



Al-Shabaab and Social Media: A Double-Edged Sword

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“SAVVY” IS ONE OF THE more popular adjectives employed by the media and security analysts alike to describe al-Shabaab, a jihadi group in Somalia.¹ This descriptor is not a reference to the organization’s military strategies, its handling of internal schisms, its management of the 2011 Somali famine, its relations with foreign jihadists, or its standing with the Somali people. In fact, all of these issues have been disastrously mishandled by al-Shabaab’s leadership.² The group’s savvy has instead manifested in its use of new social media technology to wage, and sometimes win, a global media battle.

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Al-Shabaab, which enjoyed a mercurial ascent from obscurity to notoriety between 2007 and 2008, has distinguished itself as one of the most sophisticated—and, in more recent times, conflicted—jihadi users of communication technology. In its early years, it effectively used Internet chat rooms, websites, and YouTube videos to recruit and fundraise internationally. Its real-time tweets during the group’s terrorist attack on Nairobi’s Westgate Mall in September 2013 became almost as big a media story as the attack itself. Yet in the past two years, the group has also aggressively sought to ban or control use of communication technology inside Somalia, considering it as much a threat as a tool.³

From a policy standpoint, al-Shabaab’s proficiency with social media is seen as a tool that might allow the group to better coordinate, fundraise, recruit, and demoralize its enemies. From a theoretical standpoint, al-Shabaab’s relationship with communication technology appears to lend support to those constructivist theories that seek to explain why Islamic extremist groups devote so much energy to social media. In 2006 Marc Lynch argued that al-Qaeda took a “constructivist turn” after 2001, focusing less on organizational strength and holding of territory

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and more on winning the battle to “frame the narrative” as a war of civilizations between Islam and the West—and amplifying that message through new media technology.⁴ The observation that al-Qaeda has over time become less of an organization and more of a “virtual jihad” principally devoted to its role as catalyst of transformational new norms, identity, discourses, and worldviews in the *umma*—Islamic community—is grist for constructivists’ mills.⁵ It appears to reaffirm the primacy of the war of ideas, identity, and beliefs in shaping the behavior of state and non-state actors, exactly as constructivists would predict.

Can the same be said of al-Shabaab’s preoccupation with cyberspace? Does it deploy the Internet and Twitter mainly for fundraising and recruitment to advance its war aims, as a realist would expect? Is it instead more committed to a wider, al-Qaeda-inspired, constructivist project to advance a radical Islamist counternarrative that transcends the battle for terrain in Somalia? Or could al-Shabaab’s devotion to a Twitter- and Internet-driven media strategy be more venal—a desperate attempt to stay alive in the global echo chamber of the Internet, the only arena where it can still enjoy sympathy, relevance, and an occasional rhetorical victory?⁶ Could all three of these explanations hold water at different points of time since 2006?

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This article explores the trajectory of al-Shabaab’s use of new technologies since the group first emerged in 2006, assesses the impact of these technologies on the group and its objectives, and queries conventional wisdom on al-Shabaab’s use of social media. It concludes that communication technology in particular has been a double-edged sword for al-Shabaab, rendering it vulnerable to lethal security risks and exposing its deep internal schisms even as the technology amplifies the group’s messaging globally. It questions whether the group’s use of technology has in fact been as savvy as many commentators have claimed, or just basic competence in its use of video, Internet, Twitter, and a thesaurus that millions of tech-proficient teenagers worldwide can match. It also questions whether one can even attribute savvy to an entire jihadi group when its employment of some new social media may only reflect the contribution of a handful of educated armchair jihadists from the Somali diaspora. It considers whether al-Shabaab has the ideological gravitas and the reputation to engage in an al-Qaeda-inspired campaign to reshape norms and worldviews, and whether Twitter can be a tool for “shaping a narrative” in no more than 140 characters.

CONTEXT: NEW COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES AND THE SOMALI SETTING

Al-Shabaab’s emergence in the unique setting of Somalia has shaped both the





group's tactics and its use of technology. For over two decades, Somalia has been a collapsed state with no functional central government, allowing private businesses to operate in a dangerous but entirely unregulated environment. For example, in the mid-1990s Somalia was the site of Africa's first and most efficient cellphone companies as well as the continent's biggest and most efficient global remittance (*hawala*) companies.⁷ Somalis continue to exploit new communication technologies at a fast rate, most recently with the rapid expansion of mobile money transfer technology. Thus, Somalia has been a surprisingly conducive setting for the rapid adoption of new technologies.

Somalia's large diaspora—estimated at over one million people—also contributes to the country's unique context. The diaspora is a critical source of remittances to the homeland, sending an estimated \$1.5 billion per year.⁸ Somalia's heavy reliance on remittances has meant that the development of a strong telecommunication infrastructure across the country was a matter of economic survival.

The explosion of the Somali diaspora in the early 1990s coincided with the rapid growth of the Internet, which the diaspora quickly adopted. The diaspora's close and active links to the homeland and the news-hungry "information culture" in Somali society proliferated dozens of diaspora-run news websites, many of which advanced parochial clan perspectives.⁹ Only 1.2 percent of the Somali population uses the Internet, so websites are mainly by and for the diaspora.¹⁰ However, web-based news is picked up and spread through other means of communication in Somalia, including radio and more recently, satellite TV.¹¹

The protracted crisis in Somalia and negative coverage of the country in Western media also produced a generation of Somalis in the diaspora who felt besieged and humiliated. They expressed nostalgia for a lost era of Somali national unity and became predisposed to embrace alternative narratives that emphasized Somalia as a victim of external aggression and conspiracies. Some variations of this line of thinking gravitated toward a more assertive Islamist (or Islamo-nationalist) identity than had been common in past Somali political discourse. Somali news websites and blogs became, and remain, a hotbed for the construction of a revisionist explanation of the protracted Somali crisis. Some aspects of this reframing exercise have merit, while other aspects are little more than therapeutic narrative. News stories on these websites are selected and highlighted in ways that reinforce the story of external oppression and

