STRATEGIC ANALYSIS OF AL-SHABAAB SINCE ITS INCEPTION: A REVIEW UTILIZING RATIONAL CHOICE AND STRATEGIC THEORY

by
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STRATEGIC THEORY

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Abstract:

This research policy study traces the emergence of Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen’s strategic objectives through its inception under the Islamic Courts Union from 2006 to the present. In a qualitative study this policy paper will test the rationality of Al-Shabaab as an insurgent actor by applying rational choice and strategic theory utilizing its historical objectives as a framework to provide recommendations on an effective strategy to combat the organization.

The study will begin with examining the theories surrounding cost-benefit analysis under rational choice theory. Those factors will then be nestled under Neumann and Smith’s strategic framework theory and strategic terrorism which is defined as, “phenomenon in which an organization begins to rely on terrorism to achieve its political objectives.”¹ The decision to employ terrorist violence is a strategic decision; the implications of its employment as a strategy can help distinguish the differences between groups who deploy it indiscriminately and those who use it as part of an overall plan to achieve their objectives. These two theories will establish whether an actor rationally conducts its actions in accordance to its long-term strategic objectives or possesses no rational plan to complete meet its objectives.

This study will highlight that although Al-Shabaab has remained an insurgency with nationalistic objectives, it has since then transitioned that objective to a secondary state with its primary to force political concessions from participating African Union Mission to Somalia

(AMISOM) forces. The research will further evaluate the transformation of Al-Shabaab from a national insurgency to a transnational group, in which the author breaks it down into four phases: (1) roots of Salafism in Somalia, (2) allegiance with Al-Qaeda, (3) transformation of Al-Shabaab, (4) present-day. The author concludes that within these four phases, Al-Shabaab underwent two transformations with the invasion of Ethiopia projecting the group into prominence as it fought against the foreign invasion and secondarily with its allegiance with Al-Qaeda in which it began to embrace transnational jihadism. Despite these transformations, Al-Shabaab has remained a nationalistic insurgency that utilizes strategic terrorism as a method and maintains a certain amount of rationality in its actions as well as targets.

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- Eric Schneider
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1. INTRODUCTION

In 2019, the international community saw the re-emergence of Al-Shabaab as the group increased its number of attacks by 22% from 2018. However, this sudden increase of attacks can be attributed much further back to the group’s steady evolution beginning in 2008. By tracing this emergence, the international community saw a demonstration of Al-Shabaab’s operational capacity as they began to conduct attacks outside the national boundaries of Somalia, transforming from a Somali group to an international insurgent organization. In a qualitative study this policy paper will test the rationality of Al-Shabaab as an insurgent actor by applying rational choice and strategic theory utilizing its historical and present objectives as a framework to provide recommendations on an effective strategy to combat the organization.

In October of 2008, Al-Shabaab conducted a series of coordinated attacks targeting Somali international partners operating in the country which included the United Nations, Ethiopian Consulate, and various government buildings. Between 2008 and 2013, Al-Shabaab began to publicly target nations participating in AMISOM, such as the Ugandan bombing in 2010 and the Kenyan Westgate Mall attack in 2013. What seemed like a sudden change from national to international can be traced to a subtle shift in ideology under the former leadership of Emir Godane. Under his leadership, Al-Shabaab would issue a statement of baya [allegiance] and align its ideology and rhetoric to Al-Qaeda. Since its alignment, there has been an evident impact on Al-Shabaab’s structure and operational strategy. Between 2008 and 2014, Al-Shabaab began to reinvent itself after facing external pressure from both AMISON and U.S. operations.

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Al-Shabaab began to shift from an insurgent force engaging in conventional warfare and holding swaths of territory to unconventional and strategic terrorism. However, at its core, Al-Shabaab is a different type of organization with objectives centered on nationalism combined with strategic terrorism. Given that Al-Shabaab is driven by motives such as intent, opportunity, and capacity, what justifications determine whether Al-Shabaab is a rational or irrational actor with a strategic objective?

2. BACKGROUND SECTION

This research paper contributes to the body of literature involving the Somali insurgent group Al-Shabaab by applying strategic logic and rational choice theory. By utilizing these theories to trace the thought process between the actions employed by the actor and the actor themselves, one can better determine the objectives of Al-Shabaab and apply it to better understand why the organization employed violence in the manner it did. Rationality acts as the foundation of the strategic framework theory, in which a group through cost-benefit analysis can establish a long-term strategic plan and conduct actions in thoughtful manner to meet those objectives. Strategic theory examines political actors' behavior through rational lenses in relation to their strategic goals, which in turn provides the basis for why an actor conducts terrorist violence and how that correlates to its overall strategy. The model rests on the assumptions that terrorists are motivated by political goals, weighing both the cost and benefits and embracing terror-like tactics when the benefits of such actions outweigh other options. These subsections below will define the argument and provide the necessary definitions by comparing the theories presented by various scholars to frame the hypothesis.
2.1 Defining Terrorism:

In February 2008, the U.S. State Department designated Al-Shabaab as a terrorist group. Although the definition of terrorism may seem easy to describe, it is highly contested topic. Interestingly, many definitions provide targeted violence against civilians with the purpose of coercing an adversary as the foundation of defining terrorism. Hoffman says, "terrorism is specifically designed to have far-reaching psychological effects beyond the immediate victim(s) or object of the terrorist attack. It is meant to instill fear within, and thereby intimidate, a wider target audience'..." Nonetheless, there exists commonalities between the various definitions according to Badey: (1) that terrorism involves aggression against noncombatants; and (2) that terrorism in itself is not expected by its perpetrator to accomplish a political goal but instead to influence a target audience and change that audience's behavior. For the purpose of this research paper, the definition of terrorism provided by Neumann and Smith will take precedence, "the deliberate creation of fear, usually by the use or threat of the use of symbolic acts of physical violence, to influence the behavior of a given target group." In essence, terrorism is a tactic employed by an organization to accomplish a particular objective or goal. While terrorism is employed as a tactic and can be used against civilians, it differentiates from other forms of violence through the directed target and nature. The goal of terrorism is to coerce its adversary to make a concession and targets a broader audience rather than a specific individual(s).

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2.2 Rational Choice Theory:
Terrorism cannot be explained within a void, as its very nature relies on the circumstances of events and environmental contexts. Terrorism is a choice; whether it's rational or irrational is to be decided. Rational choice theory derives from a calculated decision on an actor's part to take a particular type of action within the construct of an optimal strategy to accomplish a goal. Abrahms defines three assumptions of rational choice theory regarding terrorist actors: (1) rational actor possesses politically motivated goals that are both stable and consistent; (2) rational actors weigh the costs and benefits of such actions to their available options; (3) rational actors select the best possible option that provides an optimal outcome.7 According to Bray, "a rational actor chooses a particular course of action because he believes it will ultimately yield the greatest amount of utility for themselves, within existing environmental constraints."8 Crenshaw explains that "organizations have a set of preferences or values and will choose to conduct terrorism when it is the best way to maximize preferences in comparison to alternative form of actions."9 Diekmann and Voss, within the concept of rationality, define narrow rationality as allowing for individuals to act selfishly to enhance their utility while broad allows for altruistic goals.10 Eric van Um describes three

concepts of rationality as depicted in Figure 1. In this figure, Eric van Um describes instrumental rational groups as those who have a complete understanding of their available options to include the cost and benefits of such decisions. Herbert Simon presents a deviation from instrumental rationality. He argues that individuals or organizations cannot estimate all the alternative options or have the foresight to see the possible outcomes of their decisions and make their decisions based on their perceptions of reality. The difference between bounded/narrow and irrationality is that irrationality is the disregard for the alternative options and outcomes, while bounded/narrow allows for less rigidity from instrumental. Under this premise, terrorists are motivated by some objective; thus, whether a group engages in terrorist violence is irrelevant; rather, the decision to do so exposes its intent or objectives.

While groups can be defined as rational, they can also be irrational. An irrational organization is one that, despite the most logical decision, chooses an action contrary to its objectives. Enders and Napps argue that perhaps attacks conducted outside an organization’s area of operations could convey to the international community that its actions are uncontainable and unpredictable, thus irrational in behavior. Terror groups will often change their behavior based on their perceived circumstances of reality and maintain a perception of unpredictability and the associated fear it produces. However, what must be considered in determining rationality is the basis for the decision. In the case of Al-Shabaab transitioning from a domestic to a regional organization that utilized strategic terrorism; can be traced by their decision to force political concessions from AMISOM nations by public pressure. Napps and Enders determined that

11 Ibid, 19
groups that engage in domestic terrorism often will shift to transnational.\textsuperscript{14} Since its creation, Al-Shabaab has shown this capability, transcending from an insurgency with nationalistic desires with attacks localized within Somalia to a transnational terrorist organization. "A transnational terrorist organization carries out attacks involving victims, targets, governments, institutions, or citizens of another country or within another country."\textsuperscript{15} These attacks, conducted at the behest of a strategic objective, can be viewed as irrational by the international community; however, taken in context to a group’s objectives could prove to be rational. Rationality is thus determined by the context of a group’s decision rather than a specific alignment such as was the transition from domestic to a regional organization.

