



## *Everything You Have Told Me Is True: The Many Faces of Al Shabaab*

by Mary Harper.

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*Everything You Have Told Me Is True* is a personal account of Africa's most important Al Qaeda-affiliated group, Al Shabaab. In an introduction, six chapters, and conclusion, journalist Mary Harper (BBC Africa Editor) paints a fascinating picture of Al Shabaab based on her own experiences and stories heard from locals during her travels in Somalia. Unfortunately, she does not describe how Al Shabaab has changed since its inception in 2006: from a sub-group within the Sharia courts, it evolved into a small guerrilla movement that grew to gain control of large territories before receding back into a guerrilla force. These transformations affected Al Shabaab's interaction with the wider Somali community, and neither these developments nor changes in the group's leadership get enough attention here.<sup>1</sup> Instead, Harper's static picture of the group neglects the impact of such changes on Al Shabaab's strategies and actions.

Harper accepts the old story suggesting Al Shabaab moved to the north—the Puntland—due to pressure in the south. To date, no major Al Shabaab leader has in fact relocated to the north, though there was a minor effort to support the fight against the Islamic state in the north.<sup>2</sup> The conventional wisdom about a larger movement stemmed from an underestimation of regional variations between southern and northern Somalia. It was simply easier for Al Shabaab to operate within the southern Somali countryside than in the north. Moreover, the clannish character and local roots of Al Shabaab's southern forces make it harder to move them north. In this sense, the author follows the tendency of students of African jihadists to underestimate the factor of local roots in calculating the ease with which an organization can move to another major theater of operations. And, too, Puntland had the military capacity to thwart such an incursion.

The book is, as well, too urban-centered. Al Shabaab has conducted significant campaigns in the countryside of Somalia, where they extracted local taxes and engaged in forced recruitment. Harper, like many other scholars of the subject, disregards the critically important rural dynamics of Al Shabaab's strategy.

Harper also oversimplifies the differing extents of Al Shabaab's activities in Kenya and Ethiopia. In particular, she claims Al Shabaab made more attacks against the Kenyans because of their mass arrests of and prejudices against Somalis. But this overlooks the Ethiopians' record of human rights violations against their Somali population<sup>3</sup> and their lack of openness at home<sup>4</sup> as com-

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1. See, instead, Harun Maruf and Dan Joseph, *Inside Al-Shabaab: The Secret History of Al-Qaeda's Most Powerful Ally* (Bloomington: Indiana U Pr, 2018), and Stig Jarle Hansen, *Horn, Sahel and Rift: Fault-lines of the African Jihad* (London: Hurst, 2019).

2. See, further, Robyn Kriel and Briana Duggan, "Al-Shabaab Child Soldiers Captured in Somalia Firefight," CNN (1 Apr. 2016) – available online.

3. See Maria Burnett, "Ethiopia Violence: A Concern despite Reform Promises," *Human Rights Watch [HRW]* (15 Aug 2018), and Anon., "We Are Like the Dead": Torture and Other Human Rights Abuses in Jail Ogaden, Somali Regional State, Ethiopia," *HRW* (4 July 2018).

pared to Kenya. Nor does Harper mention Ethiopia's penchant for totalitarian police and surveillance systems.<sup>5</sup> Though this may change if prime minister (and Nobel laureate) Abiy Ahmed Ali makes needed reforms in the future, the many problems of the Somali region of Ethiopia will remain important.

The strength of the book is its nuanced evaluation of Al Shabaab's dealings with the urban Somali population. Its author helpfully amplifies local voices critical of Al Shabaab, without omitting its positive impacts, however limited. And, too, her granular, source-based discussion of Al Shabaab avoids others' too-optimistic predictions of its collapse. Nor does she accept past erroneous claims that the organization's 2013 leadership conflict gave it a more global focus—an idea disproved by Al Shabaab's consistently local or regional attack patterns since 2013.<sup>6</sup> Finally, she does not overstate (as many others have) Al Shabaab's strength in Kenya.

Overall, Mary Harper's vivid prose and wealth of personal experience make *Everything You Have Told Me Is True* a pleasure to read and a valuable supplement to the existing scholarship on Al Shabaab.

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4. Anon, "One Hundred Ways of Putting Pressure: Violations of Freedom of Expression and Association in Ethiopia," *HRW* (24 Mar. 2010).

5. Anon., "They Know Everything We Do: Telecom and Internet Surveillance in Ethiopia," *HRW* (25 Mar. 2014).

6. See, further, Stig Jarle Hansen, "An In-Depth Look at Al-Shabab's Internal Divisions," *CTC Sentinel* 7.2 (2014) 9–12.