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ISIS in Horn of Africa: An Imminent Alliance with Al-Shabaab?

By Nur Aziemah Binte Azman and Syed Huzaifah Bin Othman Alkaff

Synopsis

The Islamic State in Iraq and Al-Sham (ISIS) is expanding into Somalia with factions of the Al Shabaab militant groups pledging allegiance to its “caliph” Abu Bakar Al Baghdadi. Will these defections split the Al Qaeda-affiliated Al Shabaab or empower IS in the Horn of Africa?

Commentary

LAST OCTOBER, ISIS released seven videos featuring its fighters from Somalia as well as those from North Africa and Southeast Asia. The videos urge militants, referred to as ‘Mujahideen’, in Somalia to join the ranks of ISIS, stressing the importance of unity and danger of division. They emphasise the obligation to give *bai’ah* (pledge of allegiance) to IS “Caliph” Abu Bakar Al-Baghdadi, and advise that if leaders of the Mujahideen in Somalia refuse to give *bai’ah*, fighters should defect.

They promise that unity between the Somali Mujahideen and ISIS will bring them benefits such as receiving more support and gaining more victories on the battlefield. Groups in Libya, West Africa and Yemen were cited as examples of those who have pledged allegiance and reaped the benefits of unity.

Reasons for ISIS-Al Shabaab tie-up

For ISIS, there are several benefits from the alliance with Al-Shabaab. Having established its branch in neighbouring Yemen, ISIS may be able to create a safe haven in Somalia as well as passage for its fighters to cross back and forth from the Middle East via the Gulf of Aden to Africa via the Horn of Africa.

In addition, its location in the Horn of Africa has considerable importance for trade routes through the Red Sea and the Suez Canal, piracy being one of the issues faced by vessels travelling through those routes. If ISIS were to secure the Horn of Africa and exploit piracy, it may benefit ISIS economically as well as strategically by targeting vessels.

ISIS' expansion into Somalia is to find organised local groups and seed them with resource and training to pursue systematic violence. Through this strategy, ISIS has succeeded in expanding into Egypt, Libya, Tunisia and Nigeria. Al-Shabaab is an effective military organisation, therefore merging with the group will shape local conditions and prepare the ground for ISIS' future expansion into the rest of the Horn and East Africa.

Al-Shabaab: A house divided

However, despite ISIS' persistent attempts to pull Al-Shabaab into its ranks, Al-Qaeda still holds sway over the Somali group, given Al-Shabaab's history and Al-Qaeda's presence in Somalia. Having trained with the Taliban in Afghanistan, Ahmed Abdi Godane, the former leader of Al-Shabaab had been associated with Osama bin Laden. Al-Qaeda's presence in Somalia can be traced back to the early 2000s while senior Al-Qaeda members have worked alongside Al-Shabaab since its official formation in 2006.

In this respect, Al-Qaeda has a marked advantage over Al-Shabaab, compared to ISIS. Following the death of Godane in August 2014 and the appointment of Ahmed Omar Diiriye, aka Abu Ubaidah as the new leader, the group promptly reaffirmed its allegiance and loyalty to Al-Qaeda.

However, the group has been suffering from a power struggle in its leadership even before its merger with Al-Qaeda in 2012. With deep clan loyalties in Somalia, Al-Shabaab has been having difficulties advancing a unified cause. It has long been divided between leaders whose interests are nationalistic, others who desire to rule Somalia under the Shariah criminal code, and yet others who are faithful to Al-Qaeda and its vision of global jihad.

Likelihood of alliance?

The release of the videos marks the first time ISIS is aggressively calling the Somali militants to join its ranks. On Twitter, through the # Mujahid of Somalia hashtag, supporters of ISIS retweet the videos and express their support and encouragement for the fighters in Somalia, namely Al-Shabaab to join the group. The videos have inspired supporters to write opinion pieces on the matter and share them online. Some criticise Al-Shabaab for their delay and inaction in pledging allegiance to Al-Baghdadi.

This campaign, however, is not ISIS' first attempt at persuading Al-Shabaab to join its ranks. Last March, a few weeks prior to Nigeria's Boko Haram's announcement of allegiance to ISIS, an 'emissary' of ISIS called Hamil Al-Bushra released an audio message praising 'brothers in Somalia', encouraging them to attack "inside Kenya,

Tanzania, Ethiopia", and advised Abu Ubaidah, leader of Al-Shabaab to pledge loyalty to ISIS.

There were also social media posts by Al-Shabaab fighters who have expressed a desire to leave the group for ISIS, further fuelling rumours of a split between pro-Al-Qaeda and pro-ISIS supporters within Al-Shabaab. Nevertheless, the group has the support of both Al-Qaeda and ISIS followers. Furthermore, Al-Shabaab's propaganda materials are often released through and shared on both pro-ISIS and pro-Al-Qaeda online forums.

The likelihood of Al-Shabaab abandoning its allegiance to Al Qaeda remains low even if there are individual cases of fighters defecting to and supporting ISIS. Already, Abdul Qadir Mu'min, one of Al-Shabaab's religious leaders, along with about 20 of his followers, have pledged allegiance to Al-Baghdadi on 23 October. Additionally, 27 fighters from Somalia, though it's unclear if they were members of Al-Shabaab, have also appeared in an ISIS video and gave their allegiance to ISIS on 8 November. Further, on 8 December, another group of Somali militants, allegedly Al-Shabaab members, led by an individual identified as Abu Nu'man Al-Yintari, also gave their allegiance to ISIS in a video.

Implications

Two weeks after the announcement of Mu'min's and his followers' defection, Al-Shabaab's official spokesperson, Ali Dhere warned that Al-Shabaab will track down members who attempt to defect. Al-Yintari has allegedly been assassinated by Al-Shabaab for his defection. A strong faction within the group is reported to have favoured joining ISIS owing to a financial crisis faced by Al-Shabaab in the past three years.

Online, while Mu'min and his followers were applauded for their allegiance by pro-ISIS supporters on Twitter, there are many who are against the alliance. Many condemned and criticised those who join and support ISIS, indicating that Al-Shabaab's supporter base is still firmly loyal to Al-Qaeda.

Some supporters even speculated that Ali Dhere's stern warning accentuated the rifts and differences that have long existed within, and that it also stems from the fear within the leadership of the overwhelming support for ISIS. However, should Al-Shabaab as a group pledge allegiance to ISIS, the alliance would perhaps help alleviate Al-Shabaab's financial as well as other challenges. For its part ISIS would benefit from Al Shabaab's allegiance by its establishment in the strategic Horn of Africa.

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