\textbf{2.3 Strategic Model Theory:}

The decision to employ terrorist violence is a strategic decision; the implications of its employment as a strategy can help distinguish the differences between groups who deploy it indiscriminately and those who use it as part of an overall plan to achieve their objectives. Neumann and Smith refer to this as strategic terrorism; a phenomenon in which an organization begins to rely on terrorism to achieve its political objectives.\textsuperscript{16} The strategic model applies rational behavior based on assumption that groups are motivated by a particular set of constant political objectives, weigh their options available to them and select the best-perceived option. In other words, strategic theory examines the perception of the actor and how they effectively respond to that perception inherent to their overall goals. According to Neumann, strategic theory "enables contexts to develop whilst preserving an overarching rationale that organizes the

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\textsuperscript{14} Napps and Enders, 2014
\end{flushright}
content in a systematic fashion." Smith comprises this rational into three assumptions: "(1) military force is a functional aspect of power, deliberately employed to achieve political objectives, (2) political actors define the circumstances around them and how they react to those circumstances to achieve their objectives, and (3) political actors are behaving rational." These assumptions primarily weigh the cost-benefit analysis of their available options and only resort to terrorism when alternative options are unavailable.

Decision theory understands that actors face both perceived and realistic constraints and thus relaxes its assumptions. As such a rational actor must only, according to Abrahms; (1) have stable and consistent goals; (2) possess an understanding of the cost and benefits of each available option and; (3) select the option that is the most optimal. Therefore, evidence that would not support a rational decision would be indiscriminate terrorist violence as the first option and disregard potential non-violent or other means of violence. A strategic approach can be further clarified through the tracing of "the line of thinking of a particular political entity in order to comprehend how it proposes to achieve its objectives; and also, to look at the ideological assumptions and values that underlie that entity's thinking and how this informs the way it formulates its strategy." Simply, a correct strategy is the shortest path between the reality of an actor and what they hope to achieve. Schelling would explain that strategic analysis is "usually about the situation not the individuals – about the structure of incentives, of

19 Abrahms, 2002
Information and communication, the choices available, and the tactics that can be employed.\textsuperscript{21} Political violence can be identified as a strategic decision according to Abrahms, and the decision to employ a particular tactic of political violence –, whether that be conventional, guerilla, or terrorism –, can be strategic. Abrahms, Neumann, and Smith argue that terrorist groups will utilize violence strategically against the civilian populace to achieve their political objectives and possess a reasonable expectation that their actions will result in political consequences.

An important distinction needs to be made between what differentiates terrorist violence from other forms of violence against civilians. According to Kalyvas, it is the "target of the audience for violence." In the case of militants or rebels, "violence against civilians aims to change the behavior of civilians themselves… Violence may serve as a means of deterring civilians from supporting the opponent; by controlling civilians, rebel groups can extend their control over territory."\textsuperscript{22} John Maszka, in conjunction with Smith and Neuman, describe three categories of militant violence; “(1) military violence to overthrow a regime; (2) terrorist violence coupled with other tactics to coerce a political concession and; (3) terrorist violence employed solely to achieve their political concessions.”\textsuperscript{23} While Al-Shabaab is labeled a terrorist organization; it can be argued that it remains an insurgency and while its strategic objectives have transformed since its inception, it has instead blended terrorist violence to achieve its goals. McCormick writes that to analyze a group's course of action, requires defining their objectives, operating constraints, and then choosing a viable option that would maximize its perceived

political returns. A terrorist's political goals, relative to its stated objectives, allow one to distinguish when a group's use of transnational terror is the most viable option. The choice to use transnational terror tactics is based on the relative political effectiveness of such action to achieve their goals.

Neuman and Smith's strategic theory provides a framework in which one can examine Al-Shabaab's strategic rationale. Their framework was chosen to test Al-Shabaab’s rationality in proportion to their strategic goals due to the considerations it emphasizes on the use of violence to forward an actor’s objectives and answering why an actor conducted the actions in the first place. It is important to consider the value of why terrorist violence was utilized and its strategic value in relation to the objectives of the group. Their study concludes that there are three stages of strategic terrorism: (1) disorientation, (2) provoking a response from the intended target, and (3) legitimacy of the organization. They define strategic terrorism as "seeking to bypass both the mass agitation and conventional military elements of guerrilla warfare theory, believing that the use of symbolic violence alone will be sufficient to achieve the desired political ends."

Neuman and Smith make two assumptions; (1) through persistent attacks, a target's population will lose trust in a government's ability to protect them, and (2) through persistent terrorist-like violence, a government's resolve can be eroded.

In the first stage, a terrorist group will seek to alienate and erode the government's security and through its attacks demonstrate the government’s inability to protect its citizens, ultimately undermining the legitimacy of the governing party. Neuman and Smith write that, "By

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25 Abrahms, 2002
27 Idib.
sowing division, destroying cooperation and interdependence, and replacing stability with suspicion and mistrust, the terrorists aim to isolate the individual from the regime and his environment." In the CIA Guide to the analysis of insurgency, they describe this initial stage as "pre-insurgency Stage", in which an organization establishes its grievances, identity and structure. The guide further describes that during this phase a government is most likely willing to dismiss the problem or overreact, providing further legitimacy to a growing insurgency. Neuman and Smith emphasize that the objective is not hearts and minds, rather a delicate balance of destabilizing attacks to force the public to accept political concessions without causing further negative opinion of the assailants. In 2017, in a devastating attack Al-Shabaab detonated a truck bomb in Mogadishu that killed over 600 civilians. Though intended for the foreign embassies its aftermath caused serious backlash and loss of public support. Suicide-bombings that cause mass civilian casualties can damage a group’s legitimacy and reduce its ability to garner public support.

The second stage is quite simply designed to provoke a reaction in which the target overreacts and causes itself to lose legitimacy or support from the public. The third stage occurs when the actor tries to supplant legitimacy from the incumbent government; having "alienated the individual from the government, the terrorists need to hold out an attractive vision of a 'new' legitimacy." This third and final stage is crucial for the group to gain widespread public support. Neuman and Smith state that strategic terrorism is a "flawed strategy, which- except in

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28 Idib.
30 Idib, 8.
32 Neuman and Smith, 2005
the most favorable circumstances- is unlikely to achieve the political ends for which it is used,\textsuperscript{33} unless there exists a foreign occupation which can be used to delegitimize the existing government.

2.4 Rationality of an Insurgency versus Terrorist Organization:

Distinguishing whether an organization is a terrorist group, or an insurgency is essential when defining whether an organization will abide by rational strategic theory principles. While the definitions between terrorism and insurgency describe similar methods of political violence, they are inherently different. Each one carries a certain amount of legitimacy, and intrinsically, an insurgency is an organized movement with a set of political objectives that challenge an existing authority and typically will abide by a certain set of rational processes. The U.S. Military defines an insurgency as “the organized use of subversion and violence to seize, nullify, or challenge political control of a region.”\textsuperscript{34} In another definition by Christopher Paul, Colin Clarke, and Beth Grill, they define insurgency as “an organized, protracted politico-military struggle designed to weaken the control and legitimacy of an established government, occupying power, or other political authority while increasing insurgent control.”\textsuperscript{35} In Figure 2, Kilcullen describes the differences between terrorism and insurgent group.\textsuperscript{36} Based Killcullen’s analysis, this would constitute that an insurgency's primary objective is to delegitimize the existing government by utilizing selective violence to facilitate its goals, while competing at the same time for support from the local populace. It can also be argued that an insurgent group can use

\textsuperscript{33} Neuman and Smith, 2005
\textsuperscript{34} United States Department of the Army. (2014). FM 3-24 MCWP 3-33.5 Insurgencies and Countering Insurgencies. Headquarters, Department of the Army, May 2014
terrorism as part of its overall strategy, since terrorism—at its core—is a tactic. In figure 2, Khalil depicts the differences between insurgents and terrorists, with a primary difference being the groups legitimacy tied to an organizations physical territory and ability to provide a governance to the populace.\textsuperscript{37}

Ariel Merari writes that “whenever possible, insurgents use a variety of strategies of struggle concurrently. Terrorism, which is the easiest form of insurgency, is practically always one of these modes.”\textsuperscript{38}

While there are distinct differences between terrorism and insurgency organizations, whether an organization is an insurgency or terrorist group does not imply rationality. The implication is that an insurgency can utilize terrorism as a tactic and still be defined as rational.

