

SPECIAL REPORT: The al-Shabaab vs. Islamic State battle for foreign fighters

To secure ourselves against defeat lies in our own hands, but the opportunity of defeating the enemy is provided by the enemy himself (Sun Tzu, The Art of War)

Al-Qaeda affiliate, Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahidin, has evolved since its emergence from the Islamic Courts in 2006. While the group has struggled against the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) and Somali National Army (SNA) offensive and the loss of territories since 2011, it has developed an effective asymmetric warfare campaign as a means of survival and remains a persistent threat to Somalia and the East Africa region. Until recently, Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) has seen major gains through large scale military operations effectively capturing and controlling large amounts of territory in Iraq and Syria and declaring a Caliphate in Jun 2014. The battlefield successes of ISIL, compounded by the effectiveness of the organisation's IO¹ campaign, have contributed to a number of violent extremist organisations across the world pledging allegiance, as well as an influx of internationals travelling to the region to wage jihad (holy war). In contrast, the loss of territories for al-Shabaab has coincided with the rise of ISIL and seen fewer numbers of diaspora in the West travelling to Somalia for jihad.

On Jan 01, al-Shabaab media wing, al-Kataib, released a propaganda message, "The Path to Paradise: From the Twin Cities to the Land of Two Migrations Episode 2". Our assessment examines the video from the perspective of al-Shabaab's battle for foreign fighters, alongside the ideological conviction of some members of the diaspora, and explores reasons why global jihadist groups are desperately seeking to recruit internationals into their ranks.

The Path To Paradise: From the Twin Cities to the Land of Two Migrations Episode 2

On Jan 01, al-Shabaab media wing, al-Kataib, released a propaganda video, "The Path to Paradise: From the Twin Cities to the Land of Two Migrations Episode 2". The 51:40min video begins with approximately 11 minutes focused on perceived social and racial inequality and injustice in the United States. There are snippets of the Ku Klux Klan, and recent police shootings of black men and events which spawned the 'Black Lives Matter' movement². Speeches from Malcolm X on the 'Vicious Cycle of Poverty', and incarceration rates of black men in the U.S. lead into a theme of support and justification for the religion of Islam to unite across all races. The focus on Islam is highlighted several times in the opening, and most dramatically by Anwar Al-Awlaki.³ The video features a Nov 2011 speech released after Al-Awlaki's death⁴ in attempt to show that he predicted U.S. racism would lead to religious discrimination.



"To the Muslims in America, I have this to say. Slowly but surely your situation is becoming similar to that of the embattled Muslims community of Spain after the fall of Grenada. Muslims of the West take heed and learn from the lessons of history. There are ominous clouds gathering in your horizon. Yesterday America was the land of slavery, segregation, lynching and Ku Klux Klan, and tomorrow it will be a land of religious discrimination and concentration camps."

The video then cuts to a speech by U.S. Republican presidential aspirant, Donald Trump:

¹ Information Operations.

² Activist movement, originating in the African American community that campaigns against violence toward black people.

³ Al-Awlaki was a U.S. citizen and al-Qaeda in the Arab Peninsula Chief of External Operations, killed by a drone strike in Yemen on Sep 30, 2011.

⁴ Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula's released the original "The Martyr of Daawah" Dec 20, 2011.

“And so remember this, so listen... Donald J. Trump is calling for a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States, until our country’s representatives can figure out what the hell is going on.”

The video then returns to Al-Awlaki’s speech to reinforce his message:

“The west will eventually turn against its Muslim citizens, hence my advice to you is this: you have two choices- either hijra [immigration] or jihad [holy war]. You either leave or you fight. You leave and live among Muslims or you stay behind and follow the example of Nidal Hasan⁵ and others who fulfilled their duty of fighting for Allah’s cause.”

