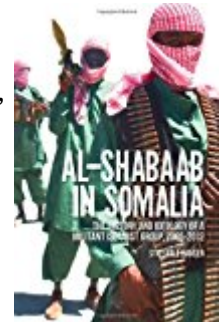


**Stig Jarle Hansen.** *Al-Shabaab in Somalia: The History and Ideology of a Militant Islamist Group, 2005-2012.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. 208 pp. \$21.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-19-026482-6.



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Given the collapse of the state of Somalia in 1991 and the internecine militia conflicts that have occurred since, the writing of an effective primary history of any of the armed groups in that region, much less the most organized and extreme of them, would likely be thought an impossibility. However, Norwegian author and researcher Stig Jarle Hansen has consistently shown an extraordinary ability to travel and interact with the violent groups of Somalia, first the pirate gangs that drew such attention in the early 2000s (see *Piracy in the Greater Gulf of Aden: Myths, Misconceptions, and Remedies* [2009]) and now Harakat Al-Shabaab, the heavily armed militant Islamist group that briefly controlled a large portion of the country. His study, which offers a detailed history of the rise, decline, and current state of the armed group from around 2005 until 2012, is an extraordinary accomplishment and one that is unmatched so far but that unfortunately will be of limited utility for many researchers.

Hansen begins his exploration of Harakat Al-Shabaab by examining the factors that have driv-

en the movement through both its ascendancy and its current marginalization. Throughout the introduction, Hansen traces the interwoven threads of religious discourse, socioeconomic grievances, clan dynamics, imported Al-Qaeda ideology, and nationalistic anger at foreign interventions that have served as the consistent animating forces of the armed group. He also offers a discussion of the interaction of Al-Shabaab's ideology, the Somali diaspora, Islamist international networks, and the role of radicalization across the globe. By the completion of the introduction, Hansen has offered a rich portrait of the group, including the ways in which it defies most of the conventional discussions of either transnational Islamist terror groups or local static violent non-state actors. Following this, Hansen inserts a brief, four-page chapter setting the context within which Al-Shabaab arose, specifically the resurgence of Islamism and its more radical organized forms, including connections with the early Al-Qaeda organization, in the late Somali state and following its collapse in the early 1990s.

From this jumping-off point, Hansen then begins a series of chronological chapters that trace the early origins of Harakat Al-Shabaab, its formation, and its initial years of operations. The first of these chapters offers an extraordinarily detailed exploration of the early origins of the fighters that became Al-Shabaab, the majority of whom were Somali mujahideen who fought in Afghanistan in the late 1970s and 80s and later struggled with both the United Nations and local warlords in the 1990s and early 2000s. The second chronological chapter traces the expansion of this initial small group as allies of the Islamic Courts movement in Mogadishu through 2006, including the tensions the aggressive and expansionist group had with the Courts movement. These tensions lasted until the breaking of the Courts movement in the face of Ethiopian interventions and the retreat of Al-Shabaab from Mogadishu.

The next two chapters are somewhat lengthier explorations of the resurgence of the armed group in 2007-8 and the apogee of their strength and influence in 2009-10. The former discusses Al-Shabaab's exploitation of the Ethiopian occupation to galvanize the local populations through their guerrilla resistance and to draw other fragmented armed groups to their banner. This resurgence in strength would generate an armed group strong enough to occupy a large portion of the country following their transition to a more conventional force. The latter offers a picture of both Al-Shabaab's reorganization to govern and defend their newly won territory but also the increasing challenges they faced with local enemies, like the Transitional Federal Government and rival Islamist groups. The chapter concludes with a detailed discussion of the military offensive that Al-Shabaab undertook toward the end of August 2010.

The final two chronological chapters discuss the challenges that Al-Shabaab has faced since this high-water mark. The first discusses the aftermath of the failure of the 2010 Ramadan Offen-

sive and the loss of significant local support. Hansen discusses the fracturing of the group as well as its experimentation with various tactics to regain their balance and initiative in the face of renewed opposition. The final chronological chapter examines the most recent years of Al-Shabaab and its continuing transition from a territorial armed group to a transnational terror front with tendrils reaching into neighboring Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda, as well as its continuing global outreach. Hansen finishes the volume with a conclusion that explores the nature of Al-Shabaab as it exists in the present, with the group being neither solely local nor solely international, and shows how the possible splintering of the group might play out both within Somalia and the greater international community.

As noted at the beginning of this review, Hansen's volume is an extraordinary work. The detail he brings to the founding, evolution, ideology, and operations within his study of a currently operating terror group is inspiring and deserves the highest praise. There is an argument to be made that this is a unique work that could only have been made by a scholar of Hansen's abilities and talents, especially given his linguistic abilities and connections within Somalia. However, this virtue also has a slight tendency toward vice. Somali society is extremely segmented, with the relations between clans, subclans, and sub-subclans all playing a role in almost all social, cultural, or political interactions, and the rise of Al-Shabaab is no exception. While Hansen admirably follows through on tracing the influences of these connections throughout his extremely detailed study, to a reader less steeped in knowledge of Somali culture and clan dynamics than him this can quickly become at least confusing if not impenetrable. While researchers on violent non-state actors, terrorism, radical Islamism, or current Somali conflicts will find this volume invaluable, they should first read one or more foundational works, such as I. M. Lewis's *A Modern History of the Somali: Nation and State in the Horn of Africa* (2003) or

Ali Jimale Ahmed's *The Invention of Somalia*  
(1995).

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