



# Al-Shabaab: An Interview with Christopher Anzalone

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Expert on jihadi-insurgent groups Christopher Anzalone talks about the recent activity and future of the jihadist group Al-Shabaab.

This interview was originally conducted for the [Remote Warfare Programme](#).

**Q. Recently, there were two major attacks on civilian targets in Mogadishu, Somalia. The first was the third-deadliest act of terrorism in recorded history. Whilst Al-Shabaab has yet to admit or deny responsibility for the first attack, it has claimed responsibility for the second. Does this activity suggest a resurgence of the group?**

Yes, the October 14 and 28 attacks together with the overrunning by Al-Shabaab of government bases in September at El-Wak, Bula Gadud, Beled Hawo, and Bariire suggest that the group is resurgent. After suffering setbacks between 2011 and roughly 2013/2014, Al-Shabaab has stabilized and even expanded its territorial reach and control (direct control as well as areas where it can operate with impunity even if covertly). The group has also withstood internal schisms such as the 2012-2013 “fitna,” the killing of Ahmed Godane, and the formal and full defection of Mukhtar Robow as well as attempts by Islamic State and IS-Somalia to attract defections. The group’s resurgence has also been marked by the maintenance of regular attacks of various types across the country including in and around Mogadishu/Banaadir, Lower and Middle Shabelle, Lower and Middle Juba, Hiraan, Bay & Bakool, Puntland, and Galguduud.

The October 14 and 28 attacks were, in Al-Shabaab’s framing, not primarily targeting civilians but rather government buildings or personnel such as inside the Nasa-Hablod Hotel. This of course may be simply the group’s talking points but even if so they are instructive with regard to understanding how Al-

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Shabaab's leadership seeks to present itself domestically: they are still primarily interested with building an insurgent Islamist state or statelet in Somalia.

### **Q. How has al-Shabaab managed to survive this long despite the numerous setbacks it has experienced?**

Al-Shabaab benefits from the continued inability of the Somali federal government to exercise any sustained form of authority or security outside of major cities and towns (and it even is unable to do this in Mogadishu, as evidenced by Al-Shabaab's continued ability to launch major attacks in the most secure areas of the capital). Clan and sub-clan elders, generally speaking, still feel that it is important or otherwise worthwhile to maintain open lines of communication with Al-Shabaab as well as the government, recognizing that the government is unable to firmly control the countryside which in turn means that it is in their (the clans') best interest to maintain a dialogue with the insurgents.

Al-Shabaab's continued resilience owes as much to political and social factors such as these as it does to military factors. The group's leadership structures have proven much more robust than some analysts have claimed. It has remained largely intact despite the departure of individual leaders and important figures such as Robow, even during the tumultuous period following the targeted killing of Godane and the rise of IS and IS-Somalia in 2014 and 2015. During the 2012-2013 "fitna" with Robow, Hasan Dahir Aweys, Ibrahim al-Afghani, Omar Hammami, and others, the group's administrative leadership remained loyal to Godane, for example.

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## **Q. How have the organisation's strategy and tactics shifted over the past decade?**

Al-Shabaab's territorial strategy has in many ways remained remarkably consistent over the past decade. In 2007 it rebuilt its strength and networks after suffering heavy losses during the Ethiopian invasion, but by mid-2008 when it began to capture large swaths of territory and major urban centers such as Baidoa, Marka, and Kismaayo it began to set up regional governing administrations. It has continued to demonstrate a desire to continue as a territorial rebel group (that is, a rebel group that seeks to implement governance over territory) since that time, even during periods such as 2011-2013/14 when it was experiencing major setbacks.

With the exception of periods in 2009 and 2010 when it foolishly used mass infantry attacks on entrenched AMISOM forces in Mogadishu, Al-Shabaab has continued through much of its history to rely on asymmetric and guerilla warfare against technologically and numerically superior enemies. After tactically withdrawing from urban centers such as Mogadishu and Kismaayo rather than waste manpower and other resources on pointless battles, Al-Shabaab transitioned in these areas to its guerilla roots and continues to carry out hit-and-run attacks in these areas.