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Somali victimhood. This diaspora-driven narrative has coalesced into a fairly coherent belief system that enjoys widespread currency among many, though not all, Somali intellectuals and opinion-shapers. Al-Shabaab's public relations unit—the “HSM Press Office”—has thus been able to tap into an existing grievance narrative, repackage it in more radically Islamist garb, and promote it to an audience that had already bought into much of the storyline prior to al-Shabaab's ascent.¹²

Al-Shabaab, which began as a small group of Somali *ex-mujahideen* in a Sharia court militia in Mogadishu between the years 2002 and 2005, quickly rose to prominence as the main source of armed resistance against a two-year Ethiopian military occupation of southern Somalia in 2007–2008.¹³ The organization came into existence in a society that was already very nimble at adopting new technologies. In the Somali context, al-Shabaab was, with few exceptions, not a leader in the use of new technology; rather, it merely took advantage of existing local capacity and innovation. Al-Shabaab has put that new technology to use in a number of different capacities—fundraising in the diaspora, movement of funds, recruitment, communicating with supporters and operatives, control of populations, espionage, public relations, and threats.

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AL-SHABAAB AND THE INTERNET

Al-Shabaab made effective use of the Internet when the group emerged as the main source of armed resistance to the Ethiopian military occupation of southern Somalia in 2007–2008. Its use of the Internet focuses on external audiences—primarily the Somali diaspora and Muslims around the world, and occasionally al-Shabaab's enemies, when it attempts to demoralize, mock, or warn them. Messaging is therefore done mainly in English and Arabic, though recently it has added Swahili content. Its media wing, al-Kataib Media Foundation, is responsible for producing videos destined for the Internet. Most of the content management for websites sympathetic to al-Shabaab is done abroad by members of the Somali diaspora.

During its early and most militarily active years (2007–2008), the group sought to use the Internet to convey a powerful narrative with the immediate purpose of mobilizing funds and recruitment abroad. It also successfully harnessed the Internet to “brand” al-Shabaab as a globally recognizable movement. Al-Shabaab quickly became an icon of armed Islamic resistance with considerable appeal to a wide cross-section of Muslims, so much so that the group name and identity successfully franchised into neighboring Kenya and Tanzania.¹⁴





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A big part of al-Shabaab's attractiveness in 2007–2008 was its powerful narrative, which won a sympathetic hearing from a wide audience. That narrative portrayed their jihad as a legitimate act of self-defense by a Muslim people militarily occupied by imperialistic Christian Ethiopian invaders, who were backed by the “great enemy of the Muslim people,” the United States. At the time, it was difficult to go wrong with this messaging, which appealed both to Islamic sensibilities and to Somali nationalism. It was also difficult for Somalis to openly oppose the messaging—that risked their perception as un-Islamic and sympathetic with the enemy Ethiopia. For al-Shabaab, the messaging had the added benefit of focusing the ideas on what the group opposed, rather than what it supported.

Al-Shabaab's Internet-based media campaign has focused on several themes, some of which have had greater resonance than others. One of its recurring themes—the quest to build a global Caliphate—is embraced by a few members of its top leadership but has not resonated with most Somalis at home or in the diaspora. A recent attempt—a 2013 video “Woolwich Attack: It's an Eye for an Eye”—is one of its most technically sophisticated productions to date and revisits the call to create an Islamic Caliphate.¹⁵ But the vast majority of Somalis who heed the call to join the struggle do so out of a combination of various Islamo-nationalist motives that privilege Somali, not global, issues.

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).¹⁶ It has challenged Somalis abroad to “get up off their couch” in the infidel's land, find meaning in their life by liberating their homeland from the infidel oppressor, and if necessary, “die like a lion.”¹⁷ One suicide bomber's testimonial spoke directly to both the imperative of *hijrah* and the glory of jihad, while tapping into the themes of honor and humiliation that resonate strongly in Somali culture: “I advise you to migrate to Somalia and wage war against your enemies. Death in honor is better than life in humiliation... To the Somalis living abroad, are you happy in your comfort while your religion, your people are being attacked and humiliated?”¹⁸ In another video, a British-Somali jihadi makes the call for *hijrah* explicit, calling for all Muslims who are “living in the land of disbelief, the lands of oppression, to make *hijrah* to the land of glory, to the land of *izzat* (honor), to the land of jihad.”¹⁹

Adventure has also been a surprisingly powerful and effective message conveyed through the Internet. Romanticized images of jihadi fighters in the bush, with inspirational Islamic chants in the background, have had—at least



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in the years 2007–2008—a powerful pull among some Somali diaspora youth. Al-Shabaab has made good use of the first wave of diaspora recruits, featuring them in video testimonies that call on friends to join them. The recruits emphasize the glory and excitement of jihad (one oddly describing it as “the real Disneyland”) and boast about their positions of leadership, prowess with guns, and their kills of infidels.²⁰ Collectively, this messaging has attracted a combination of the devout, the nationalistic, and the adventure-seekers, not all of whom possess a very strong understanding of Islam, jihad, Somalia, or al-Shabaab.

Al-Shabbab saw in Omar Hammami a propaganda goldmine, an articulate, white, American Muslim who turned against the infidel United States to wage jihad.

Al-Shabaab has made use of the Internet in a variety of different ways. YouTube video postings were an early and very successful tool. Though most of its videos are removed for violating YouTube policies, they are reposted on sympathetic websites.²¹ The group

has struggled to post recent videos on jihadi websites, as Western governments have actively sought to block them, but al-Shabaaab has ultimately succeeded in getting them out by posting them on multiple websites.²² Its videos have been uneven in quality but have improved over time. Some have been direct recruitment and fundraising pitches, typically involving clips of diaspora fighters wielding weapons and calling on others to join; testimonials by martyrs before a suicide attack; and glorified scenes of jihadi training and ambushes. One of the earliest instances of al-Shabaab video recruiting via YouTube was a series of short films featuring a non-Somali American, Omar Hammami “Al-Amriki,” who self-radicalized in the United States, joined al-Shabaab, and rose up the ranks of the group despite his inexperience.²³ Al-Shabaab saw in him a propaganda goldmine, an articulate white American Muslim who turned against the infidel United States to wage jihad.²⁴ The videos included grainy, hand-held shots of Hammami giving instructions to Somali jihadists prior to an ambush on an Ethiopian convoy, explaining the jihad to viewers, calling on Muslims to join, and singing jihadi rap songs. The latter attracted the most attention.²⁵ Though the lyrics of his songs were, by any standard, sophomoric and the actual singing cringe-worthy, al-Shabaab seemed convinced that this was a public relations coup. Alarmed counterterrorism experts devoted time to worrying if the unlistenable jihadi rap would attract more recruits to Somalia.

