



AL-SHABAB AL-MUJAHIDEEN AT A CROSSROAD

Dr. Shaul Shay (Research Fellow, ICT)

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ABSTRACT

Ahmed Abdi Godane, the leader of the Islamist militant group, Al-Shabab Al-Mujahideen, was killed in a US air strike inside Somalia on September 1, 2014. Godane's death is a big blow to Al-Shabab as well as to the Al-Qaeda network to which Al-Shabab is a member. Al-Shabab elected Sheikh Ahmad Umar (Abu Ubaidah) as the new "emir" of the group. However, Godane's death could lead to an internal power struggle and infighting within the organization.

* The views expressed in this publication are solely those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT).

Al-Shabab Al-Mujahideen at a Crossroad

Dr. Shaul Shay (September 2014)

In May 2008, Aden Hashi Ayro, the leader of Al-Shabab, was killed in an American airstrike. A few days later, the organization's Shura Council nominated Ahmed Abdi Godane, 31, to succeed Ayro. Six years later Godane was killed in the same manner.

The Pentagon has confirmed that Ahmed Abdi Godane, the leader of the Islamist militant group Al-Shabab Al-Mujahideen, was killed in a US air strike inside Somalia on September 1, 2014.¹

"We have confirmed that Ahmed Godane, the co-founder of al-Shabab, has been killed," said rear admiral John Kirby, the Pentagon press secretary, describing it as a "major symbolic and operational loss" for the militant group, which aligned itself with Al-Qaeda.² The death of Godane is a big blow to Al-Shabab and also to the Al-Qaeda network, to which al-Shabab is a member.

Al-Shabab elected Sheikh Ahmed Umar (Abu Ubaidah) as the new leader of the organization and in an audio statement posted on two Web sites, members of the group have pledged allegiance to their new leader. "We, the al-Shabab mujahideen, give allegiance to our new leader, Sheikh Ahmed Umar Abu Ubaidah," said Sheikh Abdiasis Abu Musab, spokesman for Al-Shabab's military operations, in a recorded statement.³

Just hours after the pledge, Al-Shabab claimed responsibility for two car bomb attacks targeting African peacekeepers and a government convoy. At least 12 civilians were killed in the blast.⁴

Background

The air strike came days after two major events occurred in Somalia:

¹ David Smith, "Al-Shabaab leader Ahmed Abdi Godane killed by US air strike in Somalia", the Guardian, September 5, 2014.

² "Al-Shabaab in Somalia confirms leader was targeted in US drone strike", the Guardian, September 2, 2014.

³ "Al-Shabaab pledge allegiance to new leader", Al Arabiya, September 8, 2014.

⁴ Ibid.

In the first event, Somali government forces regained control of a high-security prison in the capital that was attacked on August 31, 2014. Mogadishu's Godka Jilacow prison is an interrogation center for Somalia's intelligence agency and many suspected militants are believed to be held in underground cells there. The attack started when a suicide bomber detonated an explosives-laden vehicle at the gate of the prison and six heavily armed gunmen fought their way inside to free other extremists who were held there. Somali officials said all seven attackers; three government soldiers and two civilians were killed.⁵

In the second event, African Union (AU) troops and Somali government forces launched "Operation Indian Ocean", a major offensive aimed at seizing key ports from Al-Shabab and cutting off one of its key sources of revenue: multi-million dollar exports of charcoal. AU forces were targeting Al-Shabab on several fronts, with Ugandan troops leading the offensives against the main port of Barawe, south of the capital, Mogadishu.

The Air Strike

At least three air strikes hit a convoy of Al-Shabab vehicles in southern Somalia. The vehicles were heading towards the coastal town of Barawe, Al-Shabab's main base, when they were struck. Godane and five unidentified Al-Shabab members were killed in the strikes.

Washington has carried out a series of drone missile strikes in the past, including attacks reportedly targeting Godane, but rarely confirms this officially. Godane survived two previous attacks in 2013. One attack took place in January against an Al-Shabab base in Gedo, killing a high-ranking Al-Shabab intelligence officer, and the other one took place in October against a vehicle convoy carrying senior members of the group in Lower Shabelle, killing Al-Shabab's top explosives expert. In both attacks, Godane left the target zone only moments before the attacks ensued.

Ahmed Abdi Godane

Ahmed Abdi Godane, also known as Mukhtar Abu Zubeyr, was born in the breakaway region of Somaliland in 1977, a member of the Isaaq clan that dominates in the north but is in the minority in the rest of the country.