The opening 10.41min section of the video has received much attention and exposure in the international media, attributed to the heightened polarisation and media coverage of the U.S. presidential primaries. However, the message of the video is less about Donald Trump, and more of an attempt to portray America and the West as racists and enemies of Islam. Arguably, more relevant details of this message and insight into al-Shabaab emerge in the remaining 40 minutes. In keeping with the theme of the video series, the footage features and eulogises several members of al-Shabaab who emigrated from Minneapolis Minnesota USA, as well as other countries, including Kenya, U.K., Sweden, Sudan, and Uganda. The U.S. fighters discuss their backgrounds in the States, reasons for travelling to Somalia and their jihad. A significant insight into the ideology of some fighters and challenges of countering violent extremism (CVE) comes from Farah Mohamed Beledi, a.k.a. Asadullah, a.k.a. Bloody, a.k.a. Ghetto, who threatens the West and President Barak Obama.⁶ In the message, Beledi states:

“I wanna talk to you, Obama. Yes I’m talkin’ to you. You are happy today because you said you killed Sheik Osama. But let me tell you something. Sheik Osama, Insha’Allah he’s in the seven heavens. A place that’s way better than this dunya [world], a place that we are all seeking, a place that today that me personally and the brothers, they are doing this shahada [profession of faith] to get to where Sheik Osama has been. Let me tell you what you don’t know. We love, we love death more than you love life. We seek martyrdom. Sheik Osama was seeking martyrdom for all his life. Since he was in jihad, he was hoping to get killed. He got what he wanted. So he’s happy that, you know he got killed. So let me tell you man, what you don’t know is... There’s hundreds of Sheik Osama’s still living today... Here in Somalia, in Afghanistan, in Iraq, in Marabout Islam [West Africa/Maghreb], in every place where the jihad is going on. And they are all are planning to destroy you, and how we gonna destroy you, our bodies, with our brains, with everything we have, we’ll come and use it against you. And the jihad will come to your land. September 11th, that was nothin’ compared to what’s coming for you guys. There’s something bigger coming, and it’s coming very soon. Understand. And you Obama, you’ll be slaughtered. You’ll be slaughtered. You’ll be slaughtered, Insha’Allah...”

After further eulogising Beledi, the video cuts back to his martyrdom video and his calls for jihad:

“I’m talking to America. I’m talking to the kuffars [nonbelievers] in the West and America. Don’t think that this war will end. This war, once you start it. It will never end until, us we will always be fighting, Insha’Allah until death takes all of us. Every single Muslim takes, is taken away from this world, there will be war between us and you. And that’s a promise from Allah (And fight them until there is no more Fitnah [disbelief and polytheism] and the religion will all be for Allah Alone (Al-Anfaal,39)). We will not stop fightin’ you, until the fitnah that you guys are doing, you guys will stop this fitnah. And that the Sharia will be ruled everywhere, and every single place in this world, the jihad will not stop. Don’t think this is a simple war. You have started a war that will never, that you will

⁵ Nidal Malik Hasan is an American convicted of fatally shooting 13 people and injuring more than 30 others in the Fort Hood Army base on Nov 5, 2009. Hasan was a U.S. Army Major at the time of the incident, and while he communicated with Al-Awlaki prior to the shooting he was not charged with terrorism.

⁶ Beledi was killed in a May 30 2011 attack on a Mogadishu Checkpoint. His 2011 martyrdom video filmed shortly after the death of al-Qaeda leader, Osama bin Laden, is shown in this video.

never be able to finish. You will never be able to finish this war. Plan, and don't sleep. Plan all you want. Allah is the best plan of all plans. You are fightin' with the lord of the worlds. The lord of every single human that's on the face of this earth. The lord that you disbelieved in. That's who you fightin' with. Don't think you are fightin' with just people. You know. So don't forget that you will never rest in peace."

