

## Al-Shabaab Terrorists Propaganda and the Kenya Government Response

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### Abstract

Al-Shabaab terrorist faction cared about the popular support they enjoyed within the Southern Somalia population they claimed to represent. This level of support either rose or fell in the aftermath of a campaign of terrorist violence. Al-Shabaab terrorist used propaganda as an effective tactic for mobilizing political support for their cause. This paper models a scenario in which Al-Shabaab extremist faction consider attacking the Somalia transitional government forces and African Union Mission for Somalia forces in the hopes of provoking a counterterrorist response that radicalized the population, increased the extremists' support at the expense of a moderate faction. In this article, we looked at Al-Shabaab terrorist group propaganda and the Kenya government response which turned Al-Shabaab's violent discourse as unjustifiable by effective use of the Mass Media that reached into the deepest parts of Somalia and discrediting those who spread rumors by neutralization of the pernicious effects.

**Keywords:** Terrorism and Propaganda

### 1. Introduction

Terrorism discourse is plagued by confusion and misrepresentation. Definitions number in the hundreds. Terrorism is an anxiety-inspiring method of repeated violent action, employed by (semi-) clandestine individual, group or state actors, for idiosyncratic, criminal, or political reasons, whereby in contrast to assassination the direct targets of violence are not the main targets (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, n.d. Definitions of terrorism). The human victims of violence are chosen selectively as symbolic targets from a target population, and serve as message the hard targets like high ranking government officials. Threat and violence based communication processes between terrorist, victims and main targets are used to manipulate the main target (audiences), turning it into a target of attention, depending on whether intimidation, coercion, or propaganda is primarily sought (Schmid, 1988). Although accounting for most violence, state terrorism is widely presented as justified, while opponents are the forces of disorder and, thus, are illegitimate (Primoratz, 2002).

Discrepancies exist between the developed and developing countries as the developed Nations do as they please (Chomsky, 2008). Those leading gorilla and Insurgents are the terrorists or freedom fighters according to whose interests they serve; for example, the United States endorsed, mobilized, financed, and armed militant groups abroad, including some they now target in their 'war on terror'. The term 'terrorism' provides a means to stigmatize and delegitimize the actions of enemies. Typically, terrorism is associated with deadly attacks on civilians, such as the Friday, August 7, 1998 bombing at the US embassies in Nairobi, Kenya and Dar-es-Salaam (Odhiambo *et al*, 2010). Schmid (2005) while emphasizing terrorism's communicative aspect cites murderous violence as its 'central idea: "Kill one to frighten ten thousand". However, the term is increasingly misapplied to various other actions far removed from violent mass-casualty attacks. This ever-broadening expansion of 'terrorism' is encouraged in propaganda campaigns by corporations that profit from the abuses their opponents decry.

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## 2. Methodology

Qualitative Research method was used in this study. Primary and secondary data were analyzed. The primary data was collected by interviewing government officials in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, soldiers and officers on their understanding on war propaganda. A total of 91 people were interviewed. With 30 being military officers in active service, 40 service men and women and 21 from the ministry of Foreign Affairs and their views on war propaganda recorded and analyzed. The researchers studied literature dealing with war propaganda to gather secondary data on the subject drawn from books, journals, news papers, Conference proceedings, Government/corporate reports, theses and dissertations, Internet and magazines was critically analyzed. The findings and analysis are presented under the sub headings of: Propaganda and framing, hierarchy of Al-Shabaab leadership, the origin of Al-Shabaab's Ideology, propaganda, Al-Shabaab's propaganda works and Kenya Government Counter-Propaganda Strategies

## 3. Propaganda and Framing

Discourse analyses on terrorism usefully employ theories of framing (Papacharissi and Oliveira, 2008). Media do not simply report events but selectively frame them to construct tacit definitions, interpretations, and moral evaluations of problems and suggest solutions (Entman, 2003; Johnson-Cartee, 2004). Frames socially construct reality by imposing meaning on actions, events, and issues and organize them within familiar categories and narratives. Following familiar patterns, media select and emphasize certain facts and downplay others; their presentation of issues therefore shapes public perceptions and views of appropriate responses. Norris *et al* (2003) find it a 'puzzle' why certain frames are used instead of others, but puzzle is solved by the propaganda model that identifies filters that exclude or marginalize certain information and sources (Herman, 2003). Patrick and Thrall (2008) identify the propaganda model as part of a 'hegemonic' approach that 'has dominated political communication literature on war and the media for over a generation'.

