

HSPI Commentary Series

HAMMAMI'S PLIGHT AMIDST AL-SHABAAB AND AL-QAEDA'S GAME OF THRONES

HSPI Commentary 25

March 19, 2012

Clint Watts & Andrew Lebovich

On the occasions that American al-Shabaab commander Omar Hammami, known as Abu Mansur al-Amriki, appeared publicly, it was usually to speak in front of crowds or among groups of fighters, occasionally cracking a smile or a joke as he switched between English and Arabic. Yet on Friday the world saw a [more sober, even frightened Hammami](#), as he sat alone in front of a flag commonly associated with al-Qaeda and said that the organization for which he'd fought for much of the last five years, al-Shabaab, might be trying to kill him.¹

The video, the first public message from Hammami since last October, caught many counterterrorism analysts off guard. The release is an unprecedented public admission of fear and weakness from a jihadist figure. But it has brought to the fore a game of thrones occurring in Somalia as rival al-Shabaab factions compete for power and eliminate their rivals, even as the [organization has more tightly joined itself to al-Qaeda's global jihad](#).²

Hammami's video confirms not only a power struggle within al-Shabaab, but may also point to a larger battle for leadership supremacy in a post-Bin Laden al-Qaeda.

And while Hammami has long been a stalwart public voice in praise of al-Qaeda and its late leader Osama Bin Laden, he may have found himself on the wrong side of an internal conflict that already may have cost the lives of al-Qaeda operatives and al-Qaeda-linked foreign fighters in Somalia.

The Killing Fields

In June 2011, Somali government forces reportedly killed a longtime al-Qaeda operational commander named Abdul Fazul Mohamed (also known as Harun Fazul), at a roadblock in Mogadishu. The account of his killing did not sit well with people who knew Fazul's history as a crafty and skilled operational commander. Recently, scholar [Nelly Lahoud postulated that Fazul](#), who was close to Osama bin Laden and vocally opposed to a merger between al-Qaeda and al-

Shabaab, may have instead been killed as part of a plot by al-Shabaab leader Ahmed Abdi Godane (Mokhtar Abu Zubayr) to draw himself closer to al-Qaeda's new leader Ayman al-Zawahiri.³

Then in January 2012, a suspected U.S. drone strike killed Fazul's successor Bilal al-Barjawi. Shortly after, al-Shabaab leaders, including Hassan Dahir Aweys, Mukhtar Robow, and Ali Mohamud Raage (Ali Dhere) met in the Lower Shebelle region of Somalia where they [accused Godane of playing a role](#) in Barjawi's death. The following month (February 2012), Barjawi's deputy, an al-Shabaab official known as "Sakr", was killed in a suspicious explosion in Mogadishu, [again leading to suggestions that Godane](#) was eliminating al-Qaeda competition. Several other al-Qaeda linked fighters have been reported killed or detained in the last month as well.⁴

Most recently, al-Shabaab's Godane announced a merger with al-Qaeda – a claim quickly applauded and confirmed by Ayman al-Zawahiri. This announcement emerged absent public endorsements from Mukhtar Robow and Hassan Dahir Aweys – [a known al-Qaeda collaborator dating back to the early 1990s](#).⁵ Less than three weeks later, al-Shabaab staged another merger announcement with the Galgala Militia in Puntland. [Yassin Khalid Osman \(Yassin Kilwe\), announced himself as leader of the Galgala Militia](#) and declared the allegiance of his fighters to al-Shabaab and al-Qaeda. Al-Shabaab and al-Qaeda likely intended for the merger announcement to signal strength for their organizations.⁶ However, the Galgala Militia merger announcement from the relatively unknown Yassin Kilwe instead likely marked another chess move by an aggressive Godane.

