), fomenting anti-Buddhist sentiment, has documented how it planned to target Myanmar "once it reached the capability to do so," and after "bringing an end to [...] the apostate Bengali regime" in neighboring Bangladesh. [3] After putting Aung San Suu Kyi, the Nobel laureate and Myanmar state counselor, on its hit list, IS has already influenced a bombing plot on the Myanmar embassy in Jakarta in late November 2016.

The plot, masterminded by the IS-affiliated Jemaah Ansar Daulah, was intended to avenge Rohingya atrocities, foiled by local police (New Straits Times, November 27, 2016).

Like IS, al-Qaeda has a longstanding interest in the Rohingya issue and actively supports this community. Anti-Islamic activities in Myanmar are regularly mentioned in most of its propaganda materials, and groups like al-Qaeda in Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) have threatened to avenge the persecution of Rohingyas in Myanmar.

Other Islamist groups also actively distribute content about Myanmar and the atrocities against Rohingya Muslims on social media. In 2015, al-Shabaab, the al-Qaeda affiliate in Somalia, issued statements urging Muslims to come to the aid of Rohingya refugees allegedly persecuted by the Buddhist regime (Harar24 Online (Mogadishu) May 21, 2015).

A cursory look at the materials circulated by HaY suggests the group is seeking an Islamic legitimacy for their organized violence through *fatwas* from senior clerics in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere. This could help what is essentially a fringe group to unite scattered Rohingya militants under one platform.

Myanmar security forces' violent reprisals to the October and November attacks prompted the UN and various independent human rights groups to take notice of Myanmar's military excess in the Rakhine state, but the events have even broader repercussions. The current tense situation in Rakhine state threatens to inflame jihadist undercurrents in Myanmar and elsewhere, while pushing otherwise peaceful Rohingyas to the brink of organized jihad.

*Animesh Roul is the Executive Director of Research at the New Delhi-based Society for the Study of Peace and Conflict (SSPC).*

### **NOTES**

[1] 'Islamic Terrorist asked Rohingya to join them for Jihad to Myanmar Burma Rakhine Arakan,' YouTube (October 12, 2016). Watch it [here](#).

[2] See, for example, 'Faith Movement Message' (November 20, 2016). Watch it [here](#).

[3] Interview with the Amir of the Khilafa's Soldiers In Bengal: Shaykh Abu Ibrahim Al-Hanif, *Dabiq*, Issue 14, p.62

# Islamic State's Deir al-Zour Offensive Puts the Syrian Regime Under Pressure

*Rafid Jaboori*

In mid-January, Islamic State (IS) fighters seemed to be retreating in the face of advancing U.S.-backed Iraqi forces in the city of Mosul in Iraq. They were also under pressure from attacks by Turkish-led forces in Aleppo, Kurdish guerrillas in Raqqa and the forces of President Bashar al-Assad's regime in central Syria.

Despite this, on January 13, the group unexpectedly launched an offensive on the Syrian government forces in the city of Deir al-Zour, the capital of IS-controlled Deir al-Zour province, in Eastern Syria. IS fighters attacked Syrian troop positions in a number of Deir al-Zour neighborhoods in a bid to seize control of the airport, a strategically important target, and expand the area of the city under their control ([al-Hayat](#), January 15).

Although the offensive, which saw dozens killed on both sides, failed to achieve these goals, by January 17 IS had succeed in splitting the area controlled by the Syrian regime into two separate enclaves ([al-Jazeera Arabic](#), January 19). It also further tightened the group's two-year-long siege on regime-controlled areas in the city and demonstrated that IS could still launch effective offensives, even when under pressure on other fronts.

Since then, the situation has developed into something of a stalemate, but with no clear strategy from the West, the future of the province is being left in the hands of either the Syrian regime or IS.

## Deir al-Zour in the Syrian Conflict

IS has controlled Deir al-Zour province, an area of some 33,000 square kilometers, since 2014, with the exception of the provincial capital. The city is the biggest and most important in eastern Syria and potentially an important stronghold for IS, alongside the group's self-declared capital of Raqqa in northern Syria and Mosul — the largest city under IS control — in northern Iraq.