## 4. Hierarchy of Al-Shabaab Leadership

The chain of command of al-Shabaab appears to be flexible. The organization has multiple cells, units, divisions and figures with diverse powers, nonetheless, that do not mean al-Shabaab are not politically organized. In fact in terms of hierarchical structure of its leadership al-Shabaab is well organized with independent components (Russell and Tyler, 2010). Al-Shabaab is headed by a supreme central commander known as Amir. He is assisted by a ten-member council, in a form of top shura majlis (body of cabinet). It is this body who decide all major activities of the group. Under this is the consultative council or the general shura majlis which comprises of junior Amirs in charge of several sub divisions of different areas covering traditional areas like politics, media, and daily military operations (Michael & Lars (2010).

Under the military branch, which is the most important branch of the organization, there are two subunits; namely Jaysh Al-'Usr or the army of hardship and suffering, and the judicial, social and economic branch, Jaysh Al-Hisbah, using the term coined by ibn Taymiyah. The functions of the hisbah branch are among others to uphold law and moral principles in the society and to oversee the general welfare of the public. The hisbah also acts as a religious council, manages the shari'a courts and at the same time it enforces the laws through its Islamic Police Force.

Nonetheless, the leadership seems to be decentralized since the regional commanders managing operations in specific geographic regions are free to pursue independent action without consulting the shura council. This is however part of Al-Shabaab's policy as decentralization of this nature makes the group difficult to be monitored.

"The Al-Shabaab faces multiple internal divisions over clan, leadership, tactics, and ideology which a new unity government can exploit to convince parts of the Al-Shabaab to abandon the movement and gradually outmaneuver, marginalize, and defeat the core hardliners" (Ken Menkhaus, 2009).

### 4.1. The Origin of Al-Shabaab's Ideology

Al-Shabaab's way of getting things done have not emanated from the religious or the cultural identity of the Somali people. Religious rigidity and narrow interpretations of the Qur'an and Sunnah of the Prophet is alien component in traditional Somali Islam. The ultimate goals of al-Shabaab are the establishment of Islamic state, implementation of the Shari'a laws in Somali.

Al-Shabaab has ideological ties with Al-Qaeda and is linked to the international network of other similar organizations through leadership contacts, training and joint operations in the Horn of Africa (ICPVT, 2010). Al-Shabab's ideology is believed to be espoused from Wahhabism which preaches a more literal interpretation of Islam and condemns innovations in Islam and rituals (Rohan, 2005).

#### **4.2. The Precepts of Al-Shabaab's Ideology**

##### **a) Establishment of Islamic State**

Their main political ideology is to establish an Islamic state in Somalia. By that, the Organization aims to overrun Somalia and eventually spill-over its ideology throughout the Horn of Africa (Abdisaid, 2008). Initially, al-Shabaab pursued the establishment of an Islamic Emirate in Somalia including the north-eastern region of Kenya, the Ogaden region of Ethiopia as well as Djibouti (Al-Shabaab, Australia National Security, August 21, 2009).

#### **5. Propaganda**

The word propaganda suggests shady or underhanded activity, but that was not its original meaning (Jackall, 1995). Propaganda is defined by the North Atlantic Alliance as any information, ideas, doctrines or special appeals disseminated to influence the opinion, emotions, attitudes or behaviour of any specified group in order to benefit the sponsor either directly or indirectly (NATO Glossary of Military Terms, p. 2-205). The term came from the Latin name of a group of Roman Catholic cardinals, the *Congregatio de Propaganda Fide* (Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith). Pope Gregory XV established the committee called the propaganda in 1622 to supervise missionaries (Jowett and O'Donnell, 1992). Gradually, the word came to mean any effort to spread a belief. It acquired its present meaning after World War I (1914-1918), when writers exposed the dishonest but effective techniques that propagandists had used during the war (Miller, 2004).

Propaganda as it is used today began in the early 1900's. Lenin, who led the revolution that established Communist control of Russia, emphasized the importance of propaganda. He distinguished between two types of persuasion propaganda and agitation. Lenin regarded propaganda as the use of historical and scientific arguments to convince the well educated minority. He defined agitation as the use of half-truths and slogans to arouse the masses, whom he considered incapable of understanding complicated ideas. Traditionally, each Communist Party has included a unit that specializes in agitation and propaganda. Propaganda is one-sided communication designed to influence people's thinking and actions (Rutherford, 2000).