The classical definition of an insurgency, as stipulated by Kilcullen, is defined as a social movement aimed at overthrowing the state or its governing system. However, the definition fails to consider the complexities of a modern-day insurgency. Lisa Stampnitzky summarizes, that at the turn of the 20th century the definitions of what defined insurgencies and terrorism became ambiguous, as groups resorted to transnational attacks which stemmed from political grievances.\textsuperscript{39}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{Figure2.png}
\caption{Terrorism vs. Insurgency - Kilcullen}
\end{figure}


\textsuperscript{38} Ariel Merari (1993) Terrorism as a strategy of insurgency, Terrorism and Political Violence, 5:4, 213-251, DOI: 10.1080/09546559308427227

either rational or irrational, what makes an organization rational is dependent on their trajectory of objectives and whether they take into account cost-benefit analysis in determining their course. Kilcullen, Stampnitzky, and Kalyvas write that in order to define the rationality of a certain organization, one must examine the purpose or the intent of their actions. Mustafa Ünal writes that “terrorism is an indirect way to reach a political end, as opposed to insurgency, which directly attacks the defined enemy with asymmetric war tactics…”  

This becomes important in determining whether the terror perpetrated is a tactic within a larger political objective or the end-state objective. Whereas an insurgency is a political movement that seeks to establish legitimacy and strives to overthrow the state, terrorism can be defined as a method.

Insurgencies, as defined above, will change their tactics due to the external and internal relative factors that confront the organization to meet their objective. The question of defining whether Al-Shabaab is an insurgent or terrorist organization is irrelevant and complicated. On the one hand, the group conducts attacks that target civilian population centers. At the same time, Al-Shabaab has established a functioning shadow government with a corresponding justice and social system and defines their objectives to overthrow the Somali government. Merari and Kilcullen argue that insurgencies will often use terrorism as a tactic to advance their overall strategy.  

![Figure 3: Terrorism vs. Insurgency - James Khalil](image)

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41 Merari, 1993
“terrorism is a component in virtually all insurgencies, and insurgent objectives lie behind almost all terrorism.”\textsuperscript{42} Thus, one can’t rule out Al-Shabaab as an insurgency. There are, however, a couple clear distinctions that separate Al-Shabaab from the definition of a terrorist organization.

The first being the nature of its political objectives to overthrow the Somali government, as stipulated by the 18 March 2020 “Consultative Forum Regarding the Jihad in East Africa.”\textsuperscript{43} The leadership of Al-Shabaab released a detailed set of objectives, the first prioritized overthrowing the Somali government, and the second on the expansion of Al-Shabaab throughout the region. This expansion would allow a great amount of flexibility and autonomy to conduct attacks against participating AMISOM nations to force political concessions. Al-Shabaab is further defined by the nature of its attacks against the Somali government which are designed to both weaken the control and legitimacy of the government. Attacks such as those conducted against Somali military bases are designed to show the ineptness of the Somali government. According to Max Weber this erodes the states “monopoly on the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory.”\textsuperscript{44} Unal writes that, “insurgencies, however, strive for a change in the respective regime through the direct challenge of state forces with systematic and organized violence as part of a political campaign.”\textsuperscript{45} The nature of Al-Shabaab’s political goals is further realized through its control of territory in southern Somalia and establishment of a government.

Throughout Al-Shabaab’s controlled territory, the organization provides a sense of security and justice through its ability to provide a form of legitimate governance. Mustafa Bananay writes that Al-Shabaab “remains a viable actor for the provision of basic services and

\textsuperscript{42} Kilcullen, 2005
\textsuperscript{45} Ünal, M.C., 2016
security and justice. At present, Al-Shabaab presents itself as providing Somalia’s only effective justice system. In an article Alexus Grynkewich describes the primary benefits an organization can reap by providing social welfare: (1) establishes and challenges the legitimacy of the state, (2) provides the organization a source of loyalty from the populace, and (3) through that loyalty gives the organization a resource stream to challenge the governing system. This becomes important as an organization undermines the state’s legitimacy and “highlighting the state's failure to uphold its end of the social contract.” This fits the description of an insurgency as described by both Kilcullen and Merari, it can be argued that Al-Shabaab neither fits entirely within the definitions of either an insurgency or terrorist organization, instead exists on a spectrum between.

2.5 Current Counter-Terrorism Strategy:

There are many different theories involving counterterrorism strategy, with a primary one being deterrence. Rational choice is the weighing of options to produce the greatest return while also reducing the costs. Deterrence is manipulating the environment in which the actor operates, thus changing the actor’s perception of the current reality and increasing the cost of the action trying to be deterred. According to Trager and Zagorceva they define deterrence in two elements “(1) a threat or action designed to increase an adversary's perceived costs of engaging in particular behavior, and (2) an implicit or explicit offer of an alternative state of affairs if the adversary refrains from that behavior.” The critical underlying assumption

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48 Idib.
is the environment in which both actors operate within, meaning the deterrer must ascertain from its options the most effective policy to achieve its goals.

There are several methods of deterrence, one being individual and the other organizational. Individual deterrence is the act of targeting organizational leaders and key personnel to disrupt the organization while organizational targets crucial nodes or aspects of the organization, such as funding or logistics. Akers and Sellers write that "Terror organizations, especially those with a traditional hierarchical structure, tend to react in rational, predictable ways. The leaders of such organizations tend to be rather "professional" in their outlook; this means that they will act to preserve their organization's interests even when this means making ideological compromises." In an article by Patrick Johnston, he discusses the effectiveness of targeted strikes against high-value targets. He concludes that the “data shows conclusively… Neutralizing insurgent leaders significantly [not guaranteed] increases governments’ chances of reducing violence, terminating wars, and defeating insurgencies.”

Al-Shabab is a hierarchical organization led by its emir and regional commanders who manage the group’s presence through a shadow government. Al-Shabaab has been successful not only because of its ability to conduct complex attacks but also because of its consistent and legitimate forms of justice that are seen as a source of stability by the public. Al-Shabaab acts as a shadow government entrenched within Somali society, providing many social and governmental services that often lends the group more credibility and legitimacy than the federal government. According to Jenna Jordan, “bureaucratized terrorist groups are diversified, have a clear division of administrative

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51 Akers and Sellers, 2004
responsibilities and functions, follow rules and procedures, and are thus more likely to withstand the sudden removal of a leader or leaders.”\textsuperscript{53} Considering this, Al-Shabaab possesses a high organizational resilience due to its diverse and broad bureaucratic structure. Jenna Jordan further writes that “groups that are bureaucratic and have popular support are the hardest to destabilize through leadership targeting, and it in these cases that counterproductive outcomes are likely.”\textsuperscript{54} This type of structure makes them susceptible to stability and less likely to experience violent or disruptive transitions of leadership than smaller and less bureaucratic organizations.

Considering the differences between individual versus organizational targeting, a couple other factors must be considered when formulating a counterterrorism strategy. Before determining these factors, one must address the type of counter-terrorism strategy utilized in Somalia; this strategy consists of high-value or individual targeting with intelligence support to the Somali and AMISOM forces. The complexity of Al-Shabaab as an insurgency suggests that Al-Shabaab is an organizational group whose had both the time as well as resources to establish structured leadership base that allows for it to experience leadership losses and survive. Despite the number of strikes targeting Al-Shabaab leadership and its infrastructure, there has been little to show in terms of substantiated progress. According to Zimmerman, a security analyst, “the decapitation strategy is far below the level required to destroy the leadership network.”\textsuperscript{55} Additionally, one must also consider the impact of a counter-terrorism strategy on the population. In an article by Besteman, she writes that despite the assistance given by U.S. forces against Al-Shabaab, the U.S. government has extracted a hidden cost from the Somali people.


\textsuperscript{54} Jordan, 2014

She writes, "Al-Shabaab is fueled, in part, by the U.S. war against it. And those who pay the ultimate price for this mistaken war are innocent Somali civilians, themselves oppressed by Al-Shabaab." While this counterterrorism strategy provides to the U.S. government a low-cost means of enforcing its policy, its actions delegitimize the Somali government who is seen in the eyes of the public as a puppet of a foreign power and allowed to act indiscriminately. While it is important to note the human cost, an indiscriminate foreign power centric counterterrorism policy has rippling effects on a local government's stability and legitimacy. The current U.S. and international strategy consist of direct action using AMISOM and limited operational strikes.