It is equally important for the regime. Alongside the capital Damascus and Aleppo in the north, Deir al-Zour is the third pillar of the regime's military deployment framework. Maintaining control of Deir al-Zour's city center with local government in place — albeit providing inadequate services and highly dependent on international aid — gives the regime a much-needed presence in eastern Syria. [1]

As a consequence, the Assad regime has fought hard to maintain control over Deir al-Zour as part of a strategy that focuses on defending provincial capitals and urban centers. Despite this, over the past two and a half years, IS has managed to slowly expand the areas of the city its fighters control. At present, it is estimated that IS controls more 60 percent of Deir al-Zour ([Souriatnapress](#), January 23).

## Steadfast Defense

Brigadier General Issam Zahr al-Deen, one of the regime's most prominent field commanders, has been leading the regime's force in Deir al-Zour since 2014. The force is formed of brigade 137 of the Syrian army, supported by units from the elite Republican Guards, the air force intelligence and pro-regime militias.

Zahr al-Deen, who is a member of the Druze community, fought previously on several fronts against IS and rebel groups in Damascus, Aleppo, Homs and Hasaka, before taking over in Deir al-Zour. In an indication of how crucial the regime views defending Deir al-Zour, he was assigned there after the regime lost two of its most trusted and high-ranking field commanders, Colonel Ali Khizam and General Jamaa Jamaa in battles to hold the city in 2012 and 2013 respectively ([deiezzor24.net](#), May 21, 2016).

In its January's offensive, IS similarly dedicated some of its most seasoned fighters, and during the first days of the fighting, the Syrian regime forces appear to have been taken by surprise. In a departure from its usual strategy, IS did not deploy a wave of suicide attacks during the first stages of the battle. Instead, it favored deploying small groups of fighters who moved swiftly, attacking various points in different parts of the city, often fighting behind enemy lines ([enabbaladi.net](#), January 29).

After seizing control of the al-Makabir district, enabling IS to completely cut off the airport from the rest of the city, the group's Amaq news agency posted a video online showing its fighters celebrating the win and vowing further victories ([YouTube](#), January 17).

On the regime side, Zahr al-Deen gave a defiant statement in a phone call broadcast on one of the pro-regime TV channels on January 17. He was reportedly speaking from inside the airport, where he pledged to continue to fight ([addiyar.com](#), January 17).

Nonetheless, it was Russian air support, rather than regime troops, that was decisive in stopping the IS advance. After the regime's forces pulled back to separate their positions from the IS advance, it became possible for the Russians to locate IS targets. A series of air strikes played a key role in slowing and eventually stopping the IS offensive. The regime forces, however, have been unable to re-capture the areas seized by IS.

### Local Loyalties

The situation in the province is complicated. Even if they defeat IS, neither the government's Alawite Shia-led forces, nor the U.S.-backed Kurdish-dominated Syria Democratic Forces (SDF) — which recently claimed to have made gains in fighting IS in parts of Deir al-Zour province — are likely to be particularly welcome in this predominately Sunni Arab part of the country ([al-Jazeera](#), February 22).

The regime has made some efforts to address this, enticing the opposition figure Sheikh Nawaf al-Basheer to return to Damascus after years in the exile. Al-Basheer is the tribal leader of al-Baggara, the biggest tribe in eastern Syria. He abandoned his long-standing opposition to the Assad regime, declaring he had done so because an opposition victory would lead only to the triumph of radical jihadists ([al-Mayadeen TV](#), January 6). Although his tribe and his region have undergone significant changes after falling under IS control, he remains an important local player who could rally support in eastern Syria following an IS defeat.

In addition, nine of Syria's main oil and gas fields are located in Deir al-Zour province and all are under IS control. This has been a vital source of revenue for the group, which trades oil with a number of dealers and smugglers. Its largest client is, however, the Syrian

regime itself, which requires oil in order to provide services to, and thus maintain control over, major urban centers ([Syria Network for Human Rights](#), September 17, 2014). Supplies from its allies Iran and Russia appear to be inadequate for the regime's needs, and the infrastructure to supply oil from IS-controlled areas is already in place.