The greatest use of propaganda occurs during wartime. At such times, government propaganda campaigns urge people to save resources, volunteer for military service, support the war effort, and make sacrifices necessary for victory. Psychological warfare is a type of propaganda that aims to weaken the enemy's will to fight or belief in their government. Much wartime propaganda is called covert (secret) propaganda because it comes from hidden sources. For example, a propagandist might try to discourage enemy troops by sending them counterfeit newspapers reporting huge losses among their forces. Some covert propaganda is spread by people in a country who secretly support its enemies. A group of such people is called a fifth column. The opposite of covert propaganda is called overt (open) propaganda, which comes from known sources (Sparks, 2007).

##### **5.1. How Al-Shabaab's propaganda works**

Propaganda appeals to its audience in three ways (1) It calls for an action or opinion that seems to be wise and reasonable (2) It suggests that the action or opinion is moral and right (3) It provides a pleasant feeling, such as a sense of importance or of belonging. These techniques include gaining people's trust, simplicity and repetition, and the use of symbols. However, propagandists often use such underhanded methods as distortion, concealment, and lying. In nations ruled by dictators, governments increase the effectiveness of their propaganda by using censorship (Klaehn, 2002).

Gaining people's trust-Propagandists must be believable, and their audience must consider them reliable authorities. One way to gain an audience's trust is to report unfavorable news that the audience knows. Simplicity and repetition-Propaganda must be easy to understand and to remember. As far as possible, propagandists make their appeals in simple, catchy slogans that they repeat over and over (Andrew, 2009). The use of symbols involves words and illustrations that bring strong responses from people. Individuals react not only to the actual meaning of words and the actual content of pictures but also to the feelings aroused by such symbols.

For example, nearly all cultures have favorable reactions to a picture of a mother and baby. Propagandists try to create an association in people's minds between such symbols and the messages they are trying to spread. Powerful negative images are frequently used to increase prejudice, hostility, and hatred toward the desired targets of propaganda (Manjoo, 2004).

Distortion and concealment-Propagandists deliberately exaggerate the importance of some facts and twist the meaning of others. They try to conceal facts that might prevent the response they seek from people. They also try to shift attention away from embarrassing facts that cannot be hidden. Censorship is most common where the government controls the newspapers, television, and other means of communication. It increases the effectiveness of propaganda because the government can silence people who contradict its official views (Klaehn, 2005).

## **5.2. Al-Shabaab's and Al-Qaeda's Propaganda Strategies**

Like other activities, propaganda and recruitment are enhanced by the network's structure. Decentralization allows for superior penetration into other social nets, to take advantage of opportunities that arise suddenly, and intercept potential recruits who meet Al-Shabaab's internal standards of security and confidence. The net has not arisen spontaneously, but its earlier development had not been planned either. It spreads constantly and in a dispersed fashion. The Jihad discourse transcends personal charisma. It is an ideology with deep religious anchorage and an attractive "anti system" that will survive Al-Shabaab's leaders.

### **a) Muslims Who Live in Countries of Islamic Majority**

Al-Shabaab's actions are facilitated enormously by the previous existence of a deep-rooted sense of rancor and hostility toward the West in certain parts of the world. With regards to the perception and psychology of the masses, Al-Shabaab has resorted to a simple but terribly effective mechanism of mobilization: to spur on frustration and provoke the desire of revenge. Al-Shabaab's use of language offers an attractive justification for millions of people who need to find the ultimate cause of their misfortune and stagnated future (Altheide, 2002).

The success of Al-Shabaab's propaganda resides through the radicalized interpretation of the Koran, and the simplification of reasons that govern the international system, Al-Shabaab has been able to elaborate a simple, but attractive statement of the role and duty of every Muslim, the reasons for his unhappiness, and the way to overcome them (Jowett and O'Donnell, 1992). Al-Shabaab thus applies an excessively subjective cause-effect logic, which strengthens subculture morale. With guerilla warfare, the Americans were defeated in Vietnam and the Soviets were defeated in Afghanistan. This is the method that expelled the direct Crusader colonialism from most of the Muslim lands, with Algeria the most well known. Al-Shabaab claimed on Wednesday through their twitter account that they had blown up a Kenyan armored personnel carrier between Taabto and Dhoombley, killing six Kenyan soldiers and injured 10 others. Oguna also dismissed claims by the Somali militants that they had blown up KDF armored personal carrier and killed six Kenyan soldiers on Wednesday (NAIROBI, Dec. 30, Xinhua, 2011).

