



Burundian soldier serving with African Union Mission in Somalia cleans rocket launcher against Mogadishu skyline after sudden departure of al-Shabaab, August 18, 2011 (United Nations/Stuart Price)

Overcoming Barriers to Institutional Learning

Insights from Insurgent Groups

By Nicholas A. Dudek

The inescapable fog and friction of war make it important for state militaries to function as learning organizations capable of adapting their strategies in response to changing conditions. However, despite the importance of developing and maintaining

strategic flexibility, several dynamics often prevent state militaries from being learning organizations. Among these dynamics are histories of success and the availability of vast resources. A history of success can lead to the development of standard operating procedures (SOPs) from which leaders are reluctant to deviate even once conditions have changed. Similarly, the availability of vast resources can make

leaders more inclined to respond to strategic failures by simply attempting the same strategy with more resources rather than innovating strategically.

Attempts to overcome these barriers have traditionally focused on learning from other militaries or businesses. These efforts, however, have overlooked the possibility of learning from insurgent groups. These groups face many of the same problems and must overcome

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them to survive; therefore, they provide a potential source of valuable insights for state militaries.

This article examines a case study of Islamic extremist groups in Somalia and their ability to overcome such barriers. Evidence from these groups indicates that the personalization of power by leaders can inhibit a group's strategic flexibility, as leaders fear that implementing a strategic shift will be seen as a sign that their leadership is "wrong," which can undermine their position. By contrast, the case study found that groups with *multiple* leaders can develop alternate strategies, allowing the group to select from a strategic menu, quickly adapt to crises of practice in which the existing strategic approach is ineffective, overcome the barriers, and thus function as a learning organization.

Barriers to Learning

Military scholars and theorists have long known that it is impossible to eliminate the fog and friction of war because the enemy gets a say.¹ This inescapable dynamic means that to be effective, military organizations must adapt to unexpected developments and alter their strategies in response to battlefield conditions. To do so, militaries need the "ability to recognize changes in the environment, identify the critical elements of a new situation, and trigger changes to meet new requirements."² In other words, successful militaries must be *learning organizations*. As Major General H.R. McMaster, USA (Ret.), stated in a 2013 interview: "First and foremost, we need leaders who can adapt and innovate. As Sir

Michael Howard has said—and I'm paraphrasing—we're never going to get the problem of future war precisely right. The key is to not be so far off the mark that you can't adapt once the real demands of combat reveal themselves, *and you need leaders who can adapt rapidly to unforeseen circumstances.*"³

Two central dynamics can inhibit adaptability and make it more challenging for militaries (especially global powers such as the U.S. military) to becoming learning organizations. The first barrier is a history of success, which can create a set of best practices or SOPs that are tried and true and a belief that such procedures will succeed in the current situation because they have succeeded in the past. This can be compared to "victory disease," which "comes from a high



Kenyan soldiers patrol streets of southern port city Kismayo, Somalia, October 12, 2013, as part of AMISOM initiatives (African Union–United Nations Information Support Team/Ramadan Mohamed Hassan)

Table 1. Islamic Courts Union Strategic Shifts

Time	Balance of Forces	Primary Strategy	Outcome
Early–mid 2006	Favorable	Semiconventional warfare	Victory
Late 2006–2007	Unfavorable	Semiconventional warfare (no change)	Defeat/demise

level of demonstrated military prowess.” As a result, “a military leader . . . sees the decisive impact of past solutions and believes that if these techniques are used in future conflicts, they will yield similar results . . . [and so] military leaders and planners adopt an attitude of: ‘Why change what has worked in the past?’”⁴ The second barrier is the availability of vast resources, which can have two impacts, each of which inhibits the tendency to adapt: It can mask poor strategy by providing a modicum of success,⁵ or it can make leaders believe that the strategy can work with additional resources, encouraging a “more of the same” approach rather than a strategic change in response to failures.⁶ As a result, experts in preeminent militaries have devoted considerable attention to discovering how to be learning organizations.⁷ This is a particularly important subject as it is commonly accepted that “70 to 80 percent of organizational change efforts fail.”⁸

Islamic Extremist Groups in Somalia: A Brief Overview

The Islamist phase of the Somali Civil War (2006–present) has been defined by a series of shifts in the balance of forces and resulting changes in the Islamists’ strategies. During periods in which the Islamists were dominant (such as in 2006 and from 2009 to mid-2011), they employed a strategy of semiconventional warfare. In such periods, the Islamists’ strategy contained many elements of conventional warfare (for instance, prioritization of control of territory, large military operations, and set-piece battles between opposing sides). However, even during these periods, the Islamists balanced the use of such tactics with continued use of insurgent tactics. The result was periods of warfare that were neither purely conventional nor purely insurgent but rather a mix of both. But when the Islamists faced

foreign interventions (2006–2009 and 2011–present), they were confronted by a disadvantageous balance of forces in which they faced adversaries with greater conventional military capacities than they possessed. In each instance, foreign forces defeated the Islamists in large-scale battles. These defeats resulted in crises of practice, failures that demonstrated that the strategies the Islamists had been using successfully prior to these defeats were no longer effective.⁹ As a result of the arrival of foreign forces, the Islamists were required to shift from a strategy that prioritized semiconventional warfare to a strategy of primarily insurgent operations.¹⁰ During these periods of strategic change, the impact of the barriers to organizational learning (including those faced by state militaries) on the Islamists’ strategic flexibility is particularly evident.