This somewhat bizarre state of affairs is likely to continue even if IS gained control of Deir al-Zour, as it serves both sides' needs, but control over the oil fields will be decisive in any settlement of the Syrian conflict.

### No Clear Strategy

IS was unable to overrun the Deir al-Zour airport in its January offensive but succeeded in splitting the slowly diminishing areas controlled by the regime. The regime troops are now in a weaker position and are dependent on aerial supplies and Russian airstrikes. A future IS attempt to seize the airport or other regime-controlled areas is likely to result in expanding IS control.

By moving in Deir al-Zour while the attention and pressure was concentrated on Mosul, IS was attempting to replicate its successful recapture of Palmyra in central Syria last year ([al-Jazeera](#), December 10, 2016). IS regained control of Palmyra while the regime was breaking the final pockets of resistance in rebel-held eastern Aleppo.

The attempt to capture the Deir al-Zour airport also appears to be part of a wider IS strategy of targeting airports across Syria to cripple the regime's air force. In January, IS fighters launched attacks, or were involved in clashes, near the al-Dhamir and al-Seen airports near Damascus, and the Tiyas (also known as T4) airport in Homs ([orient-new.net](#), January 31).

For the United States, things are unclear in this part of Syria. Unlike in other parts of Syria and Iraq, however, the United States does not have a local partner in the area and there have been few operations over the years to target IS figures here. The most recent occurred a few days before IS' Deir al-Zour offensive, when a U.S. force, brought in by helicopters, carried out a ground raid aiming to capture IS militants ([Rudaw Arabic](#), January 9).

Without a clear Western strategy for Deir al-Zour, the future of the city, the province and all of eastern Syria

will be shaped either by the regime — resentment of which will only fuel Islamic radical jihadist movements — or by IS.

Further, with IS controlling an extended line of towns and cities in eastern and central Syria, the group will not be easily defeated, even if it loses both Mosul and Raqqa.

*Rafid Jaboori is a journalist, writer and researcher. He is a former BBC World Service reporter who has covered the Iraq war, its aftermath and the conflict in Syria, as well as other events. He is an expert in militant groups in the Middle East.*

#### **NOTES:**

[1] For further information on the humanitarian situation in Deir al-Zour, see UN office for Coordination of Humanitarian affairs media release (January 20). Read it [here](#).

## **Al-Shabaab: Why Somalia's al-Qaeda Affiliate Wants Puntland**

*Michael Horton*

In contrast to the abundance of forecasts that predicted the weakening and eventual demise of al-Shabaab, the al-Qaeda affiliated group is resurgent in many parts of Somalia. This resurgence is particularly notable in Puntland, a semi-autonomous part of northern Somalia where al-Shabaab has for a long time maintained a limited presence. Significantly, over the last year, al-Shabaab has steadily intensified the tempo of its operations in the area, indicating the group is focusing its efforts on expanding its presence and influence in Puntland.

The reasons for al-Shabaab's renewed focus on operations in Puntland are three-fold. First, it is intent on taking advantage of weaknesses within the Puntland government. Second, it is determined to gain access to the sea, which it has largely lost in southern Somalia. This access will allow it to deepen its links with lucrative dark networks and strengthen its ties to Yemen based al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). Third, al-Shabaab is determined to thwart the Islamic State's (IS) attempt to establish itself in Puntland.

### **Resurgence**

Al-Shabaab's forces have been driven out of many population centers in Somalia, including the capital of Mogadishu. However, it has retained its ability to attack a range of targets. On January 15, 2016, al-Shabaab launched one of its most devastating attacks to date on a fortified military base of the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) forces in El Adde, near the border with Kenya ([al-Jazeera](#), January 15, 2016). The attack is particularly significant because of its complexity and because of the number of al-Shabaab fighters involved. While the Kenyan government has not released an official death toll, Somali officials claim more than 200 soldiers died in the attack ([al-Jazeera](#), February 25, 2016). This attack — along with subsequent attacks on smaller fortified AMISOM bases — demonstrates that al-Shabaab has not only retained but also refined its ability to plan and execute complex attacks on hardened tar-

gets despite its loss of territory ([al-Jazeera](#), July 11, 2016).

