# Al-Shabaab and Humanitarianism in Somalia:
## Lessons Learned

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## Abstract

*Humanitarian response to the ongoing complex emergency in Somalia is being further complicated by the actions of the terrorist group Al-Shabaab. In order to circumvent these cyclical effects, aid organizations must learn to reevaluate the humanitarian space in which they operate. This process includes understanding the dynamics of the humanitarian regime and imperative as defined through a new-neutral context of humanitarian space.*

**(Keywords: Al-Shabaab, humanitarian space, Somalia, neutrality)**

**Overview:**

Amidst the drought and famine that has recently hit the people of Somalia, humanitarian efforts are being further complicated by the terrorist group Al-Shabaab, which came into prominence as an Islamic fundamentalist organization in 2007 (Dagne 6). After struggling to gain momentum in the first few years of its existence, Al-Shabaab has emerged as a presence powerful enough to inflict major impacts on aid organizations attempting to address the humanitarian issues that have surfaced as a result of the extreme weather conditions. Such organizations attempting to operate in Somalia are being confronted with the uncomfortable dilemma of how to function in such a politically stigmatized environment. The unfortunate irony of this conundrum is that these organizations, all of which exist based on the most fundamental principle of alleviating suffering, are finding that they must prioritize their own capacity to function and operate over the well being of the very people they are trying to help. To this effect, such organizations must make strategic decisions regarding issues of neutrality infringement that have serious implications on the imperative to help the helpless and the regime through which this may successfully be executed. The way forward in Somalia, therefore, is a matter of understanding the politicized nature of Al-Shabaab in the context of a neo-neutral humanitarian space, and adapting the regime and imperative dynamics accordingly.

**The Background of Al-Shabaab:**

As is indicative of most terrorist groups, Al-Shabaab came into prominence because of the organization's collective ability to rule by fear. The group is actually a compilation of several rogue organizations that merged over the years, with links to Al Qaeda and a name loosely translated to mean "the youth" (Dagne 6; Abild 79). Al-Shabaab claims that their primary objective is "irredentism and to establish a 'Greater Somalia'" by means of enforcing

1

Islamic fundamentalism (Dagne 6). However, since February of 2008 when Al-Shabaab was officially designated as a Foreign Terrorist Organization by then-Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, the group has pulled off dozens of violent stunts, including suicide bombings, the murdering of local police and refugee camp workers, and other extremist actions such as soliciting child soldiers and executing their own injured "subordinates as well as those they deem guilty of insubordination" (Dagne 1; Mugisha 30). Such extremist acts are, by design, impossible to ignore, leaving aid organizations operating in Somalia forced to evaluate and define the boundaries in which they operate. These "boundaries" are not geographically limited, but rather transcend the three dimensional spectrum by theoretically assessing an idealized notion of humanitarian function while simultaneously addressing the reality of what such aid organizations are realistically capable of achieving; this all-encompassing concept is referred to as the 'humanitarian space' (Abild 81).

**Humanitarian Space Issues:**

The features that compose a given organization's humanitarian space are inconsistently defined and largely dependent upon the intricate dynamics of the respective crisis (Abild 69-71). In the context of the Somali complex emergency, issues of neutrality are of primary concern due to the fact that the influence of Al-Shabaab is making relief efforts impossible to exclusively mitigate those consequences that are a direct result of the famine. The most obvious example of this is Al-Shabaab's blatant "refusal to allow international humanitarian aid agencies access to the population" for the purposes of addressing basic life necessities related to the famine (Mugisha 30). The primary ramification of such actions that interrupt the distribution of aid continuity is the prevention of the respective organization's ability to continue operations in a neutral capacity within the context of humanitarian space. This is experienced through two

primary methods: firstly, the disabling of the regime, or logistic and structural framework in which such organizations carry out day to day operations, and, secondly, in doing so, the devaluation of the fundamental imperative of the humanitarian orthodoxy; the mandate or obligation to sustain, preserve, and uphold aid operations among and simultaneously unaffected by political, economic, and social forces unrelated to the natural disaster. Therefore, the sustainability of neutrally identified aid organizations in Somalia constitutes a reevaluation of the operational regime and humanitarian imperative within the realm of humanitarian space.

Al-Shabaab has employed two primary actions to square off this issue of maintaining the integrity of the humanitarian imperative and regime within operations of neutrality: violent acts directed at NGO internal personnel used as scare tactics to manipulate and control aid organizations, and interrupting the supply pipeline by means of aid misappropriation. One high profile example of the former manipulation tactic is the killing of two Medecins Sans Frontiers (MSF) employees in December of 2011, which subsequently led to the organization's decision to close its largest medical facility in Mogadishu (MSF Closes… 1). The latter method may be demonstrated through the International Committee of the Red Cross's (ICRC) decision to temporarily suspend food distribution intended for approximately 1.1 million people until the organization receives "assurances from the authorities…that distributions can take place unimpeded and reach all those in need, as previously agreed" (Somalia: ICRC Temporarily… 1). The internal personnel security breaches threatens the notion of the humanitarian imperative, or the obligation to serve the needs of the public at any cost within the realm of humanitarian space; the supply pipeline interruption is a means to fundamentally alter the operational regime of neutrality through which the imperative is structured.