Mohamed Said Atom (Sheikh Atom), a known arms dealer believed to be a close associate of Fazul, was previously believed to be the Galgala Militia commander. His absence from the recent Galgala Militia and al-Shabaab merger announcement suggests Fazul's death may have paved the way for Godane [to push out Atom and supplant Galgala's leadership](#) with a loyal servant – Yassin Kilwe. Recent announcements thus could represent Godane's consolidation of power within Somalia – masking his efforts to eliminate rivals and install loyal men in their place.⁷

Hammami's plight amid al-Shabaab's chaos

It is admittedly difficult and dangerous to make sweeping statements about complicated group dynamics based on rumor, innuendo, and isolated pieces of evidence. But if the reports of factional disputes and the killing of foreign fighters prove true, it would make sense for Hammami to be targeted by the group's emergent leadership. While some reports [suggest](#) that Hammami is allied with Godane, his time in Somalia indicates a longer and more durable connection with Godane's rivals, notably Mukhtar Robow.⁸

It did not take long after arriving in [Somalia in 2006 for Hammami to make connections with certain al-Shabaab and al-Qaeda leaders](#).⁹ Less than two years after arriving in Somalia (and less than a year after his public debut in an interview with al-Jazeera) Hammami was helping to lead al-Shabaab forces in Bay and Bakool provinces under the overall command of Mukhtar Robow,

according to a statement released July 28, 2008 by the group. In 2009, Hammami reportedly attended a public event to punish “spies and bandits” in the company of Robow as well as Somali-Swedish commander Fuad Shangole.

New York Times reporter [Andrea Elliott reports that](#) “over time” Hammami came to the attention of Fazul as well as al-Qaeda operational figure Saleh Ali Nabhan, who was killed by American Special Forces in a daylight raid in September 2009.¹⁰ By the spring of 2009, local reports suggested that Hammami was helping lead foreign fighters under Nabhan, while later reports [placed Hammami under Fazul](#), though Hammami appears to have been more active than Fazul in living and liaising with al-Shabaab.¹¹

Just days after bin Laden was killed by U.S. Special Forces and a month before Fazul’s death, Hammami spoke at a [public conference to honor the slain al-Qaeda leader](#).¹² He sat to the left of Robow, at the same table as Aweys and Shangole (Godane did not appear at the conference). Additionally, anonymous Shabaab figures [placed Hammami at the Shebelle meeting](#) this past January along with Robow, Aweys and Raage.

While much of this evidence is sketchy and incomplete, we do see that at a time when foreign fighters are dying or disappearing in suspicious circumstances in Somalia, Hammami has found himself deprived of the protection of his two main al-Qaeda contacts and in the company of men said to be on the outs with Godane – the organization’s public face following the merger with al-Qaeda. Hammami’s recent pleas for help at least signal division inside al-Shabaab sufficient to pose a threat to an American foreign fighter known globally.

Furthermore, Hammami’s al-Qaeda links do not seem to have extended past the group’s “old guard” leadership in Somalia, indicating that Hammami has not been able to make contact with ascendant factions within the group – though to be fair, we cannot know if he has tried. However, we can clearly see that Hammami has fallen victim to factionalism of one sort, whether in al-Qaeda, al-Shabaab, or both. That he finds himself in such a vulnerable position is illustrative of the complexities and dangers inherent in such groups, especially al-Shabaab, who currently face military opposition from Kenya, Ethiopia, and U.S. drones.

Future Research and Potential Opportunities

Hammami’s plea suggests several emerging questions related to al-Shabaab’s operations and new opportunities for undermining the group’s influence. Many new hypotheses regarding al-Qaeda’s relationship with al-Shabaab should be explored. Note these are hypotheses requiring further research and not conclusions.

The first possibility is that al-Shabaab’s infighting represents a broader power struggle in al-Qaeda. Assuming the reports of Godane killing off Fazul and other al-Qaeda foreign fighters are true, this likely means Zawahiri actively or passively has permitted the removal of potential competitors to

his authority in al-Qaeda. If true, what does this suggest about potentially larger rifts between al-Qaeda's original members (Sayf al-Adel for example) and Zawahiri's inner circle?

A second possibility is that al-Qaeda's influence in al-Shabaab arrives through two parallel and competing communication channels. Al-Qaeda has had contact with militants in Somalia for [more than twenty years](#). But, al-Qaeda's original members resisted a merger between the two groups, as Fazul laid [bare in his 2009 biography](#).¹³ These competing channels may represent a split between Zawahiri and Bin Laden, especially as the two separated and likely took on different roles in the years after 9/11.