Al-Shabaab Propaganda

The storyline is similar to the first video in the series produced in Aug 2013, where the film centred on U.S. intervention in Iraq, Afghanistan and the Middle East as its justification for jihad. However, this video demonstrates increased capabilities by al-Shabaab's media wing to capitalise on relevant, current affairs and polarisation in the U.S., from events surrounding race relations and the presidential campaign. This approach has facilitated increased international media coverage, and potential for recruitment among the Somali diaspora and, possibly, among Black Americans. The attention garnered from the mainstream media coverage surrounding use of the Donald Trump statement may have given al-Shabaab more attention than it could have hoped for in spreading its intended message and desire for international recruitment. While al-Shabaab has attempted to project its strength through its propaganda, just two of its videos released in 2015 demonstrate any recent major battlefield victories.⁷ The remainder of its videos have focused on small ambushes or attacks, past attacks from 2014 and recruitment. 2015 has also seen al-Shabaab focused heavily on recruitment from the wider East Africa community with recent IO efforts,⁸ and this production marks the second video in less than two months to specifically focus on international recruitment.⁹

Al-Shabaab

While al-Shabaab has attempted to glamorise the Somalia insurgency in this release, the video featured Minnesota fighters in training and battle footage from 2009-2011, where they were each killed. By 2012, AMISOM, backed by government forces, succeeded in pushing al-Shabaab out of Mogadishu and Kismayo. 2014 saw al-Shabaab's leader, Ahmed Abdi Aw Mohamed, a.k.a. Godane, killed in a targeted airstrike.¹⁰ Soon after the loss of their leader, and facing an AMISOM and Somali National Army (SNA) offensive, the group conducted a tactical withdrawal from their strategic coastal stronghold of Barawe to avoid defeat. 2015 saw further disruptions and losses of strongholds in Bakool, Bay, Gedo, Hiran, Lower Jubba, and Lower Shabelle. Where the group had previously held large urban areas and territory, which enabled fighters to move about freely, the offensive left few remaining strongholds, forcing the group to consolidate in rural villages and areas of control in Middle Juba, remote mountain and jungle bases, and smaller cells operating in government controlled urban areas. However, AMISOM and SNA forces have struggled to consolidate gains against al-Shabaab's asymmetric strategy, with al-Shabaab withdrawing in advance then moving back into areas, and its capability to stage fighters and facilitators in reclaimed territories who conduct and facilitate attacks. The group's strength has remained in its ability to wage asymmetric warfare, attacking security forces and high value targets in Mogadishu, supply lines and

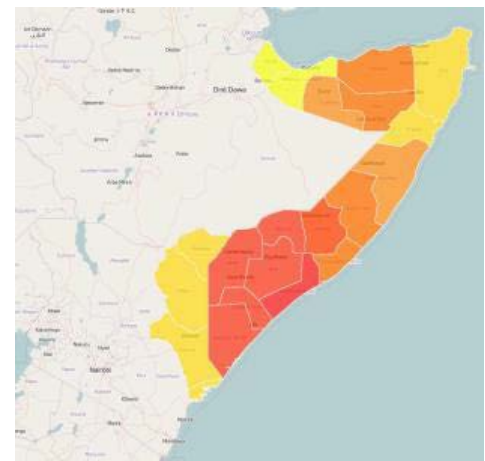


Figure 1 Vates Corp Somalia/Kenya Terrorism Heatmap

⁷ "Avenging the Honour of our Prophet: Storming the Burundian crusaders' base"; Released by al-Kataib Sep 23, 2015 at least 15 AMISOM Burundian soldiers killed, "Storming a Ugandan Crusader Base"; Released by al-Kataib Sep 01, 2015 at least 19 AMISOM Ugandan soldiers killed.

⁸ "O Believers, Make Hijra"; Released by al-Kataib Jul 08, 2015, "How often a small group overcame a mighty host by Allah's leave", Released by al-Kataib Oct 12, 2015, The messages were released in English and Kiswahili and featured a Kenyan commander, Ahmed Iman Ali, calling for East Africans to make hijra.