Since 2006, when the emergence of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) brought Islamic extremist groups to the forefront of the Somali Civil War (1989–present), they have faced three such shifts. The first major shift came in December 2006. Throughout the year, the ICU had been the strongest military force in Somalia, overcoming the warlords’ use of semiconventional warfare. The Ethiopian invasion altered the balance of forces, however, as the Islamists could not match the Ethiopians in conventional battle. The different responses of the ICU and al-Shabaab illustrate the importance of the barriers to change as the ICU, with a history of success and vast resources, was strategically stagnant, while the weaker but more adaptive al-Shabaab—which was not inhibited by either of these barriers—shifted to an insurgent strategy.

The second major shift came in 2009 when the Ethiopians withdrew, leaving a power vacuum that allowed al-Shabaab to return to semiconventional warfare and to rule much of the country, including parts

of Mogadishu. This period of dominance (2009–2010) gave al-Shabaab great success and vast resources, similar to the ICU or a conventional military, which likely hindered its adaptiveness somewhat in the face of a new shift in the balance of forces.

The third major shift came in 2011 when the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) shifted into an offensive role, and al-Shabaab faced an invasion from Kenya (Operation *Linda Nchi*). Although the barriers inhibited al-Shabaab’s ability to be a learning organization, the group was eventually able to overcome the obstacles and return to an insurgent strategy. To meet the demands of the battlefield and shift strategies, the Islamists needed to overcome organizational barriers to change, including some of the same ones that state militaries face.

Insurgent Groups and Barriers

Critical Juncture 1: The Ethiopian Invasion. Prior to the invasion in late December 2006, the preeminent militant Islamist organization in Somalia was the ICU, a broad coalition of militias that included the fledgling al-Shabaab. During this period, Islamists waged semiconventional warfare. They prioritized control of territory and set-piece battles against the warlords, including the U.S.-backed Alliance for Peace Restoration and Counter-Terrorism.¹¹ The ICU swept across Somalia with a series of large-scale assaults, using massive formations of as many as 600 fighters and 50 “battle wagons” or “technicals” (pickup trucks outfitted with mounted antiaircraft guns and machine guns).¹² ICU forces engaged in “fierce gun battles that left hundreds dead” and defeated each warlord in turn.¹³ By June 5, they were victorious and controlled most of the country, including Mogadishu.

The Ethiopian invasion radically altered the balance of forces in Somalia.

While Islamists were stronger than their domestic adversaries (the warlords), they could not match the conventional military strength of the Ethiopians, who had both better training and superior hardware. A pair of devastating defeats in “open, conventional warfare” within a week of each other demonstrated the power asymmetry.¹⁴ The first defeat occurred at Daynunay (December 19–23), where it became clear that the ICU had no way to counter the Ethiopian artillery strikes. The second defeat occurred at Iidale (December 21–26), where ICU forces waged trench warfare and held out against Ethiopian tanks for several days until Ethiopian helicopter gunships arrived and broke ICU lines.¹⁵ Over the course of 8 days of intense conventional warfare, as many as 1,000 ICU fighters were killed, and an additional 3,000 were injured.¹⁶ These defeats led to the first crisis of practice for Somalia’s Islamists, as the “battle at Iidale had just shown that there was no way al-Shabaab could win a toe-to-toe slugging match” against the Ethiopian forces.¹⁷ However, the way in which Somalia’s Islamist groups reacted illustrated the barriers to learning.

Even after these defeats, which demonstrated the futility of a conventional strategy, the ICU failed to shift to an insurgent strategy. Instead, the ICU and its allied militias (the Muqawama, or “resistance”), now under the leadership of Abdulkadir Ali Omar, decided to resist the Ethiopians. ICU forces dug in, fortifying their bases with trenches and waging an extremely bloody but ultimately futile year-long battle for control of Mogadishu against the superior military might of Ethiopia. For months, the two sides exchanged nearly constant barrages of mortars and rocket fire and mounted sporadic ground offenses, which resulted in thousands of deaths.¹⁸ However, despite the ICU’s determination not to yield the city, Ethiopia’s massive advantage in military hardware made it an unwinnable battle. As one observer noted, the “Muqawama did not have anything to fire on the tank[s] apart from an AK-47, which was ineffective,” limiting their ability to stop Ethiopian offensives.¹⁹ As a result, by the end of 2007,

Ethiopia had taken control of the city, and the ICU was all but destroyed.

Some attribute the strategic stagnancy of the ICU to the group’s ideology, the personality of its leaders, or its foreign backers. Despite a shared ideology, though, the ICU and al-Shabaab employed widely different strategies. Additionally, the ICU remained strategically stagnant despite a change in the leadership from Sharif Sheikh Ahmed to Omar, indicating that the group’s strategy cannot be attributed primarily to the leader’s preference. Finally, the Islamists’ ties to international backers, including Eritrea, became strong only after the defeat of the ICU, when Eritrea hosted the former ICU leaders to form the Alliance for the Re-Liberation of Somalia. Thus, foreign backers likely had a limited impact on the ICU’s strategy during the immediate aftermath of the Ethiopian invasion.

Instead, its history of success and vast resources likely helps explain why the ICU (unlike al-Shabaab) remained committed to large-scale operations. Prior to the Ethiopian invasion, the ICU had experienced significant success through semiconventional warfare. This success likely made the ICU more confident in its ability to defeat the Ethiopians through large-scale operations and thus reluctant to adopt insurgent warfare. Similarly, its resources (strong ties to clan and business militias) gave it the ability to regroup and recommit to further large-scale operations. This extensive support network apparently made the ICU leadership believe that their previous defeats were caused not by poor strategy but by insufficient resources. This led them to continue to contest in the same manner for control of Mogadishu.