However, what both fail to account for is the environment in which they operate, insofar they fail to address that Al-Shabaab is a rational actor with a structured organization. Additionally, these direct-action counter-terrorism measures solely used by the U.S. are seen by the public as foreign interference and exploited by Al-Shabaab for its own benefit. According to Stephen Burges, “…US military’s attempts to win hearts and minds and build partnerships in the Horn of Africa do not appear to have had a strategic effect in advancing US interests against the violent extremist threat.” While the combined pressure of AMISOM and U.S. operations has forced Al-Shabaab to adapt, it has nonetheless failed to force a conclusion to the conflict.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

3.1 Research Problem and Scope:
In a qualitative study this policy paper will test the rationality of Al-Shabaab as an insurgent actor by applying rational choice and strategic theory utilizing its historical objectives.

as a framework to provide recommendations on an effective strategy to combat the organization. By tracing both Al-Shabaab's ideological and operational choices, one may determine the group's objectives over time. While Al-Shabaab began as an insurgent organization and a military wing of a political organization focused on nationalistic objectives of overthrowing the Somali government, it has since shifted that focus to a secondary nature with strategic terrorism taking precedence. While this paper will examine Al-Shabaab’s strategic rationality, it will also examine the utility of individual versus organizational deterrence utilized by the U.S. in its efforts to defeat Al-Shabaab. The paper will test Al-Shabaab rationality by examining the group's rhetoric as well actions overtime. These will provide a basis to trace the group’s strategic logic.

Strategic theory allows one to discern the roots rather than the immediate causes of a shift of an organization's objectives. According to Smith and Stone, “strategic theory offers a concise and coherent basis for investigating the social behavior associated with conflict, that is, in situations where actors are endeavoring to secure their interests and values against the interests of other political actors.” By applying strategic theory, one can begin to ascertain the thought process of an actor’s reasoning in which it applied tactical and operational violence to achieve its objectives. The application of deterrence theory will provide a basis for examining the differences of organizational and individual targeting concerning the underlying foundation of rational theory. While deterrence theory has been an instrument by nation-states since the Cold War to counter nation-states, its theoretical foundation changes with counterterrorism strategy where instead it must rely on human behavior, organizational behavior, and rational choice.

This research will leverage; jihadist literature, statements from Al-Shabaab and Al-Qaeda, materials printed primarily by Al-Shabaab, reports issued by both government and journalists with known knowledge on the topic well as academic articles relevant to this subject. This study will use a combination of qualitative data and social media reporting. The primary sources for this will be official reporting released by both Al-Qaeda and Al-Shabaab media outlets. These primary source materials will be collected through Jihadology and Terrorism Research & Analysis Consortium (TRAC); these organizations provide near real-time access to official propaganda and translation of such messaging in such as a researcher will have access to statements issued in the past and present as this paper is being written. These primary sources will be further layered with datasets from The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) and START Global Terrorism Database to provide further data on Al-Shabaab's intent and objectives.

4. STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK THEORY

Utilizing Neuman and Smith's Strategic Framework as a foundation to determine Al-Shabaab's strategic objectives and rationality, this section will provide a snapshot of the relevant historical changes; it will divide the Al-Shabaab's past into three phases. The objectives derived in each of the following sections will originate directly from Al-Shabaab rhetoric and secondary scholarship from leading experts. The first phase outlines the rise of Al-Shabaab as an independent insurgent organization with nationalistic objectives centered on the removal of Ethiopian forces from Somalia. In the second phase Al-Shabaab transitioned from its primary objecting being the removal of foreign adversaries in Somalia to overthrowing the Transitional Federal Government Somalia. However, the third phase marks a distinct change in strategy as Al-Shabaab dynamically shifts its focus from national to an international. The group also
undergoes a series of leadership changes with the death of the group’s leader Godane. Additionally, during this phase, the group gradually shifts from governance focused with the loss of its territory to adopting strategic terrorism to achieve its goals. While Al-Shabaab had not given up on its strategic goal of overthrowing the Somalia government, the group adopted a two-part strategy; first destabilizing the region to force concessions and in doing so forcing the foreign actors in Somalia to withdraw in the face of public appeal in their own countries due to attacks. Phase four is the current phase of Al-Shabaab in which the group has adopted strategic terrorism to achieve its objectives.

4.1 Disorientation: Phase One – Roots of Somali-Jihadism:

Since 1991 Somalia has existed in chaos as warlords and politicians have fought for control and looted government agencies and foreign aid. Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen emerged as the military wing of a political organization, Islamic Courts Union (ICU), to wrest back control of Somalia from militant and warlord forces. In December 2006, Al-Shabaab broke away from the ICU to become an independent organization with political objectives separate from the ICU. The group sought to establish an Islamic State in which Shariah law would act as the government’s foundation. It was not until 2006, when Ethiopian forces, backed by the U.S., invaded Somalia to remove the ICU from power that Al-Shabaab solidified its forward momentum. The invasion fractured the ICU and was replaced by the Transitional Federal Government (TFG). According to James Barnett, this crystalized the nascent al-Shabaab to capitalize on an upsurge of nationalism. During its inception through 2008, the group


Figure 4 Citations:
experienced widespread support. Its objectives were clear with its intention to overthrow the Somalia government and establish a new government. In February 2007, after the withdrawal of Ethiopian forces, AMISOM established itself as the security force within Somalia to aid the existing government. This organization, composed of troops from member states Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, and a few others, spurred on further nationalist rhetoric by Al-Shabaab. After the withdrawal of Ethiopian forces, Al-Shabaab began to shift its rhetoric and strategy from national to regionally focused attacks and recruitment of foreign fighters. During this same period, Al-Shabaab began to slowly align its values with Al-Qaeda. In July 2006, Osama bin Laden a provided statement, "We warn all the nations of the world not to agree to America's request to send international forces to Somalia…I urge all Muslim youth and businessmen to contribute generously, and to supply all of the jihad fighters' needs through reliable intermediaries, especially in Palestine, Iraq, Somalia, Afghanistan and Sudan."

Despite this alignment, Al-Shabaab still maintained this rhetoric that stressed western oppression of

Figure 4 Citations:
Muslims in Somalia. The targeting of Al-Shabaab and the ICU by foreign forces in Somalia further galvanized the radical Islamic community and support the struggle for an Islamic state.

It can be argued that Al-Shabaab was waging both an asymmetric and conventional war while attempting to accomplish its objective. Neuman implies that a strategy only requires that an actor apply resources, whether limited or not, at its disposal to achieve its objective. Al-Shabaab's resources were too limited at this point to achieve its strategic goals without causing collateral damage. Figure four above, depicts the some of the key statements issued by Al-Shabaab beginning in 2006 through 2008 that highlight their rhetoric and eventual shift.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Objective</th>
<th>Analysis</th>
<th>Citation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oct-06</td>
<td>Jihad Statement</td>
<td>Sheikh Sharif Ahmed declared a jihad against Ethiopia for supporting the interim government.</td>
<td>Nationalism</td>
<td>This statement in conjunction with AS was meant to draw Islamic support for AS in terms of recruitment and</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nov-06</td>
<td>The Apostates’ Hell in Somali</td>
<td>&quot;transnational conception of jihad by which the ongoing Somali civil war was cast as being a part of a broader conflict between Islam and the forces of kuf&quot;</td>
<td>Nationalism &amp; Regional Jihad</td>
<td>This was an attempt by AS to convey similarities between the struggle of Islamic fighters in Somalia against the government with the global jihad, aimed at recruitment.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dec-06</td>
<td>Badr al-Ṣūmāl</td>
<td>&quot;Military training, including mobile infantry tactics and rappelling between two buildings, made up a significant part of the film as did news footage of anti-TFG demonstrations and interviews with &quot;agents of the Crusaders&quot;</td>
<td>Nationalism</td>
<td>Rhetoric that depicted the strength of AS and support for anti-TFG amongst the populace</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jun-08</td>
<td>The Seventh Martyrdom Operation in Somalia: Will of the Brother and</td>
<td>&quot;reestablish the rule of tawḥīd and shari‘a within an Islamic state…”</td>
<td>Nationalism</td>
<td>One of many series of films dictating the last statements of Shabaab martyrs woven together with attack footage, that placed an emphasis on the establishment of the Islamic state.</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sep-08</td>
<td>Preparations for the 'No Peace Except Islam' Campaign</td>
<td>&quot;explicit calls for Muslims to emigrate to Somalia in order to participate in &quot;jihad&quot; against the «new Crusaders» and aid their «Muslim brothers» inside</td>
<td>Nationalism &amp; Jihad</td>
<td>Shift in rhetoric towards regional jihad in alignment with AQ</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sep-08</td>
<td>March Forth</td>
<td>My greetings to the courageous commander and my honorable leader: Sheikh Osama bin Laden (may Allah protect him and his followers)</td>
<td>Trans-nationalism</td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 4 - Al-Shabaab propaganda (Citation’s in footnote)*
providing Al-Shabaab additional revenue and recruits to fill its ranks. Until the leadership changed to Godane in 2008, it would appear that Al-Shabaab acted as an insurgency group rather than a transnational insurgency group engaging its adversaries on a conventional level. During the first phase of Al-Shabaab’s objectives were overthrowing the government, TFG, rather than effecting policy through violence.