In addition to well-planned attacks on military targets, al-Shabaab continues to attack civilian targets across southern Somalia. The group has carried out multiple car bombings of hotels and markets and continues to assassinate journalists, government officials and members of the military and security services.

Al-Shabaab's resilience and resurgence is due largely to the group's links with the Somali countryside. Such links give it strategic depth and provide it with the ability to fight when and where it chooses. The sustained AMI-SOM offensive that gathered force with Operation Linda Nchi in October 2011 successfully pushed al-Shabaab out of most populated areas and impeded al-Shabaab's ability to finance itself. However, despite its losses, al-Shabaab remained resilient because of its operatives' ability to disappear into rural and remote areas, in particular the dense riverine forests along the Somali-Kenyan border.

From these areas, al-Shabaab bided its time and focused on re-building its organization. [1] Like any organization intent on survival, al-Shabaab's leadership learned from its defeats and recognized the critical importance of maintaining low-density bases in remote and inaccessible areas like the riverine forests of southern Somali.

In addition, al-Shabaab benefited from refuges in Puntland's rugged Cal Madow and Cal Miskaal Mountains. Following its expulsion from strongholds like the port of Kismayo in September 2012, al-Shabaab operatives fled north to Puntland as well as south. Since that time, al-Shabaab has maintained a presence in the semi-autonomous state of Puntland.

### **A Mountain Redoubt**

Concurrent with its resurgence in the south, al-Shabaab is now more active in Puntland. The semi-autonomous state maintains its own government and security forces whilst continuing to support the Mogadishu-based Somali federal government. Because of the semi-autonomous nature of its government and security forces, Puntland receives limited amounts of international aid and its security forces are not as well trained, equipped or paid as their southern counterparts.

The limited and often sporadic funding of its loosely organized security forces means that the Puntland government has not been able or willing to consistently pursue al-Shabaab. The government is also plagued with corruption, and its intelligence service, the Puntland Intelligence Agency (PIA), has a history of playing both sides in the conflict with al-Shabaab. [2]

The Puntland government has been unable to regularly pay its soldiers. This was in evidence on February 26 when soldiers belonging to the Puntland Defense Force mutinied over unpaid salaries and took over government buildings in the capital of Garowe ([Garowe Online](#), February 28). [3] Most of the government's civil servants have not been paid for eight months ([Garowe Online](#), August 18, 2016).

Roughly half of Puntlanders are nomadic, and at the same time as the government is facing a funding crisis, Puntland is experiencing a drought that has devastated the herds of livestock that many depend upon ([UNHCR](#), February 21). The government has been widely criticized by the local media for its failure to organize an effective response to the drought.

Such disorder provides opportunities for al-Shabaab, which, like most insurgent organizations, thrives in un-governed areas. Al-Shabaab has also, at times, excelled at providing the services, like emergency food aid, that Somalia's federal and various semi-autonomous governments have often failed to provide.

The leadership of al-Shabaab is exploiting the weakness of the government and the worsening drought by consolidating its presence in the Cal Madow and the Cal Miskall mountains that partially encircle Puntland's largest city and primary port, Bossaso.

The Puntland government has struggled to clear these mountains of insurgent forces allied with al-Shabaab since 2010. It enjoyed some success in 2014, when the Puntland Defense Force and allied militias launched a sustained offensive that succeed in evicting al-Shabaab operatives from the mountains ([Hiirran Online](#), October 1, 2014). However, al-Shabaab has since worked to re-assert its authority in the area, most especially in the Cal Madow Mountains. The mountains rise to altitudes of 7,000 feet (2,133 meters) and are riddled with caves and gorges. While the terrain is ideal, their proximity to the

busy and loosely controlled port of Bossaso is likely the reason why al-Shabaab is interested in maintaining and strengthening its presence in the mountains.