By contrast, the smaller al-Shabaab demonstrated a greater ability to learn and adapt to the new asymmetrical balance of forces. Although present in Mogadishu throughout 2007, “al-Shabaab was not a significant military actor” in the fighting; it resisted the ICU’s calls to engage in the fight for the capital.²⁰ Instead, al-Shabaab quickly abandoned conventional warfare strategies and reorganized itself as an insurgency.²¹ For instance, in the “face of regular combat al-Shabaab would

withdraw. [It] focused on small hit-and-run and suicide attacks”²² and focused on high-profile terrorist attacks to raise their stature. While the ICU fought, and lost, against Ethiopia’s overwhelming military might, al-Shabaab “systematically attacked the softer spots of the government,” targeting government officials and anyone collaborating with the Ethiopians, while simultaneously launching hit-and-run attacks on the Ethiopian forces.²³ This shift allowed al-Shabaab not only to survive—unlike the stronger, but strategically stagnant ICU—but also to thrive and become the main opposition to Ethiopia by the end of the year.²⁴

Some attribute this strategic shift to al-Shabaab’s ideology, the personality of its leaders, foreign backers, or geography. However, had ideology determined their strategy, the ICU and al-Shabaab would have fought similarly. Instead, despite similar ideologies, al-Shabaab employed a dramatically different strategy. Additionally, this strategic change occurred under the leadership of al-Shabaab’s first emir, Ayden Ayro, who also oversaw al-Shabaab during the first period of semiconventional warfare. The fact that this strategic change occurred despite consistent leadership indicates that the change was not caused by the leader’s personality. Furthermore, although al-Shabaab had ties to international backers, including Eritrea, its influence was limited. For example, in 2007 al-Shabaab refused to join an Eritrean-hosted summit for the formation of the Alliance for the Re-Liberation of Somalia (which it subsequently denounced²⁵) and threatened to attack Eritrea.²⁶ Thus, the role of foreign backers appears to have been limited to financial support rather than strategic direction from afar. Finally, although geography often shapes insurgent groups’ strategies, it provides little explanation for al-Shabaab’s strategic shifts. Although the geography of al-Shabaab’s war has remained constant, its strategy has not.

Others argue that al-Shabaab was part of the ICU, whose leadership assigned al-Shabaab the role of waging an insurgent war while the ICU held the line in



Ugandan soldiers serving with AMISOM move to reinforce newly occupied positions around Mogadishu Stadium following al-Shabaab's withdrawal, August 7, 2011 (United Nations/Stuart Price)

Mogadishu. While intuitively plausible, this explanation overlooks the deteriorating relationship between the two groups, which “had gone from bad to worse in the weeks before the Ethiopian military intervention.”²⁷ As a result, al-Shabaab had broken with the ICU after the December 2006 fighting,²⁸ and there were reports of assassination attempts between al-Shabaab and ICU leadership.²⁹ By this time, the two groups no longer had a common leadership. Furthermore, close observers reported that “al-Shabaab stayed out of the large battles *and resisted any calls to coordinate with any Sharia Court forces.*”³⁰ Therefore, far from being assigned the insurgent role by ICU leadership, al-Shabaab’s shift was in defiance of ICU orders.

Another potential explanation is that al-Shabaab was able to pursue an insurgent strategy because the ICU was the primary opposition to the Ethiopian

forces. Had this been the case, the demise of the ICU in mid- to late 2007 would have forced al-Shabaab to take its place and employ a more conventional approach to fighting Ethiopia. But this did not happen, and despite the ICU’s defeat, which catapulted al-Shabaab into the position of the primary opposition to Ethiopia by late 2007, al-Shabaab continued to employ a strategy of insurgency until Ethiopia began its withdrawal in late 2008. This strategic consistency on the part of al-Shabaab, despite its changed status as the opposition to Ethiopian forces, shows that what caused (and allowed) it to employ an insurgent strategy was not its secondary status to the ICU, but rather its strategic flexibility in the face of an overwhelming conventional opponent.

Al-Shabaab’s transition to insurgency demonstrated its strategic flexibility, which can be partially attributed to the absence of barriers. By contrast to the ICU,

al-Shabaab had no history of success. According to Mukhtar Robow, a senior al-Shabaab leader, the organization was only formed in August 2006.³¹ As a result, it had no experience winning large-scale battles. In early 2007, the largest battles that al-Shabaab had participated in were the defeats at Daynunay and Idale. Thus, the leadership had not experienced victories that could make them believe that a strategy of large-scale battles could be successful. Moreover, unlike the ICU, al-Shabaab lacked resource reserves. In early 2007, it consisted of only “a few hundred fighters.”³² As a result, it lacked the manpower to believe that future large-scale battles would end differently if more troops and resources were committed. Thus, unlike the ICU, al-Shabaab had little reason to think that a strategy of large-scale battles could defeat Ethiopia, making it easier for al-Shabaab to shift to a primarily insurgent strategy.



AMISOM Ugandan soldier walks through former steel factory in Mogadishu carrying 120mm mortar shell used by al-Shabaab, August 15, 2011 (United Nations/Stuart Price)

Critical Juncture 2: The Ethiopian Withdrawal. After the Ethiopian withdrawal in January 2009, the balance of forces shifted again. As al-Shabaab became “without question the most powerful force in southern Somalia,” it reverted to a semiconventional warfare strategy that emphasized larger scale battles and control of territory.³³ This strategic shift was evident in al-Shabaab’s organization, which prioritized the *Jabhat* (“army”), organized for large-scale operations, and included divisions of 300 soldiers equipped with battle wagons.