By 2009 both the quality and messaging of al-Shabaab video productions became more professionalized, with direct support from al-Qaeda’s al-Sabab Media foundation. In the December 2008 release “No Peace without Islam,”



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al-Shabaab—then at the height of its power and popularity—put together a triumphant narrative integrating both local and global grievances. It depicted a vast 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.”²⁶ The video was derivative of al-Qaeda messaging, but the integration of the al-Qaeda plotline with the armed struggle to liberate Somalia was very effective. Al Kataib mastered the use of high-quality video clips from global news sites and delivered a powerful narrative that focused on conspiracy, liberation, the *murtad* or apostate Somali government, and the weakness of the United States. Emblematic of the triumphalism of al-Shabaab during that period was the narrator’s broad smile as he taunted the United States over the 1993 Black Hawk Down disaster in Mogadishu, specifically over how the more “manly” Somali youth dragged the dead bodies of American soldiers on the streets of the city and how the American soldiers “cried like women” for protection before they died.

More recent al-Kataib video productions have tended to be slicker and framed as quasi-news documentaries. In some instances, a “reporter” presents a story of an Al-Shabaab victory that begins in an objective tone before sliding into a pro-Al-Shabaab narrative designed both to win over supporters and demoralize the enemy.²⁷ In other videos, al-Kataib cuts to the chase, presenting battlefield victories and gory footage of dead soldiers from the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM).²⁸ This has been a powerful tool for discrediting AMISOM when it denies casualties, but to date has not produced the desired backlash in troop-contributing countries like Uganda and Burundi.²⁹

Al-Shabaab has also carefully selected sympathetic local and foreign journalists for short documentaries or for sit-down interviews with its spokesperson.³⁰ These presumably independent media stories run the risk of losing control of the messaging, but they also allow al-Shabaab to broadcast a message to a vast audience via an established news organization. On their part, sympathetic journalists and producers who are given access to al-Shabaab inject just enough mild criticism of the group to throw off an unsuspecting consumer of the news, but then proceed with a story that is in line with the messaging al-Shabaab wants to get across.³¹ Whether this is a matter of concordance of views, a quid pro quo for continued access, or another arrangement is difficult to know.

Until 2009 al-Shabaab ran its own official website, carrying news, video clips, religious guidance, edicts, and issuance of threats.³² Since the site’s closure, it has relied on a network of pro-al-Qaeda and other sympathetic websites to carry its press releases and videos.³³ They present themselves as neutral news sites,





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mostly carrying stories and blog items from other news outlets, but upon closer inspection, they select stories and op-eds that advance a narrative that reinforces al-Shabaab's worldview.³⁴ They serve as a reminder that although al-Shabaab may be in a state of crisis as an organization, the narrative it has captured, refined, and advanced continues to resonate with a portion of the Somali community at home and abroad.

Especially in its early years, before the threat of counterterrorism surveillance grew significantly, al-Shabaab made particularly good use of chatrooms. Investigations of diaspora recruitment into al-Shabaab revealed that the group regularly brought its military commanders into chatrooms where they reported and fielded questions on battles waged and the state of the jihad, as well as diaspora fighters communicating with sympathizers, potential recruits, and the merely curious "jihobbyists."³⁵ Facebook has also at times been an important social media tool for al-Shabaab. It continues to issue new releases and threats in this manner, though its main utility is a means by which individual jihadists from the diaspora communicate with and debate friends from back home.³⁶

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Al-Shabaab's usage of new technologies has changed with the shifting fortunes of the group since 2006. Initially al-Shabaab focused on practical use of technologies in direct support of the insurgency, especially fundraising and recruitment. Recruitment efforts abroad were successful by any measure in the years 2007–2008. Hundreds of members of the Somali diaspora in Europe and North America joined the group (with others staying back in their adopted countries and playing a support role), and several hundred foreign *mujahideen* (i.e., those not of Somali ethnic descent) also found their way to Somalia. Recruitment abroad declined after 2008 (except from East Africa) in part because of increasingly negative perceptions of the group. Al-Shabaab's aggressive call for recruits was coupled with calls for financial support, which yielded substantial fundraising in the diaspora in the years 2007–2008.³⁷ Financial contributions from the diaspora began to dry up starting in 2009 as a result of a loss of diaspora enthusiasm for al-Shabaab. The designation of al-Shabaab as a terrorist organization by the United States and several other Western countries in 2008 also contributed to the loss of funding, as it created grave legal risks for would-be fundraisers.

Starting in 2009, as it suffered losses and setbacks, the group expanded its focus to include a waging of a war of ideas and promotion of counter-narratives against its enemies in Somalia and Kenya. This trend accelerated with the bloody 2013 purge within the group, in which hard-line leader Ahmed Godane led a campaign that killed most of his internal rivals. This gutted al-Shabaab's leader-





ship and led to the consolidation of power of an “extremist fringe. . . imbued with a ‘takfiri ethos’ that legitimizes the killing of other Muslims, and a commitment to the cause of international jihad and the restoration of an Islamic caliphate.”³⁸

The 2013 video “Woolwich Attack: It’s an Eye for an Eye” is especially instructive as a case of al-Shabaab’s attempt to go global with its messaging. Al-Shabaab seized on the deadly street attack of U.K. soldier Lee Rigby by two British Muslim converts of Nigerian descent to take up the call of the late Anwar al-Awlaki and his *Inspire* magazine and ask Muslims in the West to wage jihad at home. “Use whatever you can get your hands on” to kill infidels, implores the video.³⁹