And finally, recent events suggest that al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in Yemen plays an integral role in at least one of al-Qaeda's communication channels to al-Shabaab. After Godane's merger announcement, Al-Shabab spokesman [Sheikh Ali Mahamud Raage announced that his fighters "will be part of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula 'AQAP'."](#)¹⁴ Seeing how Godane never mentioned AQAP, this quote could indicate that: a) Raage was taken by surprise with regards to the merger; b) Raage has been in contact with AQAP and thus with announcement of a merger, assumed al-Shabaab was specifically aligning with AQAP; or c) Raage, Robow and Aweys had been in contact with global al-Qaeda, either directly or through Fazul, via connections in AQAP.

AQAP's role remains unclear but understanding its place as an interlocutor with al-Shabaab should be an essential question for future research. Raage's AQAP slip may be nothing more than an error, or it may suggest the AQAP affiliate has already begun assuming a global leadership role for al-Qaeda, especially following the death of bin Laden and the ascent of the far less popular Zawahiri. Competition between two potential al-Qaeda axes of power, Zawahiri to Godane versus Bin Laden to AQAP to Robow-Aweys-Fazul, may be showing themselves in al-Shabaab's mergers and leadership battles.

These hypotheses in turn present several possibilities for exploitation by the United States and allied governments. Within the West, Hammami's video provides an invaluable Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) tool for dissemination amongst vulnerable communities with young men ripe for al-Shabaab recruitment. How do we know this could be effective? [Because al-Qaeda's Internet forums](#) are already stifling all discussion of Hammami's plea video.¹⁵

Within Somalia, on the other hand, the U.S. government may have an opportunity to further fracture al-Shabaab. While building direct relationships with Robow or Aweys is out of the question, the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) and its allies may be able to further chip away at al-Shabaab's power base through treaties and power sharing.

Globally, Western governments should use the failings of al-Shabaab's merger with al-Qaeda to influence other al-Qaeda affiliates that may be struggling to communicate and coordinate with al-Qaeda's senior leadership. Al-Shabaab's internal rivalries have resulted in the killing of al-Qaeda foreign fighters amidst Somali clan conflicts – [a lesson learned by Bin Laden in the 1990's](#). The

more cautious Bin Laden likely would not have pursued Zawahiri's recent stretch into Somalia. Zawahiri's misstep should be broadcast throughout the Middle East and North Africa.

Conclusions

While we in the West obsess about American foreign fighters joining groups like al-Shabaab, al-Shabaab (or at least parts of al-Shabaab) thought little, if anything, about losing Hammami. This does not mean Hammami is not a threat; however, he is not the next Osama Bin Laden or [Anwar al-Awlaki](#) either.¹⁶ Instead, he may have been a convenient pawn, a public face with ties to the West, but ultimately someone not important enough or connected enough to be able to rise above the tumult of internecine conflict in al-Shabaab and al-Qaeda. Those counterterrorism analysts promoting Hammami as the clear successor to Anwar al-Awlaki were off the mark.

On the militant side of things, these recent machinations should serve as reminders to analysts and commentators alike that jihadist groups – like other militant organizations – are rarely unified, and are often subject to a number of internal and external pressures. In many ways, the merger between al-Shabaab and al-Qaeda was 20 years in the making, and the groups cooperated for years without formally joining their organizations. It may have taken the death of Bin Laden, the murder of Fazul, and the sidelining of Aweys for this merger to occur, with the threat to Hammami's life an unexpected outcome. And we may not know the full story of any of these incidents for years to come, if ever.

Clint Watts is a Senior Fellow at HSPI and currently working at Navanti Group. Andrew Lebovich is currently serving as a Senior Analyst at Navanti Group.

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this article reflect solely the opinions of the authors and do not represent the views or opinions of the authors' employers, clients or any element of the U.S. government.

HSPI Commentaries are intended to promote better policy by fostering constructive debate among leading policymakers, academics, and observers. Designed to be timely and relevant, HSPI Commentaries seek to illuminate the issues of the day by raising important questions and challenging underpinning assumptions. Opinions expressed in Commentaries are those of the author(s) alone. Comments should be directed to hspi@gwu.edu.

Founded in 2003, The George Washington University Homeland Security Policy Institute (HSPI) is a nonpartisan think and do tank whose mission is to build bridges between theory and practice to advance homeland security through an interdisciplinary approach. By convening domestic and international policymakers and practitioners at all levels of government, the private and non-profit sectors, and academia, HSPI creates innovative strategies and solutions to current and future threats to the nation.