Godane went to school in Hargeisa and later won scholarships to study in Sudan and later in Pakistan on an accounting scholarship funded by Saudi millionaires. It is believed that he travelled from there to Afghanistan, where he may have received military training.

⁵ "Al-Shabaab in Somalia confirms leader was targeted in US drone strike", the Guardian, September 2, 2014.

Godane returned to Somaliland in late 2001 and by 2002, he started a plot to create a northern wing for Somalia's Al-Ittihad al-Islami in Somaliland. He landed an accounting job at the Dahabshiil company subsidiary, Al-Barakat office, in. The U.S. government later listed Al-Barakat as terrorist organization, accusing it of providing or transferring funds for radical groups.

Godane was first linked to terrorism in October 2003. He was accused of involvement in the murder of Analena Tonelli, an Italian aid worker in Borame hospital, and of a British couple, Dick and Enid Eyeington, who ran a school in Somaliland.⁶

After that he moved south to Mogadishu and rose through the ranks of Al-Shabab, the armed wing of the Islamic Courts Union, a grassroots movement that controlled the country for part of 2006. When the US backed Ethiopia's invasion of Somalia to oust the Islamic Courts, it was Al-Shabab that positioned itself as the nationalist, Muslim resistance to a foreign, Christian assault.⁷

By 2008, Godane had become Al-Shabab's "emir," succeeding Aden Hashi Ayro who was killed in a US missile strike that year. Godane sought to move Al-Shabab closer to Al-Qaeda but Osama Bin Laden declined the offer of a formal alliance, according to documents found in his Abbottabad residence. He also warned Godane to govern well and to be careful not to harm Muslims in his attacks.⁸

After Bin Laden's death, Godane was accepted into Al-Qaeda's fold and in 2012 he pledged allegiance to the organization. Under Godane's leadership, Al-Shabab ventured outside Somalia's borders for the first time, carrying out suicide bombings in Kampala, Uganda, in 2010 that killed 74 people.

Al Shabab also came to control almost all of southern Somalia and the capital, Mogadishu. But in the last two years it has suffered a string of military defeats by AMISOM and has been riven by internal disputes.

The tensions became public in April 2013 when a group of senior Al-Shabab fighters wrote a letter to Al-Qaeda leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, criticizing Godane's autocratic leadership style. In response, Godane carried out a bloody purge that left him in undisputed control of the

⁶ Tristan McConnell, "Who is Al Shabaab leader Ahmed Godane?" Global Post, October 1, 2013.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

organization. Among those assassinated was the American jihadi, Omar Hammami, and Ibrahim al-Afghani, a friend, one-time mentor and co-founder of Al-Shabab. Like Godane, al-Afghani was also a member of the Isaaq clan.

Godane seized world attention a year ago with the Westgate mall attack in Nairobi, which left at least 67 people dead. He warned Kenya that it would suffer further atrocities unless it withdrew its troops from the AU force in Somalia. "You cannot withstand a war of attrition inside your own country," he said in an audio message posted on a Web site linked to Al-Shabab, "So withdraw all your forces, or be prepared for an abundance of blood that will be spilt in your country."

The US offered a \$7 million reward for information leading to his capture.

The Somali Government's Response

Somalia's president Hassan Sheikh Mohamud has thanked the US for killing Godane. "The Somali government thanks the US government and individuals in the Somali security forces who helped the operation," the president said in a statement, "We are confirming that no-one in that convoy survived the attack." In the statement, the president also called on Al-Shabab fighters to lay down their arms. "One of the main pillars of the Somali war has gone, so there is no reason for Somalia's youth to continue with a war when its day are numbered," it said. President Mohamud also said the government was offering amnesty to members of the militant group.⁹

"[The government] is willing to offer amnesty to Al Shabab members who reject violence and renounce their links to Al Shabab and Al Qaeda – but for the next 45 days only," he said, "While an extreme hard-core may fight over the [new] leadership of Al Shabab, this is a chance for the majority of members to change course and reject Godane's decision to make them the pawns of an international terror campaign."¹⁰

Kenya's Response

In a statement issued in response to Godane's death, Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta thanked the US for killing Godane. He said that the US State Department confirmed that its operation led to the death of Godane, who was responsible for the attack on Westgate mall in