4.2 Response: Phase Two – Allegiance between Al-Shabaab and Al-Qaeda:

During this stage of strategic terrorism, the actor conducts its actions in order to provoke a response from the intended target. In phase one, Al-Shabaab's intended objective was to overthrow the Somali government backed by the Ethiopian government; however, the group lacked the capability to complete this objective. In phase two after 2008, Al-Shabaab's actions began to take shape and provoke reactions. In an interview by a former member of Al-Shabaab, Hasan Dahir Aweys, he said: "...that the movement would adopt a guerrilla warfare strategy since it was unable to match AMISOM's military superiority."

It was also during this phase that Al-Shabaab began to establish a relationship and would eventually align its rhetoric as well as pledge itself to Al-Qaeda. Between 2008 and 2012, Al-Shabaab released a series of videos cementing its allegiance to Al-Qaeda. In September 2008, in a video titled “March Forth”, a senior Shabaab leader Saleh Ali Saleh Nabhan released a video in which he pledged allegiance to Osama bin Laden and called for Muslim youth to come to Somalia. Nabhan begins his speech, by pledging allegiance to Osama bin Laden. "My greetings

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63 Neuman and Smith, 2005
65 Barnett, 2020
to the courageous commander and my honorable leader: Sheikh Osama bin Laden (may Allah protect him and his followers)"

It would seem that the relationship between Al-Qaeda and Al-Shabaab was ideological at most with limited involvement between the two groups. In February 2009, Ayman al-Zawahiri, al-Qaeda's second-in-command, released a video that began by praising Shabaab's seizure of the Somali town of Baidoa. The group will "engage in Jihad against the American-made government in the same way they engaged in Jihad against the Ethiopians and the warlords before them," Zawahiri said. On 09 February 2012, Godane, the former emir of Al-Shabaab, publicly announced its bay'ah [allegiance] to Zawahiri, cementing Al-Shabaab's role in the al-Qaeda network. In a 15-minute-long video, Zawahri is quoted as saying:

"Today, I have glad tidings for the Muslim Ummah that will please the believers and disturb the disbelievers, which is the joining of the Shabaab al-Mujahideen Movement in Somalia to Qaeda al-Jihad, to support the jihadi unity against the Zio-Crusader campaign and their assistants amongst the treacherous agent rulers."

Zawahri's message was preceded by an audio recording of Godane in which he pledged allegiance: "We will move along with you as faithful soldiers... In the name of my mujahedeen brothers, leaders and soldiers... I pledge obedience." This bay'ah also marked a strategic shift in operations from within Al-Shabaab.

In the years following the allegiance between Al-Shabaab and Al-Qaeda, the group began to conduct external operations outside of Somalia in an attempt to compel participating

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68 Roggio, 2009
AMISOM nations to withdraw their support. Examples of these attacks consisted of the World Cup party bombing in Uganda in 2010, a suicide bombing of a restaurant in Djibouti targeting Turkish and European soldiers in 2014, and a partially failed laptop bomb on a Djibouti flight from Mogadishu in 2016. While these attacks may seem random or irrational in nature, their objective was to cause regional instability to force concessions and the eventual withdrawal of governments supporting AMISOM. In a statement given to Reuters, Sheikh Abdiasis Abu Musab states that:

“Our aim is to expel the disbelievers from Muslim lands… Until that goal is achieved, the disbelievers will never find a safe haven in Mogadishu or in any other Muslim land. Not today, not tomorrow, not as long as a single Muslim is alive”

It explicit through both Al-Shabaab’s rhetoric and targeting of participating AMISOM nations that the group would continue to conduct direct attacks. These attacks were designed to place pressure on the public and force those participating nations to divert further resources towards the security rather than AMISOM. While Al-Shabaab intended for their attacks against Kenya to force political concessions, it instead caused the Kenyan governments to mount an invasion into Somalia. While this subsequent invasion was not the intended reaction, similarly to the Ethiopian attack, this invasion caused the Somali people to deepen their distrust for the federal government and increased the legitimacy of Al-Shabaab. This invasion also led to the merger of the Muslim Youth Center (Al-Hijra – Kenya) and Al-Shabaab on 10 January 2012. This merger would have far-reaching implications for Kenya’s instability and security. It could be

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72 Beacham Publishing's TRAC (Terrorism Research & Analysis Consortium); Muslim Youth Center / al-Hijra -- Kenya; http://www.trackingterrorism.org.proxy1.library.jhu.edu/group/muslim-youth-center-al-hijra-kenya; accessed Monday, April 5th, 2021.
argued that Al-Shabaab intentionally provoked these reactions to gain legitimacy and political concessions; however, there is no concrete evidence to support this.

Between 2014 and 2015, Al-Shabaab began to reinvent itself to counter AMISOM offenses, by reducing their physical footprint in exchange for small group’s tactics. Peter Williams wrote, "Al-Shabaab's forced reinvention has seen it enter the beginning of its political end-game: with power now consolidated in its extremist fringe, its continued terror tactics are unlikely to win it more supporters within Somalia. Al-Shabaab is attempting to survive through a difficult period and develop a more potent East African franchise."\(^7\) Between phase one and two, Al-Shabaab governed its territory and acted as a secondary government. Considering Al-Shabaab's conventional tactics and governance policies, it could be argued that before 2008 the group's strategy was sound. Under Godane, Al-Shabaab shifted its nationalistic objectives to transnational or strategic terrorism.

4.3 Legitimacy: Phase Three - Al-Shabaab Reinvention to Present:

During this stage, strategic terrorism is defined as the actor's ability to gain legitimacy by mobilizing public support.\(^7\) On 21 September 2013, Al-Shabaab attacked the Westgate Mall in Nairobi, Kenya killing 67 and wounding over 100 other individuals.\(^7\) This attack by Al-Shabaab marked a symbolic transition for the organization and its strategic course. On 21 February 2015, Al-Qaeda released a video titled "The Westgate Siege–Retributive Justice,"\(^7\) depicting scenes from the Westgate Mall attack. Shortly after the release of this video, Al-Shabaab released a


\(^7\) Neuman and Smith, 2005

\(^7\) Gettleman, Jeffrey, and Nicholas Kulish, 2013

documentary-style video titled, "Mpeketoni: Reclaiming back Muslim Lands under Kenyan occupation," containing video clips of its attacks along the Kenyan coastline in June 2014. Taking these two videos together into context, their choice of targets, Kenyan militants' presence, and divergence to intertwine Al-Shabaab policy with Kenyan politics demonstrated significant growth of Al-Shabaab into Kenya and the alignment of al-Hijra and Al-Shabaab. These attacks targeting its adversaries outside its regional boundaries could be interpreted as a means of establishing relevancy in its goals of driving AMISOM from Somalia.