### **Access to the Sea: Weapons and Allies**

Like any insurgent organization, al-Shabaab must secure sufficient funds and materiel to ensure its survival and ability to grow, and al-Shabaab's leadership has always prioritized its efforts to penetrate and exploit the numerous dark networks responsible for trafficking in a variety of licit and illicit goods through Somalia.

Before AMISOM's sustained offensive and successful effort to retake southern Somalia's urban centers, al-Shabaab had little trouble financing its operations. The organization excelled at administering a relatively comprehensive system that taxed both imports and exports from Somalia's ports, most notably Kismayo, which al-Shabaab controlled up until September 2012.

After the loss of Kismayo, al-Shabaab maintained its involvement in the lucrative trade in aromatic charcoal and in sugar exports by imposing taxes on the merchants who traded in the goods ([Daily Nation](#), July 26, 2014). However, the loss of Kismayo greatly diminished its ability to collect taxes. Since then, al-Shabaab has lost more of the coastline of southern Somalia, meaning the group finds it more difficult to secure weapons and materiel. Additionally, the loss of its access to ports has impeded al-Shabaab's ability to interact with its regional ally, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).

Controlling territory so near the port of Bossaso and other informal ports nearby will enable al-Shabaab to tap into Puntland's already well-established dark networks, most especially the illicit trade in weapons, and to reinvigorate its relationship with AQAP.

Largely because of the civil war in Yemen, AQAP is stronger and better funded than it ever has been. At the same time, Yemen, which was already awash with arms, has been flooded with arms and materiel by external participants in the war like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates ([al-Monitor](#), August 7, 2015). It is highly likely that many of these weapons, including more advanced weaponry like anti-tank guided missiles (ATGMs), will make their way to Somalia where prices for such weapons are higher than they are in Yemen.

Because of its proximity to Yemen just across the Gulf of Aden, and its abundance of informal ports, Puntland is a prime destination for arms traders who want to take advantage of higher prices.

Al-Shabaab's leadership undoubtedly recognizes that maintaining a base of operations in Puntland is highly advantageous. It can easily tap into and extract fees and weaponry from the dark networks that abound in Puntland. At the same time, the proximity to southern Yemen, much of which is under AQAP control, means it will be more able to interact and potentially exchange skilled operatives with AQAP.

It is notable that al-Shabaab chose to feature a lengthy and fawning profile of AQAP-affiliated ideologue Anwar al-Awlaki in the most recent issue of its magazine *Gaidi Mtanni*. [4]

Al-Shabaab and AQAP have long maintained ties with one another and have benefited from an exchange of expertise in the areas in which they excel. For example, AQAP has learned a great deal from al-Shabaab about how to set up and manage an effective intelligence wing. Al-Shabaab's Amniyat intelligence apparatus is formidable and has proved critical to al-Shabaab's ability to control its membership and plan and carry out attacks in urban areas. In turn, over the last two years, AQAP has developed a wealth of experience with more advanced weapons systems and their use in set piece battles. Al-Shabaab can, and likely will, benefit both from this expertise and from increased access to more advanced weaponry.

The vulnerabilities and opportunities that can be exploited in Puntland mean that al-Shabaab is likely to continue to prioritize expanding its presence in the Cal Madow and Cal Miskall Mountains. These same opportunities — access to the coast and the ability to tap into lucrative dark networks — have also attracted the interest of IS.

### **Thwarting Islamic State**

The IS presence in southern Somalia remains limited. Al-Shabaab is without question the dominant militant Salafist organization in Somalia. However, al-Shabaab, particularly in 2015, did experience a number of defections to IS. One of these was [Abdul Qadir Mumin](#), a mid-level al-Shabaab operative who pledged *baya* to

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in October 2015 (see [Militant Leadership Monitor](#), October 5, 2016; [Somalia Newsroom](#), October 24, 2015). Mumin is a dual national who holds British citizenship and spent time in Sweden, where he became known for his fiery and increasingly radical sermons. Mumin left the UK in 2010 to join al-Shabaab. He is a member of the influential and commercially well-connected sub-clan Ali Saleban. Members of the Ali Saleban sub-clan are well-established merchants in both the port of Bossaso and Kismayo, in southern Somalia.