Moreover, this organizational change matched a strategic adjustment in al-Shabaab’s operations. While it previously had predominantly used secret small-scale operations, al-Shabaab now began to move large forces in the open. Its capture of the strategic port city of Merca involved “hundreds” of fighters,³⁴ and its conquest of Hudur in February 2009 involved 800 to 1,000 fighters.³⁵ As Bohumil Dobos writes, the “nature of the conflict in the second phase was closer to conventional warfare; al-Shabaab was trying to conquer the land as manifested

in its attempts to occupy important demographic and economic centers.”³⁶ And where previously al-Shabaab had withdrawn in the face of regular combat with pro-government forces, during this period it displayed a newfound willingness to engage in protracted combat.³⁷ In August, al-Shabaab seized Kismayo after “3 days of heavy fighting” against government forces, which left 90 dead and more than 200 injured.³⁸ This strategic shift culminated on May 7, 2009, when al-Shabaab launched an offensive to take over Mogadishu. The scale of this operation

Table 2. Al-Shabaab's Strategic Shifts

Time	Balance of Forces	Primary Strategy	Outcome
Early–mid 2006	Favorable	Semiconventional warfare	Victory
Late 2006–2009	Unfavorable	Insurgency (change)	Survive
2009–2010	Favorable	Semiconventional warfare (change)	Near victory
2011	Unfavorable	Semiconventional warfare (no change)	Defeats
2011–present	Unfavorable	Insurgency (change)	Survive

was unlike anything the Islamists had engaged in during the Ethiopian occupation, when they had relied primarily on small operations.³⁹ In contrast, this offensive was massive, including 6,000 to 7,000 fighters and hundreds of battle wagons. Although the leadership “offered no public explanation . . . [of the timing of the attack] the reasons were obvious: with the Ethiopians gone, AMISOM limited to defense, and the TFG [Transitional Federal Government] an unholy mess, this would be their best chance to seize Mogadishu and take power.”⁴⁰

This strategic shift succeeded, and al-Shabaab “shoved aside the official government to become the country’s true ruler.” It eventually controlled more than 80 percent of Somalia south of Puntland—including much of Mogadishu—and ruled at least three million Somalis.⁴¹ This period of dominance through semiconventional warfare (2009–2010) significantly affected al-Shabaab’s organizational structure and its ability to be a learning organization, giving it some attributes of a conventional army that included a history of success through semiconventional warfare. Additionally, during this period al-Shabaab derived as much as \$100 million USD per year in tax revenue⁴² and had thousands of new recruits (swelling its ranks to 13,000⁴³ or 14,000 fighters⁴⁴), giving it vast resources. Each of these dynamics (common among state militaries) hindered al-Shabaab’s ability to act as a learning organization and to shift strategically in 2010–2011.

Critical Juncture 3: AMISOM Offensives. Al-Shabaab’s Mogadishu offensive brought it into conflict with AMISOM, which defended critical government institutions, including the

presidential palace and the Mogadishu international airport. Although al-Shabaab repeatedly demonstrated its superiority over the Somali National Army, AMISOM counteroffensives and mortar fire repulsed al-Shabaab’s offensives each time.⁴⁵ For instance, on June 16, 2009, al-Shabaab seized control of part of Maka al-Mukarama Road, “one of the most critical” locations in the city, as it connected the palace to the airport and allowed the government to remain supplied. It was only an AMISOM counteroffensive that reopened the indispensable lifeline for the Somali government.⁴⁶ A few days later, when al-Shabaab seized the Shibis and Karan districts just two miles from Villa Somalia and the government appeared on the brink of collapse, AMISOM forces once again intervened, repelling the Islamists with counterattacks and a hail of mortar fire.⁴⁷

Although al-Shabaab controlled more than three-quarters of the capital, these repeated setbacks by AMISOM’s well-armed professional forces demonstrated that once again al-Shabaab faced a foe that exceeded its conventional military strength. However, despite these setbacks, it remained committed to a strategy of semiconventional warfare. Instead of reverting to insurgency, al-Shabaab recommitted itself to large-scale battles for control of the city. It brought new weapons and 1,800 additional fighters into Mogadishu, a decision made possible by the resources and recruits accrued during its dominance over the preceding years. On August 23, 2010, al-Shabaab launched the Ramadan Offensive (*Nihayat Al-Mu’tadin* or “The End of the Aggressors” or “The End of the Apostates”), an all-out assault on the

key institutions defended by AMISOM.⁴⁸ The result was the bloodiest month in Mogadishu’s history,⁴⁹ with stalemate fighting compared to trench warfare in World War I and the Battle of Stalingrad in World War II, although on a much smaller scale.⁵⁰ However, al-Shabaab was once again unable to overcome AMISOM’s advantage in conventional warfare—in particular, the presence of Ugandan tanks—and so the assault was a disastrous failure. More than 700 al-Shabaab fighters were killed and as many as 2,000 were injured.⁵¹ In just over a month, more than a quarter of al-Shabaab’s military strength had been spent, along with much of its treasury.

The failure of the Ramadan Offensive constituted a second crisis of practice; however, al-Shabaab still did not return to insurgent warfare as it had in 2006 when it faced a similar power asymmetry that was prohibitive to winning through conventional warfare. Instead, the crisis of practice grew more apparent in early 2011 as AMISOM went on the offensive beginning on February 19, overrunning one al-Shabaab stronghold after another. Despite this, al-Shabaab continued to fight to maintain control of important portions of the city, including the Bakaara Market and the ministry of defense, which had been its command center. In the fight for the ministry of defense, al-Shabaab faced as many as 700 Burundian AMISOM soldiers. It killed more than 50 fighters⁵² and lost as many as 400 of its own⁵³ before it was eventually forced to yield the facilities.