The Ethiopian invasion of Somalia in 2006 created the perfect set of circumstances that facilitated a breeding ground for Al-Shabaab recruitment and legitimacy. During this time, Al-Shabaab was seen as a source of stability and one of the few actors in Somalia who could fight against these foreign actors. Somali society accepted the governance provided by Al-Shabaab as a condition for the provisional security and stability. As Al-Shabaab expanded its operations and governance throughout Southern Somalia, the group began to slowly intertwine themselves within the facets that held the society together. In conjunction, the Al-Shabaab began a widespread media campaign to sensitize the Somali population to Sharia law. In doing so, it gained legitimacy over that of the government by promoting its propaganda to the populace.78

According to Menkhaus, "Al-Shabaab's most effective approach has been its clever exploitation of the Somali diaspora's sense of alienation, identity crisis, and lack of purpose. To this end, it has invoked Islamic concepts of both jihad and hijrah (religious migration)."\(^\text{79}\)

In 2019, Al-Shabaab began a series of high-profile attacks that would mark its resurgence in the region. In January 2019, Al-Shabaab attacked the Dusit D2 Hotel, Kenya, signifying its increased desire to forward its objectives in a dangerous evolution of circumstances. This attack, orchestrated with a diverse pool of fighters, underscores the group's ability to leverage foreign fighters and strike in the heart of the Kenyan capital, Nairobi.\(^\text{80}\) The attack was preceded by a statement from Al-Shabaab, labeling the operation, "Al-Qudsu Lan Tuhawwad (Jerusalem will never be Judaized)", following the guidelines of Ayman Zawahiri, leader of al Qaeda. Al-Shabaab's statement claimed, "The Mujahideen carried out this operation … [as] a response to the witless remarks of U.S. President Donald Trump and his declaration of Al Quds [the Arabic name for Jerusalem] as the capital of Israel."\(^\text{81}\) This statement would again be used similarly with the attack against the U.S. Manda Bay Airfield in 2020. The statement reinforced Al-Shabaab's long-term strategic terrorism objectives, in line with Al Qaeda, to cause regional disruption. The group's statement redoubled the organization's commitment to al Qaeda; thus, further establishing itself as the region's legitimate Islamic organization.

In 2019, Al-Shabaab released a three-part series entitled "Then Fight the Leaders of Disbelief,"\(^\text{82}\) intended to justify its jihad against the Somali government and opposition to

\(^{79}\) Menkuas, 2014
\(^{82}\) Beacham Publishing's TRAC (Terrorism Research & Analysis Consortium)
allegedly illegitimate rulers elsewhere. The clip criticized the rulers of Egypt, Tunisia, Turkey, Syria, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan for having a secular regime rather than one founded with Sharia-based principles. The purpose of the clip was to justify Al-Shabaab’s jihad against the foreign supported Somali government and its opposition to the illegitimate nations acting in Somalia. To highlight this further, in the third part of this series, Al-Shabaab spokesperson, Ali Mahmoud Raji, justifies Al-Shabaab's targeting, "UAE, Qatar, Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda and the E.U. are active in Somalia to preserve their interests. In light of the above, he reiterated that the mujahidin would keep hitting all foreign element in the country."83 It's targeting of its enemies indirectly in Somalia has been a recurring tactic by Al-Shabaab and presented nothing new. Examples include attacks against embassies and consulates in Somalia; in 2008, Al-Shabaab targeted Ethiopian Consulate and in 2013 Al-Shabaab detonated a vehicle borne explosive device at the Turkish embassy in Mogadishu. Both of these attacks were proceeded by official statements by Al-Shabaab warning of their intent to continue targeting their enemies. On 18 March 2020, Al-Shabaab convened a five-day conference with hundreds of members representing the different Islam factions in Somalia. At the forum, the group "discussed the situation regarding the political confrontation in East Africa, the difficult plight of the Muslims in the region regarding their religion, security, politics, economy, health, education and the Jihad against the enemies of Allah."84 After the forum, Al-Shabaab published a list of objectives; one, in particular, emphasized the continuance of Jihad in East Africa and increased attacks in Somalia while also offering condolences to the Muslims in both Kenya and Ethiopia. What is

important to note is the following statement, "The Mujahideen must intensify the obligatory Jihad in which they are defending the religion, land and the Muslims," in which they pledge an increase of attacks in the future throughout the region.\textsuperscript{85} During phases three and four, Al-Shabaab began to increasingly target its adversaries abroad far more than in phase one and two while reestablishing a shadow government amongst its present and lost territories as a means of establishing both relevancy and legitimacy.

\textbf{4.4 Conclusion:}

Throughout the various phases of its existence, Al-Shabaab did not always employ strategic terrorism. It can be argued that before Godane, Al-Shabaab was a solely an insurgent group and since 2008 has become an insurgency that relies on strategic terrorism to further its objectives. Al-Shabaab exists on the spectrum between a transnational terrorist and insurgent organization. Since its transition to strategic terrorism, so did its ideology and objectives change.

Beginning as the military branch of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), Al-Shabaab attained both legitimacy and status as a member of that organization. Both the ICU and Al-Shabaab were favored amongst the Somali population due to their ability to establish an order within the territory it controlled while additionally not allying themselves to any foreign government as the TFG had done.\textsuperscript{86} According to Kisiangani and Harper, part of the appeal of Al-Shabaab was that they took into account clan politics. Although it abided by a strict Sharia law, many believed that this set of rules reduced crime and corruption.\textsuperscript{87} Despite Al-Shabaab employing disorienting effects in phase one, it did so as an insurgency group. While they did provoke a response, its

\textsuperscript{85} Idib, Beacham Publishing’s TRAC
primary objective was to overthrow the TFG rather than change a specific policy. Additionally, given the Ethiopian invasion in 2006, Al-Shabaab did not need to establish its legitimacy as it attained that by fighting against Ethiopia. Menkhaus writes that, “the Ethiopian occupation inadvertently fueled a dramatic rise in radicalism and violent extremism in the country and among the diaspora.”88 The group did not need to sway public opinion during that period as it was already in their favor. During phase two, despite Al-Shabaab’s large physical presence in southern Somalia, due to the withdrawal of Ethiopian troops, the organization began to lose legitimacy and support amongst the populace.

Between phases two and three, Al-Shabaab begins to withdraw from its strategic holdings to consolidate its forces. Looking at Al-Shabaab's strategic objective, the overthrowing of TFG, and the realization of its territory, why did the group not declare statehood or complete its overthrowing of the government? Hansen argues that the group did not possess the military capability for such action in the face of increasing AMISOM deployments and U.S. military strikes.89 Menkhaus argued that Al-Shabaab had the capability to conduct such action or at the very least preferred a stalemate as it would allow them to continue to hold a form of legitimacy. Menkhaus further argued that the clan dynamics within Somalia would cause further trouble and draw Al-Shabaab into other conflicts. To this point, Hansen describes a complex dynamic in which Al-Shabaab balances on a thin line between accommodating the clans and its objectives, in some cases exploiting or pitting clans against each other in order to weaken the dynamics.90

While Menkhaus provides an excellent point, it becomes almost moot in some sense with Al-

Shabaab continuingly having to establish complicated relationships with clans, such as was the case with the capture of Baidoa in 2009. While Hansen would agree that this case did expose the internal divisions within Al-Shabaab and the practicality of governing.\footnote{Idib, Hansen 2014}

According to Strategic theory, as discussed above, the rationale assumes that “military force is an extension of politics, political actors within the system will seek to enhance their power relative to others in order to defend their interests, and political actors are behaving rationally.”\footnote{Smith, M. L. R., 1991} Taking this into account, it is evident that Al-Shabaab, during its first two phases, was strategically focused on exercising military force towards the overthrowing of TFG. However, under Godane, Al-Shabaab shifted its priorities. As argued above, Godane's organizational changes were out of necessity rather than the complete attraction to the global jihad movement. Following assumptions two and three, Godane still acted accordingly and rationally. According to John Maszka, the practical necessities of aligning with Al-Qaeda, adopting foreign fighters, and retreating from the group's territories allowed Al-Shabaab to adapt and survive militarily. However, it is also possible that Godane realized that governing Somalia with its clan dynamics could prove too difficult, so out of necessity, he changed the group's objectives.\footnote{Maszka, 2017}

While the argument that Godane saw the strategic necessity to adjust Al-Shabaab’s objectives is valid, another consideration is that Al-Shabaab’s degraded capacity were not the primary reason why the group shifted from a conventional to insurgency tactics. From a military standpoint, attacking participating AMISOM nations public center could potentially pressure their governments to force a withdrawal. These actions would cost significantly fewer resources
on the part of Al-Shabaab. With this assumption in mind, Godane altered or placed aside the objective of establishing an Islamic state to preserve the organization. Militarily, insurgent or unconventional tactics are a sound strategy when facing a superior force and when combined with political pressure on the government, it can change policy. When Al-Shabaab yielded these large towns and cities to the Somalia government and AMISOM forces, it forced the government to provide security and social services to those towns when it neither had the capacity nor resources to do so. This, in turn, caused the Somali government to rely on foreign resources, which created further distrust and animosity amongst the populace towards the government. This cascading effect further highlighted the Somali government's instability and delegitimization which falls under stage one strategic theory principles. In stage two, Al-Shabaab continuously provoked AMISOM countries into decisions that deteriorate the Somali government's legitimacy, such as Uganda's bombing of Mogadishu and Kenya's invasion of Somalia. At the same time, it is impossible to state definitively that Al-Shabaab calculated these provocations and would be a stretch of the imagination. What is definitive is that despite the casualties inflicted by both AMISOM and the U.S. on Al-Shabaab, the group has been able to adapt and survive.