On October 26, 2016, IS fighters seized the small coastal town of Qandala, located 75km east of Bossaso ([Garowe Online](#), October 26, 2016). The Puntland Defense Forces responded and sent troops to retake Qandala, but the estimated force of 50 IS fighters had already retreated to the northern part of the Cal Madow Mountains, which rise up behind Qandala. Rather than demonstrating its strength, the brief takeover of Qandala did more to show the weakness of IS in Puntland.

Mumin's men likely number no more than 100 and lack the ability to take on even small contingents of the Puntland Defense Forces. However, IS does have the ability to launch hit-and-run attacks. This was evidenced by an IS-orchestrated attack on a hotel in Bossaso that resulted in the deaths of four guards and two IS fighters ([Somalia Review](#), February 10). The attack, which occurred as Somalia was preparing to hold its long-delayed presidential election, was the first major attack on a civilian target in Bossaso.

The uptick in activity by IS in Puntland will not have gone unnoticed by al-Shabaab's leadership. They acted decisively in 2015 and in 2016 to counter the threat IS posed by tasking the group's intelligence wing, the Amniyat, with tracking, infiltrating and killing those who had defected from al-Shabaab. The effectiveness of the Amniyat and al-Shabaab's size relative to IS in Somalia means that IS' influence in Puntland is likely to remain limited. It may even be brought to an end completely. Al-Shabaab's leadership in Puntland will focus its efforts on either co-opting or eliminating what is a relatively small contingent of IS fighters. The opportunities in Puntland are too important to al-Shabaab for it to tolerate a rival organization.

## Looking Forward

Al-Shabaab's efforts to expand its operations and influence in Puntland are unlikely to diminish in the near future. The weakness within the government of Puntland and the increasing disorder within its poorly paid and organized defense forces have provided an opening into which al-Shabaab has inserted itself.

This, combined with what looks to be a devastating drought that the government has failed to prepare for or respond to, will provide al-Shabaab with additional opportunities to demonstrate its ability to provide "services" and implement its own radical version of law and order.

At the same time, al-Shabaab will take full advantage of Puntland's strategic location just across the Gulf of Aden from war-torn Yemen.

Due to the tightness of the market for weapons in Somalia, al-Shabaab has long struggled to secure adequate supplies of weapons and materiel. This may well change if it is able to tap into the burgeoning arms trade between Yemen and Somalia. Al-Shabaab will also benefit from an increased ability to interact and exchange expertise with its fellow al-Qaeda affiliate AQAP.

The only significant check on al-Shabaab's influence and ability to operate in Puntland would be a clan-backed effort to combat the group. At the present time, such an operation appears unlikely. The convergence of government weakness, severe drought and a war in Yemen that has strengthened AQAP will ensure that al-Shabaab continues to prioritize its operations in Puntland.

*Michael Horton is a senior analyst for Arabian affairs at the Jamestown Foundation. He is a frequent contributor to Jane's Intelligence Review and has written for numerous other publications including: The National Interest, The Economist and West Point's CTC Sentinel.*

## NOTES

[1] Al-Shabaab focused much of its energy and resources on reefing and expanding its intelligence apparatus, the Amniyat. Amniyat operatives were and are fundamental al-Shabaab's "stay behind element". Despite the fact that it was forced to withdraw from towns

and cities, the deployment of the Amniyat allowed it to maintain a covert presence in most urban areas.

[2] The Puntland Intelligence Agency (PIA), formerly the Puntland Intelligence Service (PIS), is suspected of having incorporated many former members of al-Shabaab who defected in 2010.

[3] The Puntland Defense Force (PDF) is also known as the Puntland Security Force (PSF). The Puntland Dervish Force is a paramilitary force that is nominally part of the Puntland Defense Force.

[4] See: <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2017/02/gai-di-mtaani-issue-8.pdf>