

# Support for al-Shabaab through the diaspora

Mitchell Sipus

**While the presence of non-state armed group al-Shabaab is primarily concentrated in Mogadishu and central Somalia, their influence has extended beyond the borders out into the lives of Somali refugees who sought to escape the violence.**

After 20 years of war, Harakat al-Shabaab<sup>1</sup> is the dominant military force in opposition to the UN-backed government in Mogadishu and the African Union military forces that support it. Promoting the vision of the *ummah*, a unified Islamic state under *shari'a* law, al-Shabaab attracts both popular support and scathing criticism among Somali people within and outside the country. Al-Shabaab is considered both the instigator of ongoing conflict and also the most viable means to peace. And al-Shabaab's vision of Islam over tribalism unifies those whose displacement may have been caused by this organisation itself. Yet while the military presence of al-Shabaab is concentrated within Somalia, its capacity is directly linked to the global flow of remittances and particularly the Kenyan neighbourhood of East Leigh.

Located just outside Nairobi's central business district, East Leigh is a well-known economic and community centre for displaced Somalis. Over the last twenty years, this neighbourhood

has moved from being a lower middle-class Nairobi suburb into a bustling hub for commerce and an important conduit for the flow of remittance monies. The remittance flow through East Leigh is primarily for displaced Somalis living in Nairobi, the Dadaab camps in Kenya's North Eastern Province, and family members who remain within Somalia.<sup>2</sup>

It is well known throughout East Leigh that al-Shabaab utilises incoming remittance flows to fund its operations in Somalia and has direct financial involvement with many of the businesses in East Leigh; indeed, the majority of shops and businesses are thought to be owned by or affiliated to al-Shabaab. Many of the shops also sell al-Shabaab propaganda videos produced by local East Leigh studios. In this way al-Shabaab can advertise their message, provide revenue to local businesses, and reinforce their position within the community.

Al-Shabaab provides opportunities and support to the residents of East Leigh while indoctrinating members by more than the mere ownership of shops and tea stalls; they also invest large sums of money in the construction and operation of mosques within East Leigh to attract the support of religious clerics. By influencing the preaching within local mosques, al-Shabaab promotes the idea of a Somalia founded on Islamic principles rather than on political or tribal affiliation.

School programmes that promote al-Shabaab within their teaching may also receive monetary or material support. Some of the schools supported by al-Shabaab even provide children with school uniforms modelled on al-Shabaab uniforms.

Although, surprisingly, the benefits offered to newly recruited youth are minimal, young men in East Leigh continue to join al-Shabaab in response to, among other things, indoctrination, poverty and lack of opportunity. Unfortunately, al-Shabaab rarely provides the necessary or desired support to these often vulnerable young men, as the organisation considers membership

a nationalistic duty in order to save and unify the nation of Somalia.

The most obvious negative effect of the al-Shabaab presence within East Leigh is the level of censorship felt by the displaced community. Within some areas young women must fully cover themselves. The presence of censorship is felt among men as well; as it is often difficult to determine who in the community is an al-Shabaab member, individuals are careful not to say or do anything to draw unwanted attention to themselves.

## Conclusion

Not all Somalis share the vision of an aggressive Islamic state but the possible end of violence, the reunification of the state under a Somali government and the vague possibility of return all maintain broad appeal. Al-Shabaab is considered a better option for long-term peace than the UN-backed government in Mogadishu which is seen as financially wasteful and some fear that the current foreign support for the government may mean strong foreign influence on Somalia in the long term. Most importantly, the success of al-Shabaab has become understood as the opportunity for any man to rise above the traditional restraints of tribalism and a means to take up new opportunities for a population tired of the violence of war and the frustrations of displacement.

Mitchell Sipus ([mitchell.sipus@gmail.com](mailto:mitchell.sipus@gmail.com)) is an independent researcher and consultant (<http://www.mitchellsipus.com>). He is a graduate from the American University's Center of Forced Migration and Refugee Studies and from the University of Cincinnati. Field research was conducted in East Leigh, Nairobi, Kenya, in October 2010.

1. Arabic for 'young men'

2. Lindley, Anna, 2007 'Protracted displacement and remittances: the view from Eastleigh, Nairobi', *New Issues in Refugee Research*. UNHCR <http://www.unhcr.org/46ea519d2.html>



IRIN/Manocheh Deghatti