This attempt to succeed al-Awlaki as the mobilizer of “lone wolf” jihadis in the West marks a new aspiration horizon on the part of the HSM Press Office.⁴⁰ On that count, it has failed—the video has not, to date, inspired a single lone wolf terrorist attack by a Somali or anyone living in the West. Furthermore, this failure also suggests that al-Shabaab may be giving up on aspirations to become a mass mobilization movement in Somalia, which had been entirely within its reach in 2007–2008. Its messaging abroad now seems designed to incite a very small number of hardened radicals to take random violent action in the West or East Africa rather than to persuade large numbers of Somalis and other Muslims to embrace its cause. Its domestic actions also mirror this apparent policy shift—the group has become increasingly indifferent to winning the hearts and minds of the masses, preferring to groom a small number of suicide bombers to wreak maximum havoc. This shift is one of the many factors that led to deep internal schisms in the group in the years 2010–2013.

The shift in messaging toward a call for global jihad and restoration of a global caliphate also raises the question of whether al-Shabaab actually possesses the Islamic credentials and theological gravitas to assume the mantra of an Anwar al-Awlaki or an Ayman Zawahiri. One of the group’s most searing critics was al-Qaeda member Fazul Abdullah Mohamed, who was associated with al-Shabaab as a security advisor until his death in 2011.⁴¹ In a personal diary he posted on a jihadi website, Fazul was quite dismissive of al-Shabaab leaders for their lack of grounding in Islamic teachings and principles and their ignorance of the correct conduct of jihad, as well as other matters.⁴²

Fazul had a point. Al-Shabaab has a number of strengths, but leadership with strong grounding in al-Qaeda’s teachings is not one of them. The group emerged in 2006 as a militia and was composed first and foremost of mujahideen, not mullahs. Most of Somalia’s collection of authoritative Islamic scholars are outside, not within, the al-Shabaab fold. The group’s unopposed leader since





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the bloody purge and consolidation of power in 2013, Ahmed Godane, is a *takfiri* jihadi committed to the fight for a global caliphate. However, he presents himself in an “uncharismatic and reclusive” manner, manages to alienate and then kill even his closest allies, and marginalizes al-Shabaab’s religious scholars.⁴³

Ironically, the al-Shabaab figure who best articulated a persuasive, well-informed, global jihadi narrative was one of the members whom al-Shabaab killed in the bloody internal purge of 2013, Omar Hammami. When not indulging in jihadi rap, Hammami’s instructional videos conveyed withering critiques of moderate Muslims, the powerful obligation Muslims must have to the umma, and the call to migrate and liberate Islamic countries.⁴⁴

The other impediment to al-Shabaab’s aspirations to play a role as champion of a global jihadi narrative is reputational. Both al-Shabaab as an organization and Somalia as a nation carry baggage in parts of the Islamic world that make it difficult for a Somali group to play a leading role in a war of Islamic ideas. Racial and other discriminatory attitudes in parts of the Arab world toward Somalis would certainly make it difficult to accept a Somali movement seeking to play a vanguard role in Islamic mobilization and teaching. This is not to say that such a role for a Somali group is not possible, but it would amount to a case of reverse missionary work. To date, Somalia has been the site where Islamic clerics from other parts of the world come to propagate the “correct” teachings of Islam, not the other way around. And, as a jihadi organization, al-Shabaab has a reputation even within al-Qaeda as being too thuggish and, since 2012, as intensely hostile to non-Somali jihadists. This suggests that even if al-Shabaab’s propagandists have constructivist ambitions to relocate their jihad to cyberspace, they may face real difficulties gaining traction beyond a narrow demographic. Waging a war of narratives requires not only the right medium and right message, but also the right messenger.

The group’s use of social media has carried a major risk of losing control over messaging, as multiple sources within the movement send out their own tweets, Facebook messages, and videos. This has exposed the group to the danger of mixed messages, and has also meant that internal tensions and other “dirty laundry” become aired in public. This exploded in al-Shabaab’s face in 2012 when internal disputes and damaging accusations within the group’s leadership were played out online. The most embarrassing such episode occurred in March 2012, when Omar Hammami, up to then the poster boy for al-Shabaab propaganda, released an Internet video in which he said his life was in danger due to threats by al-Shabaab.⁴⁵ The HSM Press Office initially tweeted a denial: “We assure our Muslim brothers that #AlAmriki is not endangered by the Mujahideen &





our brother still enjoys all the privileges of brotherhood.”⁴⁶ Later, it went on the offensive, claiming in another tweet that Hammami’s claims “stem purely from a narcissistic pursuit of fame.”⁴⁷ Thereafter, Hammami went on the offensive himself, launching a barrage of tweets accusing Ahmed Godane of abuse of civilians, abuse and marginalization of the foreign jihadis, acting like Hitler, and so on. Al-Shabaab and its followers retorted with a withering array of character attacks, which culminated in declaring Hammami an apostate.⁴⁸

The crisis worsened in early 2013, when an al-Shabaab figure (apparently a top foreign fighter) using a nom-de-guerre published an online open letter, “Yes There Are Problems,” with extremely grave accusations against Godane. The charges highlighted a deep rift between Godane and the foreign fighters, charging Godane with abuses that included arrest of foreign jihadis without charges, torture in secret prisons, declaration that foreign jihadis who leave Somalia without permission are apostates, and failure to meet or consult with foreign fighters. In a damning indictment of al-Shabaab, the author stated that the purpose of the letter was to “relieve myself in front of God and the nation of all the aggressions and legal violations committed by some of us [...and to] warn all lovers of jihad among the foreign jihadis inside or outside the country that the situation is not as it is depicted by the movement.”⁴⁹

This embarrassment was followed shortly thereafter by another scathing indictment from within the group—this time from Ahmed Godane’s close friend, mentor, and co-founder of al-Shabaab, Ibrahim Haji Jaama al-Afghani. Al-Afghani posted an open letter in Arabic to al-Qaeda’s leader Ayman Zawahiri, in the name of al-Shabaab’s “silent majority,” warning that the movement had lost support from the Somali people and risked failure due to the abusive leadership and decision-making of Godane. It reiterated the charges of abuse of foreign fighters and added a host of additional charges, such as “marginalizing al-Shabaab scholars; inciting young jihadists against scholars and leaders by issuing threats of liquidation; preventing certain scholars from publishing, teaching, or even giving sermons.”⁵⁰