Some attribute al-Shabaab’s reluctance to abandon semiconventional warfare to its unwillingness to accommodate losses or to the belief that its legitimacy was rooted in its state-like

characteristics. These explanations undoubtedly contributed to al-Shabaab's hesitance to change strategies. However, these reasons would also have affected its strategic decisionmaking in 2006–2007, when it more readily shifted to insurgency in response to the Ethiopian invasion. Had these motives been the primary factor driving al-Shabaab's reluctance to shift strategies, it likely would have been able to revert to insurgency in 2010–2011 as it had in 2006–2007. Instead, what distinguished the al-Shabaab of 2010–2011 from that of 2006–2007 was its *history of success and accumulated resources*. In 2006–2007, al-Shabaab was uninhibited by these barriers and so was able to accurately assess the battlefield conditions and shift strategies despite these strong motivations to maintain control of territory. By contrast, in 2010–2011, al-Shabaab's ability to do so was more limited.

This apparent reluctance to embrace insurgent warfare can be partially attributed to al-Shabaab's history of success through conventional warfare, which led its leaders, particularly Emir Godane, to believe that additional conventional warfare (in the form of the Ramadan Offensive) could bring victory: "Although al-Shabaab conscripts were facing a professional and well equipped army, they just thought that waves of infantry fighters could defeat it."⁵⁴ This decision was made possible by the presence of vast resources, which allowed al-Shabaab to believe that conventional warfare could succeed if repeated with greater resources (1,800 new fighters) rather than shifting strategy, as it had done previously when it was far weaker.⁵⁵

Ultimately, al-Shabaab was again able to realize the asymmetric realities of the conflict, and on August 5, 2011, it shifted its strategy accordingly.⁵⁶ Al-Shabaab spokesman Ali Dhere declared that the group was reverting to insurgency. Al-Shabaab withdrew from Mogadishu and its other urban strongholds and became "a deterritorialized entity."⁵⁷ Since then, it has "generally avoid[ed] major engagements with AMISOM and SFG [government] forces."⁵⁸ Instead, it has "melted away into the bush" when

facing large AMISOM armies.⁵⁹ As Ali Dhere announced, the strategy has shifted to "hit-and-run attacks, where the Mujahideen will attack a spot wherever government or African Union forces are based."⁶⁰ Indeed, in the past decade, "most al-Shabaab attacks [have been] small scale, including assassinations, hit and run ambushes, or mortar or grenade attacks."⁶¹ In short, "with no chance to win a conventional battle, al-Shabaab leaders had fallen back again on the strategy used by outgunned armies since the beginning of time—guerrilla warfare."⁶²

This shift allowed al-Shabaab to survive and avoid the fate that the ICU had met when it waged a war against foreign forces for control of Mogadishu 3 years prior. This makes it clear that al-Shabaab's survival and the ICU's demise were a direct result of the groups' inability to overcome barriers and be a learning organization.⁶³ This suggests that insurgent groups that survive must all be learning organizations (since those that are not, like the ICU, perish). If state militaries wish to become learning organizations, perhaps some lessons can be found not in the preeminent militaries with all the resources and power in the world at their disposal, but in struggling insurgent groups on the brink of survival. Insurgent militaries have historically learned from state militaries. Perhaps it is time for the paradigm to be reversed.

Insights from Insurgent Militaries

Al-Shabaab's ability to shift strategically in response to the changing balance of forces in 2010–2011 provides insight into how insurgent groups shift strategies and how state militaries can be more efficient learning organizations. One surprising lesson from the case of al-Shabaab is that centralized command structures, in which decisionmaking power is concentrated in an individual or a small group of individuals, can inhibit, rather than facilitate, an insurgent group's ability to adapt. This is likely because "military leaders are promoted, largely based upon their ability to solve problems."⁶⁴ In other words, a leader's position in the group is tied

to the ability to choose the "right" strategy. For such leaders, changing strategies amounts to an admission that their strategy was wrong, which can undermine their position within the group. As a result, and until forced to do so, leaders will be reluctant to admit that their strategy was wrong and adjust accordingly. By contrast, organizations with a decentralized leadership are more able to develop a strategic menu of alternative strategies, which makes it easier to shift strategies in the face of changing battlefield conditions.⁶⁵

Al-Shabaab's strategic transformation (2010–2011) demonstrates this process. Despite setbacks against AMISOM forces, Emir Godane was committed to conventional warfare. Al-Shabaab's decision to double down on conventional strategies with the Ramadan Offensive was "Godane's strategy," which he implemented despite opposition from other senior al-Shabaab leaders.⁶⁶ This commitment can be attributed both to the expressed belief that victory through conventional warfare was possible and to Godane's belief that his position and status were tied to his ability to choose the "right" strategic path, which made abandoning conventional warfare personally risky.⁶⁷

Additionally, Godane was able to keep al-Shabaab committed to large-scale offensives because the "centralization of [power in] al-Shabaab had strengthened Godane's personal authority," enabling him to almost unilaterally keep al-Shabaab committed to a strategy of large-scale battles.⁶⁸ Godane consolidated power by promoting leaders loyal to him (such as Mahad Karate and Ali Dhere) while demoting those who opposed him (such as Robow) and developing the feared special operations division, the *Amniyat*, as a separate wing outside of al-Shabaab's command structure and loyal only to him.⁶⁹ Such efforts gave al-Shabaab a more centralized leadership, limiting the group's adaptiveness to a degree, which allowed the decision to launch the Ramadan Offensive to be "pushed through."⁷⁰

