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In his 1968 speech, "Somalia: Nomadic Individualism and The Rule of Law", at a meeting of the Royal African Society in March 1968, then- Somali Prime Minister Mohamed Haji Ibrahim Egal said: "It's not easy to speak about Somalis and the very nature of the country, the way of life of its people, and their cultural background, appear to evade objective thought and rational explanation."

Egal emphasized that most of foreigners who have chosen Somalis as a subject for their studies have either become "enamored with the biblical character of Somali way of life- the rich & poetical language of the people, the absolute independence of the Somali in character, thought, behavior and intellect- which for outsiders may appear to be anarchism," or else, they are overwhelmed with " the arrogance pity, by the harsh nature of the environment they live".

Mary Harper's most recent book certainly falls on the first category articulated by Egal, except that at least this time, Mary's subject of study is specific Somalia-based group, Al-Shabaab.

Al-Shabab (in Arabic "the Youth,") is an Islamist group based in Somalia. It once held sway over the capital of Mogadishu and large portions of the Somali's countryside, but in recent years, an African Union-led military campaign, together with Somali National Army, has pushed it back from urban centers. The group is still threat to the country's peace and stability.

Al-Shabab Contact-Person

The book starts with a call from someone whom Mary Harper calls "my contact in the Islamist group of Al-Shabaab". According to Harper, the caller goes on to talk about which places she had visited in Mogadishu and the very people she had met.

In London, Harper often receives calls from a member of the group at London airport while collecting her luggage. She is astounded by this odd attention because it "beats my family and close friends, when it comes to phoning to check if I had arrived home safely".

## ABDIWAHAB: Reflecting on Mary Harper's book about Al-Shabab

The most interesting part of all these calls is when the 'Shabaab contact- person' calls Harper while driving near her London residence. At first, Harper didn't recognize the incoming Somalia number, but the voice on the other end was recognizable. Harper says when she is driving, the caller reminds her, in a very gentle tune, not to drive while talking: "you must not phone while driving, you will have an accident, or you will be arrested by the traffic cops".

This must be a classic long-distance relationship between a journalist and a violent terror group. But, since when did the brutal, violent group that detonates bombs in public places thereby killing thousands of people, started caring about traffic rules?

### Al-Shabaab

According to Harper, the radical group is "tactically smart", with deep "intelligence networks" that transcend boundaries, surviving, re-adjusting, and, maintaining shadowy presence or influence throughout and beyond Somalia, through the group has done a great deal of damage to the Somali society than anyone other entity. From 2009 Hotel Shaamoo bombing, that killed 25 people, including graduating students, doctors, journalists and Government ministries; the 14 Oct 2017 truck bomb that left 500 casualties—which is considered Somalia's worst terror attack—not to mention the Westgate mall attack in Nairobi in Sep 2013; and the Garissa University College attack.

With all these acts of violence, bombings and killings, Harper reached one conclusion: Al-Shabaab is not a black-and-white phenomenon, it's largely in between and plenty of blurred line, with less emphasis on 'violence' part. How would families, who lost loved ones react to Harper's portrayal of Al-Shabaab? Al-Shabaab is, to the eyes of many Somalis, a brutal, violent group that intimidates, terrorizes, and controls through fearful and coercion.

In addition, there are some fundamental flaws in Harper's argument on the nature and continuous survival of Al Shabaab. It is true that the group survives mainly because of the absence of strong functioning state and foreign interventions, in reality, Somalia, as a nation, is in a deep multilayered crisis of segmentation and the collapse of social order.

### The Thriving Industry

Harper rightly mentions how a whole industry has built around the threat of Al Shabaab and America's "War on Terror" campaign, not to mention the failure of counterterrorism &

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counter-productive aid politics.

First, foreign, and local security experts make a good living in Mogadishu. Handsomely paid foreign consultants prepare policies & projects on Preventing & Countering Violent Extremism (PCVE-another lovely, trending security aid jargon), some never set a foot in the country. Others often stay in Mogadishu's heavily protected Halane compound near the airport.

Second, the increasing interest of western foreign powers, as well as Turkey, Qatar, the UAE, Kenya, and Ethiopia has resulted confused and often contradictory strategies towards the country. These further damages the state-building agenda. A good example is New York Times' most recent investigative piece: "With Guns, Cash and Terrorism, Gulf States Vie for Power in Somalia that showcases Qatar government's use of violence to advance its agenda in Somalia.

All these countries and, certain members of Somalia's elite, have been benefitting from the chaos and conflict in what Rasnah Warah, called in another book "the 3 Ms"—Missionaries, Mercenaries & Misfits, thriving during the decades of violence, lawlessness, weak government and lack of regulations.

The most important issue, and the least explored in the book is the damages done by the western media.

### The Media Propaganda

Mary Harper has done in-depth research on Al Shabaab's communication. The group uses its communication and propaganda machine both to spread the word and to attract fighters, funders and sympathizers from across the globe. A good example is its famous film, *Stone Stoves and the Development of Society after the deceptions*, showing Al Shabaab distributing food and participating community development projects.

To Mary Harper, however, Al Shabaab provides "ample source of stories" for journalists like her. My job as Africa specialist for BBC, she writes, "has put me in uncomfortable position of being useful for Al Shabaab Media agenda".

The female-reporting-on-terrorist organizations genre has produced some very good work and some failures. Robin Wright's *Sacred Rage* set the bar high. It is interesting that foreign

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women can enjoy much better access to Islamist extremists who guarantee their safety, but most publications that came after Wright's classic are somewhat disappointing, BBC journals being no exception.

A picture is worth a thousand words

There is nothing more disappointing than seeing Mary Harper's choice of the book's back flap image—Harper standing in the middle, surrounded by Somali men with Ak-47s. The caption reads: "Mary Harper with her bodyguards!". After all, some old habits never die. And it seems that Mary Harper, fell-on the same trap, reinforces the western media's privileged, fetishizing correspondent's gaze or what Keren Weitzberg, reviewing Jeffrey Gettleman's memoir calls "an equivalent of an ambulance chaser, following the stories with the most thrill and bloodshed and also the biggest pay-off".

Mary Harper's book captures the group's Modus Operandi- in governance, financing, and shadow businesses. However, it falls short in digging on the historical content in which Al Shabaab evolved; it reads a bit like a list of stories, events, and anecdotes, and it often lacks the cohesion to analyze and synthesize all these variables and unpacking the layered, complex realities. There are as well quite a few contradictions and repetitions in the book.

None the less, it would be good read to anyone who is interested to know more about al-Shabab.



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