Al-Shabaab’s internal schisms, which in an earlier era might have been contained, spilled across Twitter and into the public arena for all to see. The damage was incalculable, especially throughout the two external audiences al-Shabaab had spent so much time trying to cultivate—the Somali diaspora and al-Qaeda. The group’s reputation was damaged even further by its bloody 2013 internal purge, which garnered extensive coverage on Somali websites and which shocked even the group’s sympathizers. The Internet and social media were clearly not al-Shabaab’s friends at this point. What became clear is that social





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media's greatest strength—its intensely, chaotically democratic nature—was the antithesis of what a controlling jihadi leader like Godane desired.

AL-SHABAAB AND TWITTER

Al-Shabaab's use of Twitter since 2011 has attracted more attention than its use of any other social media, in part because of the novelty of the group tweeting in real time about its terrorist attack on Nairobi's Westgate Mall in September 2013. Even before the Westgate attack, one social media expert concluded that "the Somali Islamist militant group al-Shabaab runs by far the most interesting social media feed in the insurgency industry."⁵¹

Why Twitter? A social media with such limited content would seem to be an exceptionally poor platform for the development of a counternarrative. Yet al-Shabaab has demonstrated that micro-blogging does have some utility. First, what Twitter has given al-Shabaab is a means of delivering instant sound byte messages that give journalists pithy quotes on which to draw and that challenge Western, AMISOM, and Somali government narratives.⁵² The re-tweeting of messages by the 15,000 or more followers of @HSMPress was a major amplifier—the START project estimates that a total of 4.5 million al-Shabaab tweets appeared on user timelines before its account was shut down.⁵³

Second, under the right circumstances, Twitter actually has more utility in narrative-building than meets the eye. The START project's content analysis of al-Shabaab's tweets determined that the single most important objective of the group—comprising one-third of all its tweets—was projecting a narrative.⁵⁴ This would have constituted a truly jumbled narrative if assembled at a rate of 140 characters per message. But START's findings make sense when set against an observation made earlier in this article—that al-Shabaab has never been the creator of a narrative, but rather an inheritor of a Somali grievance narrative that was already well-formulated by the time the group came into existence. Thus, what al-Shabaab has been able to do with Twitter is reinforce an existing narrative with shards of evidence that fit the worldview of its sympathizers, while reshaping it with more radical Islamist messaging. What al-Shabaab was doing effectively with Twitter before its account was shut down was not that different from what politically partisan new channels do with their news ticker—deliver a steady flow of shards of evidence that reinforce the existing belief system of their audience. This is especially important for a jihadi group, for which cognitive dissonance and doubt are more dangerous than a drone.

For all of the significance of al-Shabaab's Twitter war, the group's tweeting





has had a short history to date. It began in late 2011 and quickly acquired new followers for its entertaining taunting of the Kenyan military spokesperson, Major Emmanuel Chirchir, who was also using Twitter as part of the Kenyan military public affairs campaign.⁵⁵ From that point on, the al-Shabaab Twitter account became a heavily followed stock source of quotes as well as the group's favorite means of communication. However, since the Westgate attack, its use of Twitter has been repeatedly interrupted by rapid closure of its new accounts. As a consequence, Twitter is now a less viable means of communication for the group.

Unfortunately for al-Shabaab, the educated diaspora members responsible for the tweets starting in 2011 became infatuated with their verbal sparring skills and command of English, so much so that the tweets soon came across as more about them than about al-Shabaab. The tweets were painfully pretentious in style and arrogant in tone, and hence off-putting, even when the content had merit. Dropping words like “desultory,” “wretched,” and “thorny quagmire” seemed designed to prove that at least one al-Shabaab member possessed a Master's degree, or a thesaurus. Some of the stilted language bordered on self-parody, as when @HSMPress responded to a critic with the tweet “what's beyond abhorrence is the collective Western Crusade against Islam of which you seem quite blasé about if not supportive.”⁵⁶ This pedantic tone remained a problem right up to the closure of the group's Twitter account and blunted the effectiveness of the medium.⁵⁷

Al-Shabaab's real time-tweeting during the Westgate terrorist attack set a precedent, and for that reason garnered significant media attention. Using Twitter, it took responsibility for the attack; justified the attack as revenge for Kenya's armed occupation of southern Somalia and the civilian casualties there; warned Kenya of more attacks unless it withdrew from Somalia; conveyed to its Muslim audience that jihadis in the attack were allowing Muslims to go free, killing only the infidels; and taunted the Kenyan government for its weak response and “incoherent ramblings.” Al-Shabaab also tweeted photos from inside the Mall, boasting, with its usual puffed-up language: “Here are 2 of the mujahideen inside the #Westgate Mall, unruffled and strolling around the Mall in such a sangfroid manner.” It also indulged in self-congratulations in the third person voice, tweeting “A spectacular AlShabaab attack, with 50+ dead and guaranteed extended media coverage is finalized.” And it sought to frame the attack as the start of a great Islamic awakening: “A new era is on the horizon. A new dawn, illuminating the path to #Khaliifa. It's a paradigm shift.”⁵⁸

The Westgate attack revealed another unexpected problem for al-Shabaab.





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The main point of using Twitter was to maintain direct control over messaging. But bogus Twitter accounts purporting to be the official al-Shabaab Twitter complicated the situation, and this grew worse when the group's account was closed. International media took tweets from the imposters and cited them in stories, including false claims that some of the jihadis were Somali diaspora from Minnesota. This caused subsequent embarrassment to those journalists but also

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exposed the fact that al-Shabaab had now lost control of its messaging. With every new Twitter account closed as soon as it was opened, al-Shabaab had to email journalists to inform them the tweets were not from them.⁵⁹ The only silver lining for the group was that its sympathizers in the blogosphere seized on the incident as proof that the West-

ern media never checks its facts and therefore, cannot be trusted.