**The Foundations of Terrorism:**

Ideally, all aspects of imperative and regime will exist in a neutrally functioning capacity within the humanitarian space, unencumbered by threatening outside forces. However, in the longstanding complex emergency of Somalia, such capacities may actually contribute to Al-Shabaab's staying power. Al-Shabaab is neither the first nor the last terrorist group to garner power by capitalizing on the handicapped nature of the Somali population, but for the immediate time being they are the group that has been the most infamously successful. Consequently, personifications of neutral imperative and regime actions may function as an enabler to the terrorist group rather than as an independent third party entity. This argument is based on the notion that "the key political strategy of the past 20 years has been anchored on [the] flawed assumption [that] the cause of the Somali political disaster has been due to the neglect of clan identity in political affairs of the country" (Samatar 1). "However, this strategy continues to destabilize the country…[by] transform[ing…] minor cultural differences within communities and among Somalis into major political rifts,…and…because of such division,…encourage[ing] endless retailing of identity" (Samatar 1).

These incidents of retailing identity lead to the formation of rogue organizations, which subsequently "demands political representation[, while emphasizing]…concerting divisions among the population, enabling pirates and terrorists, and encouraging corrupt officials to flourish – at the cost of the wellbeing of the population and the genuine investment of the international community" (Samatar 1). Perhaps a better response to this longstanding trend of "dysfunctionality of the political formula," which lends itself to the formation of such terrorist groups, is for those humanitarian organizations who have the muscle capacity, in regards to regime and imperative, to exercise any power and authority they may have in a given situation to take strategic and proactive action to discourage the continuation of such incessant and

4

reoccurring rouge uprisings (Samatar 1); to proverbially put the belligerent child in time-out,

rather than looking the other way in the name of neutrality, until the child grows up to become

Al-Shabaab, the neighborhood bully.

**Pragmatic Humanitarianism:**

This notion requires a radical reorganization of the ideological and foundational

framework on which humanitarian assistance is based: the concept of neo-neutrality. Taken in

the "humanitarian space vacuum," neo-neutrality refers to a humanitarian's liberty to "work

freely in a given set of circumstances… [by] defining a limited relationship outside conflict that

permits the pursuit of another interest" (Bornstein 62). As applied to the context of the regime,

neo-neutrality seeks to introduce the notion of pragmatic humanitarianism in which actualities,

or the practicalities of "staying in business," take precedence over the ideal of maintaining a

purely neutral presence. This framework introduces several new factors into the consideration of

humanitarian space as a generalized idea. As pertaining to the complex emergency in Somalia,

issues of security are of paramount importance. Al-Shabaab is most obviously maintaining its

tyrannical control by manipulating humanitarian "aid resources to regroup [, thus] relaunch[ing]

their struggle [for power]. Furthermore, the manipulation of aid – using it to curry political favor

or for economic gain – [is helping to] solidify the status quo" of the terrorist group (Hoffman

14).

**Military Collaboration:**

Consequently, broaching the subject of military coordination within the humanitarian

space regime is now a necessary requirement for the purposes of navigating through logistics

complicated by Al-Shabaab actions. The employment of national security forces in Somalia,

such as the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) and AMISOM (the African Union Mission

in Somalia), address this relationship (Mugisha 27). AMISOM is designed as a peacekeeping force that was created to "pave the way for a proper UN mission" as a supplement to the internationally recognized TFG (Mugisha 26, 27). The most advantageous aspect of AMISOM is that its "military operations have increasingly adopted a humanitarian component. The TFG and AMISOM gains in Mogadishu have created a safe haven for thousands of Somalis…Life, business, and the economy in these areas are slowly improving [as] AMISOM forces provide security, clean water and medical facilities" (Mugisha 32).

This military collaboration both sustains the neo-neutral humanitarian regime in Somalia and threatens its very existence. The relationship is a double edged sword due to the fact that the military presence can provide a physical and literal security component of humanitarian space such that, under the discipline of neo-neutrality, aid organizations are not forced to abort all operations in order to avoid a situation similar to that in which MSF and ICRC found themselves; conversely, military enterprises such as AMISOM, which not only carry out security operations, but also have their collective hands in the distribution of supplies and other humanitarian chores may very well consider international NGOs and other such organizations as expendable, and for good reason. In this sense, the humanitarian regime is "knocked off its high pedestal" as an untouchable entity carrying out an elite mission, and must realize the need and value of cooperation and "playing nice with other-entities-capable-of-similar-logistics." Therefore, in the spirit of neo-neutrality, humanitarian organizations operating in Somalia must learn to be adaptable to and utilize the military and other security resources available to them for their own regime benefit, as well as for the promotion of the highest quality of aid that can be offered to civilians.