⁹ "From the Frontlines 3"; Released by al-Kataib Nov 02, 2015, The message calls for foreign fighters to travel to Somalia to fight alongside al-Shabaab and featured a number of non-Somali militants, included two Caucasian fighters, Briton Thomas Evans (a.k.a. Abdul Hakim) and German Andreas Martin Mueller.

¹⁰ Sep 01, 2014 Ahmed Abdi Aw Mohamed a.k.a. Godane killed in a targeted airstrike near Dhay Tubaako IVO Sablale, Lower Shabelle.

convoys in reclaimed areas and, at times, remote AMISOM bases such as Leego and Janale.¹¹ In 2015, al-Shabaab conducted a series of asymmetric attacks in remote border areas of Kenya, as well as the Garissa University College attack, which saw the group claim the highest number of lives in a single attack.¹² While there have been few outright wins or major battles to decisively destroy the group, al-Shabaab has suffered consistent losses through airstrikes, AMISOM and SNA operations, minor skirmishes and foiled ambushes, which will over time have taken a toll on the group's strength and necessitates further recruitment.

Islamic State Influence

In contrast to al-Shabaab, since 2012 ISIL has seen large scale military victories in Iraq and Syria and, as documented in the map (Fig. 2), the group has retained much of this territory despite coalition airstrikes. In Jun 2014, a Caliphate was declared with a large number of violent extremist organisations (VEO) from around the world pledging bayah (allegiance) to leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. This has led to significant numbers of internationals travelling, or attempting travel, to the region for jihad. A recent study in the United States by Vidino & Hughes (2015) revealed:

The tempo of ISIS-related arrests has increased markedly in 2015. An overwhelming majority (56 individuals) were arrested for ISIS-related activities this year. This represents the largest number of terrorism arrests in a single year since September 2001. While the FBI has stated that there are active ISIS-related investigations in all 50 states, to date only 21 states have had at least one arrest within their borders. New York saw the highest number of cases (13), followed closely by Minnesota (11).¹³

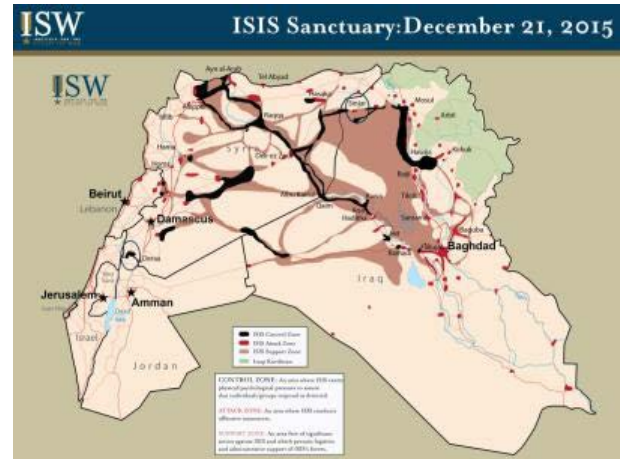


Figure 2 Institute for the Study of War, ISIS Sanctuary: Dec 21, 2015

While the evolution of al-Shabaab and its ability to conduct asymmetric warfare has enabled the group to survive and remain a credible threat in Somalia and the greater East Africa region, the very nature of this style of guerrilla warfare allows for less direct control and influence over local populations and fighters. This has led to fractures emerging, especially within the ranks of foreign fighters, and recently several small groups in Somalia have attempted to align with Islamic State. Al-Shabaab has traditionally dealt harshly with dissent, as seen during the reign of Emir Ahmed Abdi Godane and his famous 2013 ‘purge’.¹⁴ More recently, several foreign fighters, who may have attempted to leave the group, have been killed or fled al-Shabaab strongholds where recent clashes have been reported between the groups.¹⁵ In Dec 2015, two U.S. Nationals and members of al-Shabaab thought to have aligned with Islamic State were captured, or reportedly surrendered, as they fled the group.¹⁶ One of those captured, Mohamed Abdullahi Hassan, a.k.a Miski, was indicted by U.S. Prosecutors in 2010 for conspiring to and providing material support to al-Shabaab and conspiring to kill, maim, and injure persons abroad.¹⁷ Miski was also thought to be a primary recruiter