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The most serious loss of control of messaging that al-Shabaab suffered via Twitter was not the bogus accounts, but the extensive use of Twitter by Omar Hammami during his bitter feud with the Godane. If, as the START project contends, one of the principal goals of jihadi groups in communication strategy is to project "group integrity and cohesion," al-Shabaab failed badly on this score. Hammami was an intriguing case of jihadi use of social media not just because of his jihadi rap and his Twitter feud with his al-Shabaab rivals, but also because of his recourse to Twitter to engage in intense exchanges with followers, some of whom he knew to be counterterrorism analysts. He began tweeting in May 2012 and continued until his death at al-Shabaab's hands in September 2013.⁶⁰ His use of Twitter in the last year of his life appears to have been less an effort to project a narrative and more a desire for human contact and attention, and to leave a record of his existence before his imminent death.

AL-SHABAAB AND CELLPHONES

One of al-Shabaab's enduring technology problems is that all traceable electronic communications are risky if the user is a high-value counter-terrorism target. A growing number of top al-Shabaab commanders have been taken out by U.S. drone strikes or missiles, and observers strongly suspect that traced cellphone and Internet usage have played a role in tracking those individuals. As a result, al-Shabaab leaders now minimize or avoid cellphone usage and Internet-based





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communication. In a recent interview, an al-Shabaab leader acknowledged that he stays off the Internet on his iPad lest he fall victim to “birds in the sky.”⁶¹ Ironically, a group that has earned a reputation for sophistication in use of social media in its global messaging has been forced to resort to low-tech measures for its local internal communications.

Fears concerning smart phone use by local spies, whose goal is to betray the positions of al-Shabaab leaders, led the group to take the extraordinary step in January 2014 of issuing an edict via Facebook that banned mobile and fiber optic Internet access in areas it controls and threatened to treat anyone violating the ban as “the enemy.”⁶² It followed this up with an attack on an office of the largest telecom provider in south Somalia, Hormuud, prompting it to suspend most of its Internet services across the country.⁶³ It also launched a sweep of the strategic port town of Brava—one of its last remaining urban strongholds, and likely the target of an AMISOM offensive—to confiscate smart phones, which it outlawed in November 2013.

Even so, Somali cellphone services have been of use to the group in other ways. Al-Shabaab has benefited from the telecommunications sector principally as a target funding—whether from “taxation,” extortion, or active support.⁶⁴ A UN Monitoring Group report from 2012 estimates that the contributions to al-Shabaab from one telecommunication firm, Hormuud, added up to hundreds of thousands of dollars per year. That same report warned that Hormuud employees actively monitor phone calls on behalf of Al-Shabaab.⁶⁵

Al-Shabaab’s ability to tax populations under its control has been undermined with the arrival of mobile money transfer services such as ZAAD, which were introduced in Somalia in 2009.⁶⁶ These services allowed Somalis to make cashless local business transactions on their cell phones as well as increasingly receive remittances from abroad. This was a problem for al-Shabaab because transactions became impossible to tax. Consequently, al-Shabaab declared mobile money transfers “un-Islamic” and banned them.⁶⁷ At the same time, the UN Security Council in 2012 accused the owner of ZAAD and its parent company Hormuud Telecom of colluding with al-Shabaab to use ZAAD to funnel money for the group undetected.⁶⁸

CONCLUSION

New communication technologies have hurt al-Shabaab as much as they have helped it. The organization has exploited the Internet and social media to recruit, fundraise, issue threats, monitor enemies, amplify its messaging, and reinforce





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its narrative. It has used remittance and telecommunications sectors to move money and raise revenues. At the same time, this technology has exposed the militant group to lethal armed counterinsurgency strikes, broadcasted its internal feuds, and rendered it impossible for al-Shabaab's leadership to control its image and message. Consequently, the group has a schizophrenic relationship with new communication technologies, simultaneously using them to communicate globally while seeking to ban or restrict them domestically. Over time, these new technologies have become more of an Achilles heel and less of an asset to al-Shabaab. The unregulated and hyper-democratic nature of the new social media has collided with the leadership's obsession with tight control.

The evidence reviewed here suggests that claims of al-Shabaab's "savvy" use of social media and the Internet are generally but not entirely true. Some of its videos have been powerful and have helped it build a brand that for a time was very popular. Its employment of Twitter to instantly send photos or sound bytes have helped it shape media coverage, and its use of chatrooms and Facebook have given it a very strong recruitment tool. But the group has also been amateurish at times in use of these tools, from the pompous tone of its tweets to the jihadi rap that was more a source of derision than inspiration.

Al-Shabaab's success in harnessing social media to advance a radical narrative was not an act of creation, but of appropriation. Al-Shabaab inherited an existing Somali grievance narrative, which it adapted, repackaged in more radical Islamist garb, and transmitted with social media back to an audience which had already internalized the basic story line. Al-Shabaab used Twitter to reinforce, not build, that narrative with shards of evidence and images that conformed to the belief system of its target audience. Twitter can be a more effective tool for narrative wars than meets the eye, but only if the audience has already accepted the broad contours of a grievance narrative.

Finally, the al-Shabaab case suggests that both realist and constructivist theories are helpful lenses through which to view jihadi use of social media. The explanatory value of the two theories depends in part on the state of play of the jihadi movement itself. Al-Shabaab has always been in the business of projecting a narrative, but in its early years—when it was advancing on the battlefield and holding territory—its main goal in using social media was for tangible assets—funds and recruits, as a realist would anticipate. Al-Shabaab's shift toward a greater focus on advancing a global jihadi narrative occurred at a time when its ability to hold territory, win battles, and maintain organizational coherence was waning. This points to the possibility that jihadi groups like Al-Shabaab tend to embrace the "constructivist" war of ideas via new social media

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not so much as an expansion of their activities but as a form of strategic retreat. In this sense, they replicate the behavior of leaders of failed states by devoting more energy to projecting a narrative to win recognition and support from an external audience than to earning legitimacy at home.⁶⁹ Failing states and failing jihadi movements, it turns out, have more in common than either would care to admit. 