Despite Godane's efforts, however, he was unable to fully monopolize



Team of engineers with Kenyan contingent of AMISOM search former police station for improvised explosive devices, in Kismayo, Somalia, October 3, 2012 (United Nations/Stuart Price)

decisionmaking power, and al-Shabaab still had a plethora of significant leaders, most notably Robow, the former deputy emir and onetime face of al-Shabaab. Not all of these leaders were in lockstep with Godane's strategic approach. Prior to the Ramadan Offensive, Robow and others had "questioned the military wisdom of an all-out battle against AMISOM, claiming that al-Shabaab's strength had been related to insurgency tactics rather than conventional warfare."⁷¹ For these leaders, the failure of the Ramadan Offensive was proof that al-Shabaab should abandon conventional warfare.⁷² The presence of other leaders advocating for alternative strategies meant that in August 2011, when Godane was finally forced to admit the failure of his strategy,

he had strategic alternatives to choose from. In other words, although Godane's attempts to centralize power in himself hindered al-Shabaab's strategic flexibility, his inability to completely unite all decisionmaking power in himself meant that other leaders, such as Robow and Ibrahim al-Afghani (whose statuses were not tied to the strategy of conventional warfare), were able to suggest other strategies (such as insurgency). This allowed Godane to switch to an insurgent strategy more easily after conventional warfare had manifestly failed.

Al-Shabaab's 2011 transformation back to insurgency also demonstrates why organizations with power concentrated in a single leader are less strategically adaptive. This is at least in

part because leaders are (likely correctly) afraid that a strategic shift will be seen as a sign that their leadership is "wrong," which can undermine their position. This fear proved justified in Godane's case, as the "most serious crisis in the history of the organization" and the greatest threat to his leadership came after he essentially admitted the failure of his conventional warfare approach and switched to a strategy of insurgency.⁷³ Stig Jarle Hansen writes, "The fact that it was Godane who planned the ill-fated [Ramadan] Offensive . . . meant that the September defeat [retreating from Mogadishu] damaged his status as leader."⁷⁴ This retreat from Mogadishu "was a highly symbolic decision and an unacceptable humiliation for Godane

as al-Shabaab's [emir].⁷⁵ Sensing Godane's vulnerability, other leaders (including al-Afghani and Robow) wrote an open letter to al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri calling for Godane to be removed as leader of the group.⁷⁶ Although Godane was able to reassert his control with a brutal purge (2011–2014), in which al-Afghani and notable American jihadi Omar al-Hamammi (Abu Mansour al-Amriki) were killed and Robow was removed,⁷⁷ the intensity of the conflict during this period indicates that such strategic shifts make leaders uniquely vulnerable to internal opposition,⁷⁸ and many leaders are reluctant to jeopardize their position.

Conclusion

This article makes four key points to help address the need for militaries to function as learning organizations. First, state militaries are often hindered by their histories of success, which generate SOPs, and by the availability of vast resources, which make leaders of state militaries more strategically stagnant and likely to commit additional resources to their strategies, rather than to adapt strategically.

Second, insurgent groups are a possible source of lessons for state militaries. Scholars and policymakers often look to other state militaries or to businesses for insights on how to become learning organizations. However, they overlook the possibility of learning from insurgent groups. Although insurgent groups differ in many ways from state militaries, they face some of the same demands and must overcome some of the same barriers that states do, including, at times, histories of success and vast resources. However, for such groups, overcoming these barriers is a matter of not only success or failure but also survival.

Third, the personalization of power by leaders (as under Godane) can inhibit groups' strategic flexibility, as leaders fear that implementing a strategic shift will be seen as a sign that their leadership is "wrong," which can undermine their position.

Finally, groups with multiple leaders can develop alternate strategies, allowing

them to select from a strategic menu and quickly adapt to crises of practice in which the existing strategic approach is ineffective. Al-Shabaab's history suggests that the presence of multiple leaders with perspectives different from those of the primary leader is critical to a group's ability to overcome the barriers and function as a learning organization.

These findings likely apply not only to insurgent groups but to state militaries as well, even ones that differ from insurgent groups in many ways. In fact, there is evidence to suggest that to function as a learning organization, "problem solving must become a shared responsibility for the whole organization, not just the task of the leadership."⁷⁹ JFQ

Notes

¹ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976).

² William J. Cojocar, "Adaptive Leadership in the Military Decision Making Process," *Military Review* (November–December 2011), 24.

³ Andrew Erdmann, "How Militaries Learn and Adapt: An Interview with Major General H.R. McMaster," McKinsey and Company, April 1, 2013, available at <<https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-and-social-sector/our-insights/how-militaries-learn-and-adapt>>. Emphasis added.

⁴ Timothy Karcher, *Understanding the "Victory Disease," from the Little Bighorn to Mogadishu and Beyond*, Global War on Terrorism Occasional Paper 3 (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2004).

⁵ This is particularly powerful in organizations that have a history of success and are thus predisposed to believe that the strategy will be successful and are more likely to believe that success has been achieved.

⁶ Richard Shultz, "The Irreducible Minimum"—An Evaluation of Counterterrorism Operations in Iraq," *PRISM* 7, no. 3 (2018), 102–117.

⁷ Richard Shultz, *The Marines Take Anbar: The Four-Year Fight Against al-Qaeda* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2013); Shultz, "The Irreducible Minimum"; William F. Mullen III and Ryan Evans, "Learn Like a Marine," *War on the Rocks*, August 18, 2020.

