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Review: Harun Maruf and Dan Joseph: Inside Al-Shabaab - The Secret History of Al-Qaeda's Most Powerful Ally (2018)

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Book Reviews

Maruf, Harun, and Dan Joseph (2018), *Inside Al-Shabaab. The Secret History of Al-Qaeda's Most Powerful Ally*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, ISBN 978-0253037497 (paperback), xiii+323 pages

Harun Maruf and Dan Joseph provide an insightful account of Al-Shabaab, the extremist organisation fighting in Somalia and conducting terror attacks both there and beyond, in the Horn of Africa. The authors embed the group's history into the larger one of political Islam in Somalia and beyond. They also clearly show Al-Shabaab's relevance within the global jihadist scene.

In its 17 chapters plus a prologue, the book by Maruf and Joseph outlines the emergence of Al-Shabaab. One thread of narration is based on the year-by-year historical developments occurring in Somalia. While chapters 1 and 2 set the stage and provide the background history to Somalia's path into (civil) war and the coming to the fore of Islamist actors in the country (in the 1990s and early years of the new century), chapters 3 to 16 focus, meanwhile, on relevant events between 2006 and 2017 in their respective contexts. This provides the reader with an elaborate chronology. The other thread of narration runs parallel to this, and develops individual life stories. It starts with the prologue, "Birth of a militant," which introduces a young man, Dalha Ali, whose pathway into Al-Shabaab is followed throughout the book. His (short) life provides a deeper understanding of the forces at work leading many ordinary young men into war. Later chapters present the biographies of important and well-known Islamist actors, such as Ibrahim Al Afghani, Ahmed Abdi Godane, and Mukhtar Robow, who – often after education and/or training in Pakistan and/or Afghanistan – turn up as leaders of Al-Shabaab.

Omar Hammami, aka Al-Amriki, a United States citizen of Syrian-American origin, is featured as representative of the foreign fighters who at one point played a major role in Al-Shabaab. Other key members of the group, such as Mahad Karate, Sheikh Hassan Dahir Aweys, or the current emir, Ahmed Diriye, aka Abu Ubaidah, are characterised in terms of their political positions. Throughout the book as a whole, grand history and personal life stories are interwoven. One remarkable outcome from this means of presentation is that it shows how the phenomenon of Al-Shabaab is grounded, and shapes many lives, in Somalia and beyond (also in the diaspora). It makes it also difficult to single out indi-

vidual chapters for exclusive discussion. They all belong together, and provide a larger (complex) narrative. The last chapter (17) is a concluding discussion. It hints at structural factors influencing the warring in Somalia. Particularly the references to and citations of the Somalia expert Roland Marchal, a Frenchman, provide much helpful analytical clarification.

There are a number of strengths to the book. First, the authors succeed in showing the diversity within the hardcore Islamist scene in Somalia. They also help us to understand the puzzle of why Al-Shabaab remained a powerful force for over a decade, even despite: massive internal divisions and partly bloody in-fighting between its leading personal; the power of clannism being at work in Somali society, which militates against overarching solidarity in the name of religion; and, of course, significant external military challenges as posed mainly by AMISOM and also Somali government forces and, increasingly, US special operations including drone strikes too. Al-Shabaab is portrayed as a resilient group that functions in complex ways, which is not in line with the clichéd image sometimes drawn about Islamist extremist groups in general as manned by brainwashed, death-loving "zombies."

Second, the text is extremely well written and understandable also for non-specialist readers. Third, and what really distinguishes this book from most other texts on Al-Shabaab, is that it draws on many original (written and oral) sources in Somali and partly in Arabic, which are accessible to Maruf as the lead author – who is Somali and a seasoned journalist working for Voice of America Somali Service, with a good reputation on the ground. Over the years he has interviewed a number of key Al-Shabaab actors, and thus got closer to them than most other people researching militant Islamism in Somalia ever have.

What is missing from the book, however, is female voices. It would have been good to hear from more ordinary Somali women, but also the wives and mothers, as well as sisters, of fighters. There are also prominent female politicians in the Somali government such as Maryam Qaasim or Fowsia Yusuf Haji Aden, who were members of parliament and government ministers during the height of Al-Shabaab's struggle for control of the capital (2009–2010) – as well as immediately after its withdrawal in mid-2011, too. Their voices, contrary to those of the numerous men who are heard, remain absent from the book. Another point of criticism is that the book focuses in-depth on Al-Shabaab but only marginally touches on the structural conditions that have provided the framework for the emergence and indeed continued importance of militant extremism in Somalia: military interventions, top-down and externally driven "state-building," as well as violent counterterrorism

measures that often have little legitimacy in the eyes of many Somalis. A more analytical debate at the beginning, also referring to the relevant existing secondary literature (which is largely absent from the text), would have given the book more academic weight.

As it stands, the book by Maruf and Joseph is a very readable, extremely informative, and in passages thrilling account that provides in part previously unknown details for Somalia specialists, as well as a basis for reflection and comparison for (counter)terrorism experts. The book is, then, strongly recommended for current thinking both about and beyond the Somali setting.

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