¹¹ Jun 26, 2015, at least 50 AMISOM soldiers killed as al-Shabaab attack and overrun base in Leego, Lower Shabelle; Sep 01, 2015, at least 19 UPDF AMISOM soldiers killed, others missing after al-Shabaab attack Janale base. Lower Shabelle.

¹² Apr 02, 2015, al-Shabaab gunmen stormed Garissa University College, killing at least 148 people.

¹³ Vidino, L. & S. Hughes "ISIS in America: From Tweets to Raqqa" *George Washington University Program on Extremism*, Dec 2015. Minnesota has a large ethnic Somali population, estimated to be around 25,000 as of 2013.

¹⁴ U.S. National Omar Hammami a.k.a. Abu Mansoor Al-Amriki, and Afghan National Ibrahim Haji Jama Mee'aad a.k.a. al-Afghani were killed. During this time, both Sheikh Mukhtar Robow a.k.a. Abu Mansur, and Sheikh Hassan Dahir Aweys were forced to flee the group for protection in their clan strongholds.

¹⁵ Dec 24, 2015 al-Shabaab forces attacked a pro ISIL militant group led by Abdiqadir Mumin in the Bari region of Puntland.

¹⁶ Dec 08, 2015 U.S. Department of State announced Mohamed Abdullahi Hassan, a.k.a Miski, surrendered to the FGS on Nov 6, 2015. Maalik Alim Jones a.k.a. Abdul Malik John a.k.a Abdimalik Jones. captured near Barawe Dec 07, 2015.

¹⁷ FBI “Fourteen Charged with Providing Material Support to Somalia-Based Terrorist Organization al Shabaab” Department of Justice: Aug 05, 2010.

and facilitator of travel for the ethnic Somali community in the U.S., to al-Shabaab and later ISIL.¹⁸ However, in an interview following his detention, Miski admitted having been involved in media and preaching departments for al-Shabaab but denied any links to Islamic State, claiming he left al-Shabaab in 2013.¹⁹ There are still a number of U.S. citizens linked to, or fighting, with al-Shabaab. While this message targeted the African American community, not all U.S. nationals fighting with al-Shabaab are ethnic Somalis or African Americans.²⁰ Many travelled to Somalia for jihad from 2007-2009 following the Ethiopian intervention.²¹ This number has been decreasing over the years, which may be linked to several factors, including the loss of territory by al-Shabaab, the success of the AMISOM and SNA offensive, as well as the rise of the Islamic State group. In 2015, just one U.S. citizen thought to be fighting with al-Shabaab was added to the FBI Most Wanted List.²²

Al-Shabaab Recruitment of Foreign Jihadists

Al-Shabaab is likely to be seeking to replenish its ranks of foreign jihadists for multiple reasons ranging from attrition to the further potential for recruitment among friends and family of those who join, to internationalising its agenda. The group will almost certainly be looking for individuals to assist with media and IO. In a jihadi media space dominated by Islamic State, al-Shabaab has taken an almost polar opposite approach to media by banning mobile internet.²³ While some fighters and media teams are allowed access and post regular social media updates, the al-Shabaab IO campaign has primarily been conducted through official al-Kataib linked accounts and websites. This has been evident in the past year during online campaigns by ISIL supporters, which have attempted to convince al-Shabaab to leave al-Qaeda and join as an affiliate. While the group's leadership has remained firm with al-Qaeda, there has been widespread condemnation by ISIL supporters among the online jihadi community who have castigated the group for the killing of pro-ISIL Muslims. Some online al-Shabaab supporters have attempted to justify and defend these actions, while others have downplayed the killings, and some appear to support both sides. There has also been conflicting messaging from official al-Shabaab media, with sites linked to the group often reporting on successes in Iraq and Syria, and a recent statement praised attacks in Paris, France and Bamako, Mali.²⁴ While the statement centres on Iraq and Syria, al-Shabaab did not endorse Islamic State, but rather called on all Muslims to join together:

“Let the Jews, America, Russia, France and the entire Crusader alliance know that they are not fighting a small group as they claim, but the entire Ummah of Muhammad, peace and blessing of Allah be upon him – an Ummah that is destined to be victorious, established and prevalent. And they will not stop the tide of Muslims no matter how much they gang up on it.”

The message goes on to call on the brothers in Syria and Iraq to, “unite and renounce all causes of division and difference”, in reference to the Islamic State and al-Qaeda, and similar to previous recent messages from Ayman Al-Zawahiri, who is also praised alongside Osama bin Laden in the statement. While this message was likely released due to the recent attacks and in attempt to gain attention during the intense international media coverage surrounding international terrorism incidents, it was interesting to see al-Shabaab praised the Paris attack without naming Islamic

¹⁸ For further information: Counter Extremism Project “Muhammed Abdullahi Hassan a.k.a. Mujahid Miski” <http://www.counterextremism.com/extremists/muhammed-abdullahi-hassan-aka-mujahid-miski> (Last accessed Jan 06, 2016)

¹⁹ Joseph, D & H. Maruf “American Al-Shabab, Nabbed in Somalia, Denies IS Links” (VOA) Dec 08, 2015.

²⁰ For example, Jihad Serwan Mostafa, a.k.a Ahmed Gurey, FBI Most Wanted Oct 09, 2009: Conspiracy to provide material support to terrorists; conspiracy to provide material support to a foreign terrorist organization; providing material support to a foreign terrorist organization. Mostafa is thought to be a senior commander in al-Shabaab's intelligence wing.

²¹ Todd Jones, B. “Operation Rhino” *Office of the United States Attorneys*, Jul 08, 2015.

²² Jan 29, 2015 Liban Haji Mohamed, Providing Material Support or Resources to a Designated Terrorist Organisation. Mohamed was captured in in Somalia by Somali security forces sometime prior to Mar 02, 2015.

²³ Somali telecommunications companies have the ability to provide mobile internet access, but there is no mobile data service throughout South Central, including Mogadishu. In 2014, al-Shabaab shut down Hormoud in areas it controlled and issued an ultimatum to stop providing mobile internet and fibre optic services. This reportedly led to meetings between al-Shabaab and telecommunication representatives which likely included payments to reconnect services, and the discontinuation of mobile internet.

²⁴ Al-Kataib “Victory Comes with Patience” (al-Kataib), Nov 26, 2015. Statement from the General Command of Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahidin Concerning the Crusaders' Campaign Against Our People in Shaam and Iraq.

State, while at the same time it was actively attempting to hunt down and kill Islamic State supporters in Somalia. While this inconsistency or lack of direction supports counter IO and exploitation efforts against the group as it struggles for direction, the video release and its quality of messaging and timing, is most certainly supported by international members of the group, and influenced by the Islamic State IO campaign.