⁹“ Somalia put on high alert after Al Shabaab leader Ahmed Abdi Godane confirmed dead”, ABC News, September 6, 2014.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Kenya's capital, Nairobi, last year in which a large number of civilians were killed or injured. "His (Godane) death is a stark reminder that those who live by the sword shall perish by the sword," Kenyatta said. "Kenya, with its partners and allies, will do everything it can to secure itself and the region. And we will stand in solidarity with the victims of the Westgate attack, for whom Godane's death provides a small measure of closure," Kenyatta vowed.¹¹

The Successor, Sheikh Ahmad Umar (Abu Ubaidah)

Godane ruled Al Shabab like a tyrant with an iron fist and killed off many of his rivals and potential successors. That raised questions about who might take over for him and how effective that person could be to lead a group that was seen as an emerging threat in the region.¹²

Al-Shabab selected Mahad Omar Abdi-Kareem as the new "emir" at a meeting held in Barawe on September 6, 2014. Abdi-Kareem uses different aliases, such as Ahmad Umar, Abu Ubaidah and Ahmed Dirie. Little is known about Al-Shabab's new leader. According to one source, Mahad Omar Abdi-Kareem was born in Kellafo, in the Ogaden region of Ethiopia, hails from Isaaq sub-clan and is Godane's cousin. Another source claims that he is from a branch of Somalia's Dir clan, whose homeland is in the country's south.

Mahad Omar Abdi-Kareem served as Al-Shabab's "Waali", the governor of Bay and Bakool regions of Somalia and, in recent months, deputy and special advisor to Ahmed Godane.¹³

A senior Al-Shabab official described him as having been very close to Godane and having played a role in Al-Shabab's most shadowy and feared wing, the clandestine internal secret service known as "Amniyat", which Godane set up to maintain discipline and expose rivals and informers.

Abu Ubaidah was involved in a major internal purge that took place last year, in which Godane eliminated several key rivals including a commander thought to be his likely successor, and in last year's killing of Omar Hammami, better known as al-Amriki, who was one of the most prominent foreigners fighting in Somalia but who had a falling out with Godane.

¹¹ "Kenya vows anti-terror measures after death of Al Shabaab leader", Business Standard, September 7, 2014.

¹² Gordon Lubold, "Will al Shabaab's new leader be as dangerous as it old one?", Foreign Policy, September 5, 2014.

¹³ "Somalia: who is the new leader of Shabaab?" Waagacusub Media, September 7, 2014.

Al-Shabab announced the move in an online statement, vowing to take revenge for Godane's death. Abu Mohammed, one of Al-Shabab's commanders, said that the decision to appoint Abu Ubaidah had been unanimous. In a statement, Al-Shabab reaffirmed its affiliation with Al-Qaeda and warned: "Avenging the death of our scholars and leaders is a binding obligation on our shoulders that we will never relinquish nor forget no matter how long it takes. By the permission of Allah, you will surely taste the bitter consequences of your actions." The announcement of the new leader came just minutes after Al-Shabab itself confirmed the death of Godane.¹⁴

Summary

Al-Shabab Al-Mujahideen is fighting to topple Somalia's western-backed government and AMISOM forces, and regularly launches bombings and shooting attacks against state targets and civilians.

Since August 2011, African Union, Kenyan and Ethiopian troops, alongside Transitional Federal Government (TFG) forces and a coalition of Somali militias, have liberated the major towns from Al-Shabab.

Al-Shabab has shown little resistance, strategically abandoning its former strongholds, bases and training camps, and adopting guerrilla and terror tactics in the face of larger and better-equipped armies. However, although Al-Shabab is weakened, is far from a spent force.

Somalia's government has warned that Al-Shabab rebels are planning a wave of retaliatory attacks after it was confirmed their leader was killed.

The death of Godane is big blow to Al-Shabab, as well as to the Al-Qaeda network, of which Al-Shabab is a member. Godane's death could now lead to an internal power struggle and infighting within the organization.

With Godane gone, the group's future relationship with Al-Qaeda is now uncertain and some believe that without him, Al-Shabab's ambitions to join the broader network will disappear, potentially leaving the organization to slip to a more localized threat characterized more by criminal behavior and illicit trafficking inside Somalia.¹⁵

¹⁴ "Al-Shabaab names new leader after Godane death in US strike", BBC News, September 6, 2014.

¹⁵ Gordon Lubold, "Will al Shabaab's new leader be as dangerous as its old one?" Foreign Policy, September 5, 2014.

The military defeats of Al-Shabab and the death of Godane are signs of hope after decades of despair, and could serve as a turning point for the country and a step towards democracy and restoration.