NOTES

1. See, for instance: “Al-Shabab Showed Gruesome Social Media Savvy During Attack,” *CBS News*, September 24, 2013.

2. For a cataloguing of the group’s misfortunes since 2009, see: Christopher Anzalone, “Al-Shabab’s Setbacks in Somalia,” *CTC Sentinel* 4, no. 10 (October 2011), 22–25; Ken Menkhaus, “Al-Shabab’s Capabilities Post-Westgate,” *CTC Sentinel* 7, no. 2 (February 2014), 3–8; Roland Marchal, “The Rise of a Jihadi Movement in a Country at War: Harakat al-Shabaab al Mujaheddin in Somalia” (Paris: SciencesPo CNRS, 2011); and Matt Bryden, *The Re-invention of Al-Shabaab: A Strategy of Choice or Necessity?* (Washington, D.C.: CSIS, February 2014).

3. This ambiguous relationship with new technology was nicely captured in a recent *Al Jazeera* story recounting how a top al-Shabaab official used his iPad in the field even as his group has banned Internet access through mobile devices. See: Hamza Mohamed, “Al-Shabaab’s Governor: One Man and His iPad,” *Al Jazeera*, February 26, 2014.

4. Marc Lynch, *Al-Qaeda’s Constructivist Turn* (Praeger Security International, May 5, 2006).

5. Steve Coll and Susan Glasser, “Terrorists Turn to the Web as Base of Operations,” *Washington Post*, August 7, 2005.

6. The group continues to be a major terrorist threat in Somalia and Kenya, but has far less public support than in the period from 2007–2008. It is, as this author and others have argued elsewhere, both weaker and more dangerous in the short term. See: Menkhaus, “Al-Shabab’s Capabilities.”

7. Joseph Winter, “Telecoms Thriving in Lawless Somalia,” *BBC News*, November 19, 2004.

8. Laura Hammond et al., *Cash and Compassion: The Role of the Somali Diaspora in Relief, Development, and Peacebuilding* (Nairobi: UNDP, 2011).

9. BBC World Service Trust, “The Media in Somalia: A Force for Moderation?” Policy Briefing #4 (November 2011): 1.

10. “Internet Users in Africa,” Internet World Stats: Usage and Population Statistics, 2012.

11. Radio remains the most important source of news in Somalia, despite the fact that al-Shabaab has shut down some stations and forced others in its areas of influence to broadcast only readings from the Qur’an and al-Shabaab approved news, which has caused a sharp drop in listeners. In 2013, there were over 30 radio stations operating in Somalia. For a full survey of Somali media, see: “Somalia Media and Telecom Landscape Guide,” Infoasaid, January 2012.

12. HSM is the acronym for the full name of the group, Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen.

13. For definitive studies of the early organization of al-Shabaab, before it had even taken on its current name (Al-Shabaab was adopted as a group name sometime in 2006, when it formed the strongest wing of the Islamic Courts Union armed forces), see: *Counter-terrorism in Somalia: Losing Hearts and Minds?* Africa Report no. 95 (Nairobi/Brussels: International Crisis Group, July 11, 2005); *Somalia’s Islamists*, Africa report no. 100 (Nairobi/Brussels: International Crisis Group, December 12, 2005); Cedric Barnes and Harun Hassan, “The Rise and Fall of Mogadishu’s Islamic Courts” (London: Chatham House Africa Program, March 2007).

14. For coverage of the East African affiliates of Al-Shabaab, see: Bryden, “The Reinvention of Shabaab;” Menkhaus, “Al-Shabab’s Capabilities;” UN Monitoring Group on Eritrea and Somalia, “Report of the UN Monitoring Group on Eritrea and Somalia pursuant to Security Council Resolution 2060 (2012),”





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S/AC.29/2013/SEMG/OC.62 (New York: UN, 19 June 2013), 14–17; and *Kenyan Somali Islamist Radicalization*, Africa Briefing no. 85 (Nairobi/Brussels: International Crisis Group, January 25, 2012).

15. For a corrupted version of the video, see: “Al-Kataib Media Productions The Excellent Video Woolwich Attack It’s an Eye for an Eye,” Internet Archive. For a sympathetic summary of the main themes of the video, see: “Al Shabaab Releases Hour Long Video on Woolwich Attack,” Harar24, October 16, 2013.

16. Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, Shiraz Mahar, and James Sheehan, “Lights, Camera, Jihad: Al-Shabaab’s Western Media Strategy” (London: ICSR, 2012).

17. Andrea Elliott, “A Call to Jihad, Answered in America,” *New York Times*, July 11, 2009. See also: “Joining the Fight in Somalia,” *New York Times*, October 30, 2011.

18. For quote, see: Meleagrou-Hitchens, Mahar, and Sheehan, “Lights, Camera, Jihad,” 7.

19. *Ibid.*, 13.

20. The most recent recruitment video, “The Path to Paradise,” featured three “Minnesotan Martyrs.” See: “Kenya Mall Terror Attack Group Al-Shabab Still Draws Somalis from US,” *CBS News*, September 26, 2013. Most of the first wave of diaspora recruits are now dead or defected.

21. An “Al-Kataib” search on YouTube at the time of this writing produced three media productions. More can be found on third party sites.

22. “Al Shabaab Releases Hour Long Video on Woolrich Attack,” Harar24.com, October 16, 2013.

23. For a rich look at Hammami’s background and his path to radicalization and Somalia, see: Andrea Elliott, “The Jihadist Next Door,” *New York Times Magazine*, January 27, 2010.

24. Hammami, who died at the hands of al-Shabaab rivals during the group’s bloody in-fighting in 2013, was born of a Muslim father of Arab descent and a southern white Christian mother.

25. His rap is still available on YouTube. For example, see: “amriki rap,” YouTube, May 5, 2009.

26. For access to this video, see: “No Peace Without Islam,” Iraq War: Non-English Language Videos, Internet Archive, 2008.