## **Q. What role has the media played in Al-Shabaab's strategy?**

A multi-pronged media operations campaign has been integral to Al-Shabaab's strategy since at least 2007. This campaign includes external, regional (East African), and domestic Somali parts. Al-Shabaab leaders understand that they need to target a number of different audiences and so they have invested the time and resources to develop these different streams of media production and

messaging. I have discussed the group's media campaign and its evolution in depth here in this [NGO report](#).

**Q. You've previously described AMISOM's push back against Al-Shabab as a military success rather than a political one. In what ways has AMISOM been a political failure and why is this important?**

There is a limit to what military force alone can accomplish in Somalia or anywhere for that matter. AMISOM, whose members have different priorities and interests, cannot make local powerbrokers such as business people and clan elders stop dialogue or cooperation with Al-Shabaab. AMISOM cannot eradicate corruption within the Somali federal or regional governments or make the former cooperate with the later. Al-Shabaab has proven that it can weather significant blows and losses such as the killing of top leaders and being forced to withdraw from key locations such as Kismaayo. However, it has been able to rejuvenate and even extend its reach (compared to 2012) because of continuing corruption, lack of accountability, and poor capacity of the Somali state.

**Q. In terms of Al-Shabaab's foreign links, the group "pledged obedience" to al-Qaeda in 2012. However, it decided not to ally itself to Islamic State. Why did the group make this decision and how do you see Al-Shabaab's relationship with Al-Qaeda evolving in the future?**

It is unclear why Al-Shabab's leadership did not heed IS' wooing, though it most likely has to do with the relationships forged between the group and Al-Qaeda Central figures in the preceding years. It may also have involved a more rational calculation about what switching "allegiance" would bring. Al-Shabaab has long been a strong vocal supporter of Al-Qaeda and its leaders but

operationally and strategically has remained focused on a primarily domestic and, since 2011, regional (particularly in Kenya) project rather than truly “globalizing” its operations as AQ Central leaders have historically sought from irredentist Islamist groups. Al-Shabaab will most likely remain aligned with AQ Central, particularly as IS Core continues to decline. IS-Somalia’s limited ability to expand also suggests that it has not been able to tap into segments of the population that are pro-insurgency but strongly anti-Shabab or without previous ties to Al-Shabaab, unlike Wilayat Khurasan in Afghanistan and Pakistan which built itself up on defectors from the Tehrik-i Taliban Pakistan umbrella and groups in Afghanistan that were either opposed to, had been expelled from, or were not allied or a part of the Afghan Taliban.

**Q. What factors will determine whether Al-Shabaab resurges or is finally politically defeated in the future?**

Al-Shabaab’s fortunes will be determined in the end by improvements in the political field, which in turn will enable the federal and regional state governments to convince local notables that they should not continue to de facto legitimize Al-Shabaab as a social actor in Somalia. Political improvements include a sustained campaign against corruption, building up reliable security forces loyal to the state instead of specific clans/sub-clans, and other related issues such as paying security forces regularly and on time as well as being held accountable for donor funds and equipment. The rampant corruption has led to significant amounts of misappropriated funds and other aid, which in turn hampers the government’s ability to address these priorities. Some AMISOM countries such as Kenya and Ethiopia have their own interests in Somalia and, though they are a part of the African Union force, have also pursued these interests. The international community should hold

the Somali government accountable so that the process of rebuilding the country does not become a business in and of itself for corrupt politicians and other officials.

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Image of a bullet hole in the window of a hotel in Mogadishu, where AMISOM forces previously engaged with Al Shabaab militants. Image credit: [UN Photo/Flickr](#).

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**Christopher Anzalone** is a pre-doctoral research fellow in the Belfer Center's International Security Program and a Ph.D. candidate at the Institute of Islamic Studies at McGill University. His dissertation examines the intersection of social movement and organizational dynamics, ideology, and political and economic goals and how these affect the utilization and presentation of violence, and particularly the "violence of control," by jihadi-insurgent groups with cross-regional bases and support networks with a special focus on Islamic State in Syria and Iraq and Al-Shabaab in Somalia. It also looks at the strategic and symbolic dimensions of this violence and how it impacts and is impacted by organizational structure, cohesion, and culture.



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