-
- ¹ See Aaron Zelin, “New Video Message from Omar Hammami,” at *Jihadology*, 16 March 2012, available at: <http://jihadology.net/2012/03/16/new-video-message-from-omar-hammami-abu-man%E1%B9%A3ur-al-amriki-urgent-message/>
- ² See J.M. Berger, “al Qaeda’s Merger,” *Foreign Policy*, 14 February 2012, available at: http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/02/14/al_qaedas_merger
- ³ See Nelly Lahoud, “The Merger of al-Shabaab and Qaidat-al-Jihad,” *The Sentinel*, Combating Terrorism Center, available at: <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-merger-of-al-shabab-and-qaidat-al-jihad>
- ⁴ See Mohamed Odowa, “al-Barjawi Assassination Widens Rift in Shabaab,” *Somalia Report*, available at: <http://www.somaliareport.com/index.php/post/2603>; and see Dominic Wabala, “Kenya: Senior Al Qaeda Official Killed in Mogadishu Attack,” *All Africa*, 28 February 2012, available at: Kenya <http://allafrica.com/stories/201202290751.html>
- ⁵ See Clint Watts, Jacob Shapiro, and Vahid Brown, *al-Qaeda’s (Mis)Adventures in the Horn of Africa*, Combating Terrorism Center, available at: <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/al-qaidas-misadventures-in-the-horn-of-africa>
- ⁶ See Garowe Online, “Galgala militants ‘join Al Qaeda,” 26 February 2012, available at: http://www.garoweonline.com/artman2/publish/Somalia_27/Somalia_Puntland_s_Galgala_militants_join_Al_Qaeda_printer.shtml
- ⁷ See Robert Young Pelton, Sucaad Mire and Mohamed Nuxurkey, “Atom Militia Declares Allegiance to al Shabaab,” *Somalia Report*, available at: http://www.somaliareport.com/index.php/post/2915/Atom_Militia_Declares_Allegiance_to_Shabaab
- ⁸ See “al-Shabaab Now Joins al-Qaeda,” *The Star*, 11 February 2012, available at: www.the-star.co.ke/national/national/62052-shabaab-now-joins-al-qaeda
- ⁹ See Frank J. Cilluffo and F. Jordan Evert, “Hammami the Jihadist Pop Star—Bridging Worlds: From Mobile to Mogadishu,” *HSPI Commentary*, 9 August 2010, available at: http://www.gwumc.edu/hspi/policy/commentary15_hammami.cfm
- ¹⁰ See Andrea Elliott, “The Jihadist Next Door,” *The New York Times*, 27 January 2012, available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/31/magazine/31Jihadist-t.html?_r=2&pagewanted=all
- ¹¹ See Guled Mohamed, “Dining with the enemy: Former al Shabaab commander speaks out,” *The Star*, 25 February 2012, available at: <http://www.the-star.co.ke/lifestyle/128-lifestyle/15703-dining-with-the-enemy-former-al-shabaab-commander-speaks-out>
- ¹² See Chris Anzalone, “The End of a Romance? The Rise and Fall of an American Jihadi,” *The Wasat*, 16 March 2012, available at: <http://thewasat.wordpress.com/category/al-shabab-al-mujahidin/>
- ¹³ See Lahoud, *The Sentinel*, available at: <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-merger-of-al-shabab-and-qaidat-al-jihad>

¹⁴ See Abdalle Ahmed, “Shabab spokesman says ‘we are part of AQAP,’” RBC Radio, 13 February 2012, available at: <http://www.raxanreeb.com/2012/02/somalia-shabab-spokesman-says-we-are-part-of-aqap/>

¹⁵ See Evan Kohlmann, “Admins on the top-tier Ansar al-Mujahideen English Forum (AMEF) have banned discussion of Omar Hammami’s split with Shabaab al-Mujahideen,” available at: <https://twitter.com/#!/IntelTweet/statuses/181418575922335744>

¹⁶ See Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, “Al-Shabaab’s Western Recruitment Strategy,” *The Sentinel*, Combating Terrorism Center, 18 January 2012, available at: <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/al-shababs-western-recruitment-strategy>