27. START, “Lights, Camera, Jihad,” 30.

28. One of its more effective videos on this count is the 2010 release “Mogadishu, The Crusaders Graveyard,” which shows extensive scenes of armed combat with AMISOM forces. See: “Mogadishu, The Crusaders Graveyard,” Internet Archive, Iraq War: Non-English Language Videos, 2010.

29. Al-Shabaab frequently posts video and photos of dead AMISOM soldiers as part of an effort to project an image of a victorious army, to demoralize its enemy, and in some cases to undercut AMISOM when it denies losses on the battlefield. To view one example, where Al-Shabaab posted images of 60 Burundian soldiers killed in a battle, see: Neil Ungerleider, “How Al-Shabaab Uses the Internet to Recruit Americans,” Fast Company Blog, September 23, 2013.

30. “Al-Shabaab woos Coast youth as noose tightens,” Harar24.com, April 19, 2014; Jamal Osman, “Exclusive: Inside an Al-Shabaab Training Camp,” *Channel 4 News*, December 16, 2013; For a recent *Al Jazeera* interview with Al Shabaab spokesperson Sheikh Ali Dhere, see: “Somalia’s Al-Shabab Vows to Make Comeback,” *Al Jazeera*, February 24, 2014.

31. Jamal Osman’s “Exclusive” portrayal of an Al Shabaab training camp is one recent example.

32. “Home Page,” Kataaib.net.

33. For instance, see: “Home Page,” al-Qimmah.

34. Harar24.com is one of a number of such news sites.

35. Elliott, “The Call to Jihad.”

36. *Ibid.*

37. The calls for contributions were broadcast via the internet, but the actual collections were done by local supporters, who then sent the cash via remittance companies.

38. Bryden, “The Reinvention of Al-Shabaab,” 2.

39. “Al Shabaab Releases Hour Long Video,” Harar24.com.

40. Bryden, “The Reinvention of Al-Shabaab.”

41. Fazul describes himself in correspondence to Osama bin Laden that he was, in 2006, head of a “secret security portfolio” within the Islamic Courts Union that the political leadership of the courts knew nothing about—the group that would later take on the name Al-Shabaab. See: Nelly Lahoud, “Beware of Imitators: Al Qa’ida through the Lens of its Confidential Secretary” (West Point, NY: Combating Ter-





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rorism Center Harmony Program, June 4, 2012), 82, 90–92.

42. The Arabic language original of his diary, “The War Against Islam,” is archived at the West Point Combating Terrorism Center website.

43. Crisis Group, “Somalia’s Divided Islamists,” Africa Briefing # 74 (Nairobi/Brussels: May 19, 2010), 4. This is the best source on ideological differences within Somali Islamists; Hassan Abukar, “The Letters: How Al Qaeda failed in Mali and Somalia,” *Wardheernews.com*, April 13, 2013.

44. START, “Lights, Camera, Jihad,” 23–8.

45. Spencer Ackerman, “Rapping Jihadi Now Fears Terrorism Pals will Kill Him,” *Wired*, March 19, 2012.

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47. Ibid.

48. The most elaborate was a 17-page attack. See: Abu Hamza Al-Muhajir, “Turning Away from the Truth Won’t Make it Disappear: Demystifying the Abu Mansur Saga,” Selected Wisdom.

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50. Hassan Abukar, “The Letters: How Al Qaeda Failed in Mali and Somalia,” *Wardheernews.com*, April 13, 2013.

51. Will Oremus, “Follow Friday: Terrorists Who Tweet,” *Slate.com*, March 2, 2012.

52. Andoni Berasategui, “VE Virtual Messaging in Somalia: Al-Shabaab Virtual Messaging and Avenues for Counter-Messaging,” (Presentation for the ACSS, Addis Ababa, February 25, 2014).

53. START, “Research Brief: Violent Jihadism in Real Time: Al Shabab’s Use of Twitter,” January 2013.

54. START, “Light, Camera, Jihad,” 34.

55. David Smith, “Al-Shabaab in War of Words with Kenyan Army on Twitter,” *The Guardian*, December 13, 2011.

56. Quoted in Will Oremus, “Twitter of Terror,” *Slate.com*, December 23, 2011.

57. In one of the last tweets before its account was closed, @HSMPress announced “a paradigm shift.”

58. The al-Shabaab Twitter account is closed; these quotes are from stored copies of the tweets.

59. Mukhtar Ibrahim, “Westgate Attack: Al-Shabaab and the Comedy of Errors,” *Sahan Journal*, September 26, 2013; See also David Barnett, “Are You Looking at an Official Shabaab Twitter Account?” *Long War Journal*, September 25, 2013.

60. Jim Berger, “Omar and Me,” *Foreign Policy*, September 16, 2013.

61. Mohamed, “Al-Shabaab’s Governor.”

62. Somalia Newsroom, “Unraveling Al-Shabaab’s Partial Internet Ban and Other Stunts in Somalia,” January 15, 2014.

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64. Al-Shabaab requires all businesses to pay it taxes, a demand backed by threats. Whether the firms pay willingly, view it as extortion, or consider it protection money varies from case to case.

65. UN Security Council, SC/10545, “Security Council Committee on Somalia and Eritrea Adds One Individual to List of Individuals and Entities,” February 17, 2012.

66. C. Penicaud and F. McGrath, “Innovative Inclusion: How Telesom ZAAD Brought Mobile Money to Somaliland,” Mobile Money for the Unbanked Project, Gates Foundation, July 2013.

67. “Al-Shabaab Bans Mobile Phone Money transfers in Somalia,” *BBC News*, October 18, 2010.

68. UN Security Council, SC/10545, “Security Council Committee on Somalia and Eritrea Adds One Individual to List of Individuals and Entities,” February 17, 2012. See also: “Somalia’s Telecoms: Cashless Doesn’t Mean Broke,” *MobileMoneyAfrica*.

69. Preoccupation with the privileges and perks of external recognition by leaders of juridically sovereign failed states is a well-documented dynamic. For instance, see: Pierre Engelbert, *Africa: Unity, Sovereignty, and Sorrow* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2009).



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