### **b) Muslims Who Live in the West**

In this area Al-Shabaab's is perceived more clearly that, far from being the simple result of a backward and archaic fanaticism, it is a product of the included and immersed world of the information revolution. Al-Shabaab is conscious that manipulation, frustration, and indignation are not the only personal experiences extracted, but that these can be generated across emotive and sentimental resources recounted to a third party. Personal accounts, telecasts, photos, and an entire array of electronic means are capable of ensuring that individuals born and educated in Western societies, with no direct suffering themselves, nevertheless experience and empathize with the desperation of others. This skillful management of propaganda and the means that the information provides gives rise to deep transnational solidarities and nets of identity from which the terrorists obtain considerable yield (Alisha Ryu et al, 2009).

Any resulting xenophobic event or violence against Muslim minorities constitutes a most valuable resource in its propaganda arsenal. The same can be said about various types of information that promote mutual distrust, for example, conspiracy theories that blame the Kenya intelligence services and the economic ambitions of Kenya leaders for conflicts, terrorist attempts, and evil that, in general, actually stem from the international struggle against the terrorism. Al-Shabaab uses the technological advances that, to a great extent, produced the civilization that it tries to defeat. The Internet plays a pivotal role in its information strategy, even within the terrorist organization itself (Wine, 1999).

The appearance of power and the outreach of the Jihad message achieved through the Internet is reinforced as a consequence of links that include the related Web pages dedicated to Al-Shabaab. Any Web navigator interested in the Palestinian cause is able to easily connect to pages that gather the messages of the Islamic militants of Kashmir and the Afghan Taliban. All this transmits the idea of a global and linked struggle as Al-Shabaab and Al-Qaeda tries to mobilize to new candidates against the alleged enemies of Islam.

c) ‘‘No Muslims Need Apply’’

The communicative action of Al-Shabaab terrorism toward Kenya tends to spread fear, distort normal modes of behavior, generate insecurity, and stir hostility and distrust toward Islam. These are the most evident effects of its violent actions. But several subtle and dangerous others must be emphasized: to undermine the support that a population gives to leaders; to sow doubt on the capacity of the government to protect its population; and, especially, to spread the feeling of self-guilt among those receiving terrorist assaults. Therefore, there is a double objective: to terrify and de-legitimize (Taylor, 2002). Media

Al Shabaab uses various media in order to proliferate their propaganda. Besides traditional radio, the internet is the most heavily utilized by Al Shabaab and other militant Islamic groups such as Al Qaeda because it is the easiest and most cost-effective way to reach a large audience. As the internet is especially popular with today's youth, organizations such as Al Shabaab are using online forums and chat rooms in order to recruit young followers to their cause. Al Shabaab's official website, which has since been taken-down, featured posts, videos and official statements in English, Arabic and Somali, as well as online classrooms to educate followers (Ploch, 2011).

Prior to its expulsion from Mogadishu in mid-2011, Al-Shabaab had also launched the Al-Kataib propaganda television station the year before. The channel's pilot program aired the confessions of Ahmed Kisi, an alleged CIA spy, who had been executed earlier in the week (Anti-Defamation League, 2011)

In addition, Al-Shabaab is also using music to influence and appeal to their young followers. According to Robin Wright, "by 2010, almost eight out of every ten soldiers in Somalia's many rebel forces were children", which are especially influenced and susceptible messages conveyed to modern, western-themed music (Wright, 2011). One of Al Shabaab's foreign-born leaders, American Omar Hammami aka Abu Mansoor Al-Amriki, gained notoriety after an April 2009 video of him rapping about jihad (Gartenstein-Ross, 2011). Hammami's most recent song, "Send Me a Cruise", debuted online (Omar, 2011).