5. ANALYSIS: AL-SHABAAB OBJECTIVES

5.1 Transition from Nationalistic Objectives:
Since the inception of Al-Shabaab, the group has advocated that its objectives are nationalistic and intend to remove the foreign invaders and restore the Islamic Somalia government. This objective is reinforced by targeting foreign actors operating within Somalia, such as Ethiopia, Kenya, and AMISOM forces. These targeted attacks and rhetoric reinforce its justification in its desire to overthrow the Ethiopia-backed Transitional Federal Government (TFG) and, later, the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS). Both TFG and FGS are seen as

94 Idib, Hansen 2014
puppets of foreign nations and illegitimate in the eyes of Al-Shabaab. During Al-Shabaab’s rise to power it focused on domestic nationalistic objectives to include the control of Somali territory. Despite these domestic objectives, Al-Shabaab had the capacity and intent to conduct transnational attacks outside its area of operations, demonstrated in the 2010 World Cup bombing in Kampala, 2013 attack on the Westgate Mall, or 2014 suicide bombing of a restaurant in Djibouti. These attacks after 2008 were accompanied by transnational statements and an overall change in rhetoric that deliberately demonstrated an intent to publicly target foreign actors in Somalia in their own home countries. This type of rhetoric and accompanied propaganda used foreign actors' involvement in Somalia to justify Al-Shabaab's 'retaliatory' attacks.

From the early 2000s to 2008, Al-Shabaab adopted nationalistic objectives aligned with the formation of an Islamic Somali state and foreign actors' ousting. The table in figure six outlines Al-Shabaab's transformation from its beginning to its present form and accompanied statements indicating this shift in focus. From a rational viewpoint, its objectives and methods to accomplish its strategy were aligned. However, beginning in 2008, the organization began to adopt rhetoric that strongly reflected transnational conflict. Menkhaus writes that in 2008, Al-Shabaab released a series of videos to include "No peace without Islam" that depicted global conspiracy (American/Zionist/United Nations /humanitarian /Ethiopian) against Islam in Somalia while at the same time voicing Somali nationalist outrage over the presence of infidel, Crusader occupying forces on "our soil".95 Al-Shabaab labeled the government an apostate, and it was during this period, the organization experienced its most popular support. Al-Shabaab was able to utilize this nationalistic fervor to occupy southern Somalia; however, the group emphasized

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the defeat of foreign actors rather than the implementation of an Islamic State. In a sense, their ideological struggle was a lesser priority than the nationalistic goals of Somalia's freedom.

Within these set parameters, Al-Shabaab's goals by 2008 were the establishment of an Islamic State, and its nationalistic goals were the defeat of its foreign invaders and the Somali government. Within rational choice and strategic theory, the set conditions were not conducive to accomplishing these goals. Under the combined pressure of AMISOM and U.S. support, having lost both Mogadishu and Kismayo, the organization was militarily outmatched. As a rational actor utilizing cost-benefit analysis, Al-Shabaab revised its strategic tactics. In doing so, the organization began to look for ways to weaken its opponent. It became apparent that conventional warfare was not suitable and the organization needed outside support. Its transition from conventional to insurgent tactics solidified what would become its transnational jihadist

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Type of Organization</th>
<th>Tactics</th>
<th>Objective</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Basis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2000 - 2006</td>
<td>Military Wing UIC / AIA</td>
<td>Irregular Warfare</td>
<td>Establishing an Islamic State</td>
<td>Nationalistic / Religious</td>
<td>The primary objective of this group was restoration and establishment of a “Greater Somalia” under Sharia as well as resistance against Ethiopian Invasion in 2006.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conquering Somalia</td>
<td>Nationalistic</td>
<td>In 2006, Al-Shabaab released its first video in which it dubs the Somali government as a puppet of foreign actors and an enemy of the people. Al-Shabaab casted itself as the protector of Somalia utilizing religious-nationalist rhetoric. The group also pursued a transnational agenda and an alignment with Al-Qaeda.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
|         | Safe Haven for AQ in East Africa | Transnational |国家安全与非洲安全
|         | Attacking Foreign Targets in Somalia | Transnational |国家安全与非洲安全
| 2006 - 2007 | Military Wing ICU | Conventional/ Irregular | Conquering Somalia | Nationalistic |
|         | War against Ethiopian occupation | Nationalistic |国家安全与非洲安全
|         | Attacking Foreign Targets in Somalia | Transnational |
| 2007 - 2008 | Independent Group | Terrorist/Conventional | Establishing an Islamic State | Nationalistic / Religious |
|         | War against Ethiopian occupation | Nationalistic |
|         | Conquering Somalia   | Nationalistic |
|         | Attacking Foreign Targets in Somalia | Transnational |
| 2008 - 2012 | Global Jihadist Group | Terrorist/Conventional | Conquering Somalia | Nationalistic |
|         | Safe Haven for AQ in East Africa | Transnational |
|         | Establishing an Islamic State | Nationalistic / Religious |
|         | Attacking Foreign Targets in Somalia | Transnational |
| 2012-2017 | Affiliate Al-Qaeda | Terrorist/ Irregular | Establishing an Islamic State | Nationalistic / Religious |
|         | Safe Haven for AQ in East Africa | Transnational |
|         | Attacking Foreign Targets in Somalia | Transnational |
| 2017-Present | Affiliate Al-Qaeda | Terrorist/Irregular | Establishing an Islamic State | Nationalistic / Religious |
|         | Safe Haven for AQ in East Africa | Transnational |
|         | Attacking Foreign Targets in Somalia | Transnational |

*Figure 6: Al-Shabaab's Strategic Goals Timeline*
ideology while concurrently framing rhetoric with Al-Qaeda. While the group transitioned to a transnational agenda, it continued to maintain its momentum in Somalia. Rational choice theory would reason that these transnational attacks were a means to an end employed to place public pressure on the foreign actors to force political concessions. The targets of these attacks were directed against public interests to force pressure on those governments.

It became clear that its nationalistic objectives were not going to come to fruition in the near future, and with its public support waning, the organization had to broaden its interests. Under Godane's leadership, the group expanded its transnational targeting and declared its loyalty to Al-Qaeda. Godane foresaw that Al-Shabaab could not retain its current territory with and would need to withdraw strategically. According to Warner and Chapin, there were numerous differences after Al-Shabaab affiliated itself with Al-Qaeda to include its ideologic policies and tactics. Prior to its affiliation, Al-Shabaab engaged in various irregular tactics with a reliance on assassinations; however, under this new foreign influence, its tactics began to include suicide bombings and improvised explosives. Data from the Global Terrorism Database shows that between 2007 and 2008, there were only 18 attacks using explosives and bombs; however, between 2010 and 2011, the group conducted over 137 attacks using those materials. Al-Shabaab attacks became more coordinated and increased in their profile, and logically one can assume that tactics predominantly used by Al-Qaeda influenced Al-Shabaab. Within the

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99 Warner and Chapin, 2008
100 Global Terrorism Database. Al Shabaab. 20 May, 2013. Start.umd.edu/gtd.
parameters of rational choice, in order for Al-Shabaab to continue to remain relevant and achieve its nationalistic objectives, it choose to incorporate transnational targeting. By tracing the relationship between Al-Shabaab and Al-Qaeda, it becomes evident that this relationship was one of convenience in light of Al-Shabaab struggling to meet its nationalistic goals due to the movement's questioned legitimacy. Harnisch writes that the relationship between Al-Shabaab and Al-Qaeda is a partnership with common goals as released in multiple statements by each group and each organization benefiting from the relationship. According to Byman, this cooperation would allow Al-Shabaab to gain access to a broader network of support, increased publicity, increase recruitment, and allow it to claim the status of participation in the global jihad. Concurrently, Al-Shabaab was facing widespread pressure internally, domestically, and external foreign actors. Taking these external factors into mind and the perceived environment, using rational choice, Al-Shabaab utilized Al-Qaeda to regain legitimacy internationally while lessening the priority of its nationalistic objectives.