⁸ Charles D. Allen, "Foreword," in *Leading Change in Military Organizations: Primer for Senior Leaders*, ed. Tom Galvin (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College Press, 2018), vii–ix.

⁹ Richard Shultz coined the term *crises of practice*. Personal conversation, 2019.

¹⁰ However, this was a shift in the *primacy* of one method of warfare over another rather than a complete shift. Periods of insurgency contained elements of conventional warfare, and even in periods when the Islamists prioritized semiconventional warfare, they continued to employ insurgent tactics in parallel in *support* of larger scale operations.

¹¹ Stig Jarle Hansen, *Al-Shabaab in Somalia: The History and Ideology of a Militant Islamist Group* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

¹² Bill Roggio, "The Fall of Kismayo," *FDD's Long War Journal*, September 25, 2006, available at <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2006/09/the_fall_of_kismayo.php>.

¹³ Harun Maruf and Dan Joseph, *Inside Al-Shabaab: The Secret History of Al-Qaeda's Most Powerful Ally* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018).

¹⁴ Bill Roggio, "The Rise and Fall of Somalia's Islamic Courts: An Online History," *Long War Journal*, January 4, 2007, available at <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2007/01/the_rise_fall_of_som.php>.

¹⁵ Maruf and Joseph, *Inside Al-Shabaab*.

¹⁶ Bill Roggio, "Islamic Courts in Retreat in Somalia," *Long War Journal*, December 26, 2006, available at <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2006/12/Islamic_courts_in_re.php>.

¹⁷ Maruf and Joseph, *Inside Al-Shabaab*, 50.

¹⁸ Human Rights Watch, *Shell-Shocked: Civilians Under Siege in Mogadishu* (New York: Human Rights Watch, August 13, 2007), 82.

¹⁹ Maruf and Joseph, *Inside Al-Shabaab*, 56.

²⁰ Roland Marchal, "A Tentative Assessment of the Somali *Harakat Al-Shabaab*," *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 3, no. 3 (2009), 381–404. See also Hansen, *Al-Shabaab in Somalia*, 53, for a similar description of the group's absence from the fight for Mogadishu, despite the Islamic Courts Union's exhortations to join the fight.

²¹ Bohumil Dobos, "Shapeshifters of Somalia: Evolution of Political Territoriality of Al-Shabaab," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 27, no. 5 (2016), 937–957.

²² Hansen, *Al-Shabaab in Somalia*, 54, 57.

²³ *Ibid.*, 53.

²⁴ Jason Mueller, "The Evolution of Political Violence: The Case of Somalia's Al-Shabaab," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 30, no. 1 (2018), 116–141; Katherine Petrich, "Cows, Charcoal, and Cocaine: Al-Shabaab's Criminal Activities in the Horn of Africa," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* (October 2019), 1–22.

²⁵ Mapping Militant Organizations, "Al Shabaab," Center for International Security and Cooperation, Stanford University, available at <<https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/al-shabaab>>.

²⁶ Andrew McGregor, "Opposition Group

Promises Attacks Following Sanctions on Eritrea for Support of Terrorism,” *Terrorism Monitor* 8, no. 1 (January 7, 2010), available at <<https://jamestown.org/program/opposition-group-promises-attacks-following-sanctions-on-eritrea-for-support-of-terrorism/>>.

²⁷ Marchal, “A Tentative Assessment,” 396.

²⁸ Maruf and Joseph, *Inside Al-Shabaab*, 53.

²⁹ Marchal, “A Tentative Assessment,” 396.

³⁰ Hansen, *Al-Shabaab in Somalia*, 53.

Emphasis added. Maruf and Joseph, *Inside Al-Shabaab*.

³¹ Hansen, *Al-Shabaab in Somalia*.

³² Marchal, “A Tentative Assessment,” 396.

³³ Matt Bryden, *The Reinvention of Al-Shabaab: A Strategy of Choice or Necessity?* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, February 21, 2014), 1–13.

³⁴ Mohamed Amiin Adow, “Islamic Rebels Grab Key Somali Port,” CNN, November 12, 2008, available at <<https://edition.cnn.com/2008/WORLD/africa/11/12/somalia.towns.seized/>>.

³⁵ Hansen, *Al-Shabaab in Somalia*.

³⁶ Dobos, “Shapeshifters of Somalia,” 950.

³⁷ Hansen, *Al-Shabaab in Somalia*, 54.

³⁸ Maruf and Joseph, *Inside Al-Shabaab*, 82.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 109.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 136.

⁴² Even the lowest estimates report that al-Shabaab earned “tens of millions of dollars” (estimated at \$35 million to \$50 million) per year. See Mueller, “The Evolution of Political Violence,” 125, 129. Matthew J. Thomas, “Exposing and Exploiting Weaknesses in the Merger of Al-Qaeda and Al-Shabaab,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 24, no. 3 (2013), 413–435, estimates that al-Shabaab takes in between \$70 million and \$100 million per year. Similarly, Petrich, “Cows, Charcoal, and Cocaine,” estimates that al-Shabaab revenue peaked between \$75 million and \$100 million per year. Counter Extremism Project estimates \$100 million per year (including \$35 million to \$50 million from Kismayo alone); Maruf and Joseph, *Inside Al-Shabaab*, cite a \$70 million to \$100 million per year income (although Marchal, “A Tentative Assessment,” is doubtful); Mary Harper, *Everything You Have Told Me Is True: The Many Faces of Al Shabaab* (London: Hurst, 2019), reports that al-Shabaab revenue peaked at \$70 million to \$100 million per year.