## **6. Kenya Government Counter-Propaganda Strategies**

Any analysis into the strategy used to diffuse Al-Shabaab's ideological content must arise from the fact that the propaganda is multidirectional. Al-Shabaab's future depends not only on its aptitude to support an operative nucleus capable of realizing ostentatious assaults, and its ability to obtain funding and secure recruits. Eroding and neutralizing this image of a mighty fortress must be the ultimate goal of any action designed to offset Al-Shabaab's propaganda campaign. In achieving this aim, the following measures can be useful:

a) Turn Al-Shabaab's Violent Discourse into an Unjustifiable discourse. The challenge is the uprooting of opinion that terrorism constitutes an acceptable way, independent of the legitimacy of the ends it seeks. Seating within the Muslim populations the idea that terrorist violence delegitimizes those that employ it can help to erode the supposed popular representation that terrorists always claim. A global rejection must be achieved in the long term to this type of violence. Kenya's military incursion into Somalia against the militant group Al Shabaab dubbed "Operation Linda Nchi" (Swahili for "Operation Defend the Country") has turned into Twitter war. This came after the official military spokesperson Major E. Chirchir posted old photos claiming that a Kenyan Al Shabaab recruit had been stoned to death recently by the group members because of "a difference of opinion". It later became apparent that the photos were actually taken by a Somalian journalist in 2009 and does not even feature a Kenyan Al Shabab recruit (<http://siku moja.blogspot.com/2012/01/kenya-defense-forces-and-al-shabaab.html>).

b) Criminalizing the Delusion of Impersonal Incitement to Murder via Communique's and Propaganda Messages  
In some countries that have suffered for years, for example, Spain, terrorism is defined in legislation and punishable by a jail sentence. This strategy can be transplanted to other countries. Working against the apologists of terrorism does not hit against the public's general freedom of expression because the expression of support for the murder of innocents is a way of endorsing those who commit such actions (Kamalipour & Snow, 2004). In addition, in an interconnected world, without real restrictions to the flow of information, tackling this dilemma solely within a national arena is pointless.

c) Effective Use of the Mass Media that Reaches into the Deepest Parts of Somalia

The mass media should be activated to spread an anti-terrorist message, as was done during the Cold War with the anti-Soviet Western radio listened to on the other side of the Berlin wall. In the current case, not perceiving these means as foreign agents of manipulation is difficult. Phenomenal successes like Al-Jazeera show the need to detract attention from these mediums, and take part in expressing opposing opinions and facilitating contrary information; otherwise the mass media become easy prey to systematic terrorist manipulation (Hall, 2006).

d) Paying Attention to the Power of Symbols

Any informative action that tries to offset the effects of terrorist imagery must use the mobilizing power that symbols possess. In this struggle to erode the image of terrorists' being a fortress, such actions as the loud and clear advertising of the detentions of the terrorist, the publication of their confessions and of any act that shows their lack of loyalty to the organization and to their colleagues, and any other measures that cast a mistrust over Al-Shabaab's heroic image of fallen or captured members, can prove enormously helpful (Manjoo, 2004).

e) Discrediting those who spread rumors

Rumor and misinformation occupy an important place in the terrorist network's propaganda strategy. Through them, Al-Shabaab manages to question the legitimacy and the honor of its opponents, without the need to justify the truth of its accusations. Rumors can consist of all kinds of delirious statements, conspiracy theories, and odd suggestions. Though the public first grants only limited credibility to this type of statements, the long-term effect supposes an internalization of doubt about all those involved: the political and security leaders, the security agencies, and the terrorists. The often secret nature of the authorities, the frequent lack of coordination, and the damage of the allegations, allow the "fire to spread." Neutralization of the pernicious effects of these statements can perhaps be achieved through the creation of an agency or foundation that devotes itself exclusively to denying, in an informed manner, the misinformation, and to providing clear and forceful proof to end rumors. Keeping its composition neutral, by including academics and professionals outside the political or military arenas, would contribute to its credibility and efficiency (Dinan & Miller, 2007).

f) Resorting to the Emotions

Terrorist propaganda relies on a wide use of the emotional impact of certain visual material. Without any type of available or effective restriction, crude images of corpses and mutilations can be found on terrorist-sponsored sparse Web pages, including disabled persons and injured men portrayed as supposed evidence of the results of Kenya Defence Forces (KDF) military action. Terrorists are conscious that appealing to the emotions is one of the most rapid and effective ways of modifying public and personal attitudes, and they do not hesitate to resort to any type of material that they consider to be useful to this end.

Without committing to excesses, and always respecting ethical criteria, the Kenya counter-informative strategy cannot ignore the emotive perspective of this information war. Illustrating the results of terrorist action, through actual images of its victims and the resulting human tragedy, is one of the most powerful ways of delegitimizing terrorists. Together with respect due to the victims and their families, the exhibition of certain images can constitute a revolt against terrorists much more powerful than a long series of official communiques' regarding penalty. Indeed, concealing the real results of terror only helps to generate an idealized stereotype removed from what terrorism actually is (Andrew, 2009).

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