5.2 Transnational & Nationalistic Objectives:

As discussed in the previous section, Al-Shabaab began to transition from a nationalistic underpinning to a transnational one in light of its perceived challenges. Menkhaus writes that "while Al-Shabaab initially wanted to establish an Islamic state, the group's current strategy suggests that statehood may no longer be an immediate objective." As Al-Shabaab transitioned to a more regional actor, it began to expand operations in Kenya. This further outlines Al-

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Shabaab's operational goals to target countries participating in AMISOM and serves as a means of readily available recruitment to bolster military strength within the organization. In 2011, Ethiopia and Kenya conducted a joint intervention campaign into Somalia, which likely solidified Al-Shabaab’s transformation of a nationalistic domestic agenda to regional and its use of transnational terror. "This intervention drummed up Al-Shabaab's intent to target Kenyan interests, prompting an externalization of the conflict into Kenyan territory, with Al-Shabaab subsequently conducting attacks on Kenyan soil." Its use of transnational terrorism allows the group to, in a sense, force-multiply its effects and threaten its adversaries on a regional scale as well as multiply its perceived capabilities to the international community. While there may be some evidence that the perceived loss of territory and cities demonstrates a lack of strategy and a weakening of the organization, these strategic withdrawals had little effect on its capabilities, as demonstrated in previous sections. Instead, it gave Al-Shabaab the freedom of maneuver to conduct operations and free them of some physical governance. However, Al-Shabaab continued to maintain control over lost territory through its shadow governments.

5.3 Conclusion:

As Al-Shabaab adapted from its inception, the group has changed its primary objectives to include the liberation of Somalia and the establishment of an Islamic state to the following:

1. The disruption of the East African region with a primary focus on AMISOM countries to force concessions for the withdrawal of foreign forces from Somalia (Transnational)

2. Creation of a unified Islamic Somalia (Nationalistic/ideological)

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These objectives can be drawn from its actions and statements over the past couple of years; however, was recently confirmed in its March 2020 forum address in which it outlined its objectives. Al-Shabaab’s current strategy has been rational and realistic in its expectations given the fact that Al-Shabaab's adversaries are better resourced and militarily superior. While Al-Shabaab has transformed from primarily a nationally based insurgent into a transnational insurgency that utilizes strategic terrorism, its rationality has not changed.

6. Counter-Terrorism Policy Recommendations

To further illustrate the complexity of Al-Shabaab and the challenges of developing an effective counterterrorism strategy, one must look at the categorization of Al-Shabaab. The organization's behavior does not reflect a typical terrorist group between territorial expansion and direct violence, representing behavior typically seen amongst insurgency groups. The group demonstrates traits or aspects of a criminal organization with its illegal trade and blackmailing. While its structured shadow government in its territory, targeted killing and infiltration of public organizations, targeting military or international military targets is representative of an insurgent group. Together these actions and their rational behavior are demonstrative of an insurgency. To defeat Al-Shabaab, one must employ tactics that increase state-building, discredit the religious claims of Al-Shabaab, and develop efforts that delegitimize the efforts of Al-Shabaab in order to reduce its attractiveness as well as popularity with the public.

6.1 Recommendations:

Recommendation 1: Looking at Somalia's current situation, the U.S. government does not have a clear strategy to defeat Al-Shabaab. U.S. interests in East Africa are divided, and the recent withdrawal of its forces from Somalia signifies a lack of support for the Somali government. Current U.S. military strategy is framed around the central idea that it can achieve a
military victory over Al-Shabaab. In contrast, the U.S. should focus its efforts on establishing the grounds for political compromise. According to Paul Williams, “the bottom line is that U.S. military actions have failed to blunt al-Shabaab’s ability to attack Somalis and international personnel…Nor have they curbed al-Shabaab’s ability to launch significant terror attacks abroad.”

While the U.S. may have a military strategy, it lacks a political objective. General Townsend explains that while military action acts as means of stemming the expansion of Al-Shabaab, the “political friction between the Federal Government of Somalia and Somali Federal Member States threatens to distract Mogadishu from the fight.” The U.S. government should pressure the Federal Government of Somalia, and the Federal Member states to finalize the implementation of the electoral model. This would lay the foundation to ratify the structure of the constitution. As of 23 February 2021, under the pressure of the United Nations, the FGS and FMS have not reached a consensus, which weakens the current government and its legitimacy in its populace's eyes. Current government policy consists of a power-sharing agreement, known as the 4.5 formula, in which power is distributed to the dominant clans and thus marginalizes the smaller clans. "Many Somalis see the 4.5 power-sharing formula as crude and simplistic. Marginalized groups and minority clans, in particular, perceive it as having reduced their political representation and access to authority" In this way, larger clans can vote a system that

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benefits them, "control of the presidency, premiership, and speaker of parliament also resides with these clan-families." In contrast to the Somali government, Al-Shabaab does not have this issue. The group instead relies on Salafism to empower its organization and utilizing religious authorities to mitigate the challenges of governance, justice, and education. The intent behind recommendation one is to lay the political foundation in which the U.S. could help facilitate future negotiations with Al-Shabaab with a stable Somali government.

**Recommendation 2:** When determining an actor's rationality, one must take into account the differences between what is reasonable and what is rational. Keith Payne warns "against attributing a universal rationality or reasonableness to opponents as the basis for establishing expectations about opponent decision making and thereby also comforting and convenient expectations about the effectiveness of and requirements for U.S. deterrence strategies." In essence, one cannot attribute rationality to reasonableness. For example, it might be rational for someone to join Al-Shabaab for monetary reasons or survivability, but to assume it is reasonable to believe that this decision implies a certain desire to a life-long occupation in this organization is false. To target this, the Somali government and the current U.S. policy needs to focus its attention on the propaganda or messaging of its activities to deter and create opportunities for the delegitimization of Shabaab. A prime example, as discussed in earlier sections were Shabaab's justification of Somali deaths at the hands of their bombing of hotels; by utilizing religious leaders or clerics to deliver specific targeted messages, it could create an environment where Al-Shabaab loses support. However, to create this environment both the U.S. and Somali government should focus on establishing or strengthening or incentivizing radio, multi-media,

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10. Idib, Ahmed
commercial, television pieces that support this messaging. This deterrence strategy aims to change the environment in which Shabaab operates, forcing them to become more conducive to non-violent or less violent attacks on Somali citizens. In 2017 and 2018, in the wake of horrific attacks by Al-Shabaab public outcry rose to the highest levels with fear turning to anger over Somali citizens' deaths. ACLED data showed that from the end of 2017 through the first half of 2018, violent attacks by that of Al-Shabaab were reduced and remained low due to the reaction of thousands storming the street in protest against Al-Shabaab.\textsuperscript{112} Instances such as these can be a decisive turning point for the Somali government with the right resources to change the environment and introduce deterrence measures to facilitate the loss of support for Al-Shabaab and the introduction of negotiations.

7. Conclusion

This research paper has argued that Al-Shabaab is a dynamic insurgent organization that operates under a rational strategy. Despite its operational challenges, it has remained flexible and transforms as necessary to meet environmental considerations. Although the direct targeting of civilians and strategic terrorism can be interpreted as irrational and contrary to its nationalistic goals, it does not discount the fact that it is a rational organization. While Al-Shabaab did align and pledge a bay'a to Al-Qaeda, it did so as a means to regain the momentum and is not representative of Al-Shabaab’s overall structure. Al-Shabaab is an insurgency that aligned itself to Al-Qaeda out of strategic necessity. This paper traced Al-Shabaab’s objectives as they shifted from primarily nationalistic to transnational with nationalistic undertones. It can be argued that the organization resembles an insurgency, and its utilization of strategic terrorism as a tactic has not influenced the overall objectives of the group instead just transformed how it would achieve

them. During the course of increased military pressure by both AMISOM and international partners, Al-Shabaab changed out of necessity to attacking the far enemy rather than the near, thus exchanging its relatively large territorial holdings for a more secure area of operations.

By recognizing that Al-Shabaab is a rational terrorist group, one must also recognize that its political objectives are more than mere destabilization of the region, rather have an end-goal. It can then be further identified that the further diminishing of Somali government forces in exchange for international partners, although will produce results militarily, will nonetheless strengthen Al-Shabaab's legitimacy. Looking ahead, governments in the horn of Africa need to refocus their understanding on their counterterrorism policies, while Ethiopia is more incorporating of religious practices, Kenya, on the other hand, has created inequality and a disparage between Muslims and non-Muslims who have a distinct advantage.\(^{113}\) The solution to establishing a peaceful solution within Somalia will require the government to negotiate and compromise with Al-Shabaab. Despite the best efforts of both AMISOM forces and U.S. operations, Al-Shabaab remains resilient and capable of conducting operations with a freedom of maneuver throughout the region. Currently, the Somali government is in a place of weakness with government infighting due to the recent elections and its inability to secure its own capital. For negotiations to begin, the Somali government must demonstrate that it can be trusted and allow Al-Shabaab defectors to walk away from the organization without the fear of being imprisoned or hunted down, while at the same time proving the same to its population. Violence met with violence often will prove to be ineffective in the prevention of more violence.

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