⁴³ Maruf and Joseph, *Inside Al-Shabaab*, 273.

⁴⁴ Thomas, “Exposing and Exploiting Weaknesses in the Merger of Al-Qaeda and Al-Shabaab,” 414.

⁴⁵ Al-Shabaab’s dominance over the Somali National Army (SNA) could largely be attributed to the SNA’s incompetence: See Roland Marchal, “The Rise of a Jihadi Movement in a Country at War. Harakat Al-Shabaab Al Mujaheddin in Somalia,” *SciencesPo*, January 3, 2011, 58: “Al-Shabaab first and

foremost is strong because of the weakness of its adversaries.” See Maruf and Joseph, *Inside Al-Shabaab*, 110, 168: “On the eve of battle, [government] forces still amounted to a mishmash of soldiers, police, and militia groups bound together by political expediency,” and they frequently fled during battle “sometimes because they ran out of ammunition, sometimes because they chose to flee rather than fight.” As a result, they were “largely irrelevant” to the battle. Also see Hansen, *Al-Shabaab in Somalia*, 82. Al-Shabaab’s forces were comparatively well trained, more unified, far more committed, and better armed. These advantages enabled them to repeatedly defeat government forces. However, this advantage did not apply to African Union Mission in Somalia forces (predominantly Ugandan), which were better trained and equipped, as al-Shabaab never developed an answer to the Ugandan tanks.

A full analysis of the comparative strengths of the combatants is beyond the scope of this article. For a more comprehensive analysis, see the works of Paul D. Williams, specifically, “Building the Somali National Army: Anatomy of a Failure, 2008–2018,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 43, no. 3 (2020), 366–391.

⁴⁶ Maruf and Joseph, *Inside Al-Shabaab*.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Hansen, *Al-Shabaab in Somalia*.

⁴⁹ Maruf and Joseph, *Inside Al-Shabaab*, 155.

⁵⁰ Hansen, *Al-Shabaab in Somalia*.

⁵¹ Seth G. Jones, Andrew Liepman, and Nathan Chandler, *Counterterrorism and Counterinsurgency in Somalia: Assessing the Campaign Against Al Shabaab* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2016), available at <https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1539.html>.

⁵² Maruf and Joseph, *Inside Al-Shabaab*; Marchal, “The Rise of a Jihadi.”

⁵³ Marchal, “The Rise of a Jihadi,” 59.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 62–63.

⁵⁵ Hansen, *Al-Shabaab in Somalia*.

⁵⁶ Mohammed Ibrahim Shire, “How Do Leadership Decapitation and Targeting Error Affect Suicide Bombings? The Case of Al-Shabaab,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (June 2020), 1–21.

⁵⁷ Dobos, “Shapeshifters of Somalia,” 950.

⁵⁸ Bryden, *The Reinvention of Al-Shabaab*, 7.

⁵⁹ Hansen, *Al-Shabaab in Somalia*, 71.

⁶⁰ Maruf and Joseph, *Inside Al-Shabaab*, 176–177.

⁶¹ Ken Menkhaus, *Elite Bargain and Political Deals Project: Somalia Case Study* (London: Stabilisation Unit, February 2018), 8.

⁶² Maruf and Joseph, *Inside Al-Shabaab*, 245.

⁶³ Somalia is not the only context in which insurgent groups have faced (and had to overcome) these barriers. Other examples include the Liberation Tamil Tigers of Eelam

(LTTE) in Sri Lanka, whose ultimate defeat in 2009 can be (partially) attributed to their victories, which gave them a history of success and vast resources (accrued from 2002 to 2006, when they effectively ran a semi-independent Tamil state in northern Sri Lanka). These victories led them to shift from a strategy that emphasized insurgency to one of conventional, large-scale battles, and made the LTTE reluctant to revert to insurgency in the face of a renewed and overwhelming offensive by the Sri Lankan government (2006–2009). Similarly, the Chinese Communist Party faced a similar set of challenges adapting to overwhelming government offensives in 1933–1934, when they were crushed in the Fifth Encirclement Campaign and subsequently needed to revert to insurgency. The author thanks peer reviewers for helpfully suggesting these additional examples.

⁶⁴ Rod Korba, “The Dilemma of Defense Innovation and Adaptation (Part II),” *Small Wars Journal*, November 25, 2016.

⁶⁵ However, it should be noted that while decentralization likely increases *strategic flexibility*, it can also be accompanied by other challenges, including infighting, particularly at critical junctures.

⁶⁶ Hansen, *Al-Shabaab in Somalia*, 102.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 101.

⁶⁹ Bryden, *The Reinvention of Al-Shabaab*.

⁷⁰ Hansen, *Al-Shabaab in Somalia*, 101.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 100–101; Maruf and Joseph, *Inside Al-Shabaab*, also report that Robow “counseled caution” (154).

⁷² Maruf and Joseph, *Inside Al-Shabaab*.

⁷³ Hansen, *Al Shabaab in Somalia*, 103.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ Bryden, *The Reinvention of Al-Shabaab*, 3.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ Maruf and Joseph, *Inside Al-Shabaab*.

⁷⁸ Some argue such opposition is not inevitable and there are methods that Godane could have used to suppress or subvert this opposition. This is undoubtedly true; moments of change do not automatically result in uprisings against leaders. However, the lack of inevitability does not mean that such moments do not present heightened risk of opposition to leadership, which is sufficient to discourage leaders from taking such a risk and changing strategies.

⁷⁹ Shultz, “The Irreducible Minimum,” 105.