The exact reason why a number of young Somalis may be susceptible to radicalisation and recruitment by al-Shabaab or Islamic State will vary, but some experts believe, “The decision to go fight in a foreign conflict is usually less an act of religious commitment than of young male rebellion and thirst for adventure”.²⁵ Somali National Intelligence Agency (NISA) Director, Gen Abdirahman Mohamed Turyare, recently stated that a majority of suicide attacks in Somalia were conducted by foreign fighters.²⁶ Recent Mogadishu hotel attacks have been attributed to members of the diaspora from Germany, Netherlands, and Switzerland.²⁷

Perhaps the most compelling reason for al-Shabaab seeking to recruit internationals and Somali diaspora may be the potential for attacks outside of East Africa. Al-Shabaab was designated as a foreign terrorist organisation by the U.S. State Department in Feb 2008. The group publicly declared loyalty to al-Qaeda in Feb 2009, and even though it was not formally accepted until 2012, the group appears keen to evolve towards a more transnational agenda. Al-Shabaab has previously called for supporters to conduct attacks on the West,²⁸ but to date there have been no attacks, whether commanded or inspired, attributed to the group outside of the East Africa region. However, it is plausible to consider that al-Shabaab may seek to attempt future attacks outside of Africa, which could likely be facilitated or conducted by international members, or ideologically aligned individuals in their home or third countries.²⁹ A 2015 NATO report estimated one in nine foreign fighters may attempt attacks on returning home,³⁰ but these statistics are likely to evolve with the increasing number of international terrorist attacks.

Conclusion

Al-Shabaab remains a persistent threat to Somalia and the East African region through its asymmetric warfare and coordinated terror attacks. While the al-Shabaab media and IO campaign pales in comparison to that of ISIL, the quality of messaging and timing of releases to coincide with other recent international events is improving. With this evolution, international counter terrorism efforts must also improve to respond to the messaging by al-Shabaab through effective IO campaigns of their own. Although the Jan 01 video message was focused on international recruitment in the U.S., it appears that a majority of these citizens are choosing to fight jihad with ISIL, and the countries at most risk for foreign recruitment to al-Shabaab are likely to be those in the East Africa region. These at risk countries must also focus efforts to develop effective CVE strategies to combat radicalisation and recruitment in local communities, as well as plans for rehabilitating those fighters who choose to leave the group and return to their home countries. For much of what is required to defeat al-Shabaab’s foreign fighter appeal can be found in the messaging and information provided in the group’s own IO campaign, as well as by those who defect and choose to return to their home countries.

²⁵ Byman, D. & J. Shapiro “Be Afraid. Be A Little Afraid: The Threat of Terrorism from Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq” *Foreign Policy at Brookings* Policy Paper Number 34, Nov 2014.

²⁶ For further information: Radio Dalsan “Somali Intelligence Chief accuses Diaspora Youth for Carrying out Majority of Suicide Attacks in Somalia during his address at the SNY Conference in Mogadishu” <http://www.radiodalsan.com/2015/12/20/somali-intelligence-chief-accuses-diaspora-youth-for-carrying-out-majority-of-suicide-attacks-in-somalia-during-his-address-at-the-sny-conference-in-mogadishu/> (Last accessed Jan 06, 2016)

²⁷ Jul 26, 2015 Jazeera Palace - Abdirazak Bouh (Germany); Feb, 20 2015 Central Hotel - Ismail Muse Ahmed Guled, Lula Ahmed Dahir (Netherlands); Jan 22, 2015 SYL Hotel - Mohamud Osman Jimale (Switzerland).

²⁸ Al-Kataib release “The Westgate Siege, Retributive Justice” Feb 18, 2015, called for lone wolf against Jewish-owned shopping centres in the West, and named malls in the United States, United Kingdom, Canada and France.

²⁹ On Dec 16, 2015, Turkey National Police Department warned an al-Shabaab member identified as “Bihaari”, believed to be in Syria, may be planning to travel to Turkey, and may have been assigned to carry out bomb attacks in Turkey. Another al-Shabaab member was identified as D.X., said to be trained in explosives and believed to be studying in Turkey. A third al-Shabaab suspect named was Ahmed Ibrahim Barlex, who was believed to have been educated in Turkey and involved in planning a possible attack.

³⁰ Garriaud-Maylam, J. “Challenges in Addressing Home-Grown Terrorism” *NATO Committee on the Civil Dimension of Security General Report*, Oct 10 2015.