**Proactive Humanitarianism:**

This harkens back to the notion of pragmatic humanitarianism but can be taken a step further by introducing a new component: taking a proactive role to discourage the continuation of the terrorist group cycle formation rather than dealing only with the cycle's ramifications.  To clarify, this does not mean advocating for all humanitarian aid organizations to become militarized, but rather to have them become active participants by aiding military interventions through such measures as disclosing any relevant security information of which a given international NGO may be privy to the appropriate military channels, or cooperating with military protocols to respond to high security alerts.  In this way, international humanitarian organizations must become "neo-neutralized."  The complex emergency in Somalia will not end with the drought, and refusing to acknowledge this and incorporate necessary security measures into the humanitarian regime space in order to address the politicized environment will only reinforce Al-Shabaab's presence and undermine the integrity of such international NGOs and other humanitarian organizations.

If the reformation of the humanitarian regime encompasses the rewriting of policy, rerouting of protocol, and the rethinking of procedure, then the revolution of the humanitarian imperative is the ideological reevaluation of these notions.  This calls for a quantum shift in the way that humanitarian workers, as well as the general public, understand humanitarian space and perceive complex emergencies.  This has primarily been brought about due to the fact that "there has been an increase in the use of UN organizations and NGOs as the primary providers of relief to meet the increased requirements for emergency relief.  Simply put, there are more relief workers to be threatened in more dangerous situations" (Dombrowski 157).  "What can be derived from this [sentiment] is that humanitarian space and how it is perceived" by the general public is largely the byproduct of "discursive power [, that is, when] agencies are able to use the

concept of humanitarian space to construct the situation as they want to see it" (Abild 100). "By characterizing the humanitarian space solely as an operating environment for humanitarian agencies, it is these agencies themselves who end up controlling the understanding of this space. Agencies often hold information relating to a given situation, they suggest how it should be solved, they do the actual operations, and they evaluate them" (Abild 73). Therefore, "by treating humanitarian space as an exogenous variable over which they have no control,… agencies construct it as a constraining factor and a defense of the status quo," rather than a controllable situation that can be acted upon and changed for the better (Abild 100).

This is not to suggest that the cultural context in which humanitarian space operates is a "problem" needing to be "fixed." However, as indicative of most complex emergencies such as that in Somalia, the byproduct of politicized actors like Al-Shabaab do create fundamental societal problems, such as food pipeline interruptions that leads to widespread malnutrition which affects the long-term neurological development in children, which do, to put bluntly, need to be fixed. Once the humanitarian enterprise wraps its collective head around this notion, then the humanitarian imperative will take a giant step into the multi dimensional reality that is neo-neutral humanitarian space. The articulation of this "neo-imperative" is that "post-Cold War crises are no longer simple affairs of single cause or single response. The political, military, human rights, and humanitarian dimensions, as well as the economic development implications, now all come together like an accordion" and need to be handled accordingly (Dombrowski 158).

**The Responsibility of Humanitarian Organizations:**

Although this "handling" must begin with humanitarians on the ground, the era of globalized information has transformed the essence of the imperative from a "call to act" to an

undeniable and fundamental responsibility that needs to be acknowledged by the general public. Such responsibility is most obviously played out by means of donor-driven versus issue-driven funding. Within the current "information era," international NGOs must act as their own secretary, vying for the media attention necessary to support their operations in crisis areas that do not always attract adequate publicity or suffer from the consequences of inaccurate or unreliable information being reported. "This illustrates the point that many conflicts over aid are not necessarily over the aid given to people in need, but how aid is being delivered and who benefits from the process" (Abild 87). "The inability of aid agencies to provide firm assurances against the risk of misappropriation of aid has been particularly problematic in south-central Somalia, [due to] fears that Al-Shabaab was benefiting from the influx of humanitarian assistance, particularly food aid," which consequently lead to the suspension of $50 million in humanitarian aid by the Office of Foreign Assets Control in 2009, as well as UN sanctions in April 2010 (Pantuliano 7). "Whilst humanitarian action intends to save lives and relieve human suffering, and not support terrorism, the manner in which 'support' to terrorism has been interpreted directly impacts upon the work of humanitarian organizations" (Pantuliano 5). For example, "under the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA) of 1977, the President may block resources to designated entities in wartime or if a national emergency is declared 'to deal with any unusual and extraordinary threat, which has its source in whole or substantial part outside the United States, to the national security, foreign policy, or economy of the United States'" (Pantuliano 3).

When applied to the current context of the "war on terror," this "extraordinary threat" has now become a globalized, omnipotent, and ubiquitous force capable of reducing the entire humanitarian enterprise to a moot point. However, humanitarian assistance is anything but, and

the humanitarian imperative is the counter-force that must now become the norm; if the "war on terror" is the new battlefield then the "neo-neutralized humanitarian imperative" is the latest weapon. This weapon is the most powerful of them all due to the fact that it is a weapon of the mind, an ideology that humanitarians and the general public alike must adopt: the notion that individuals living in the day to day realities of complex emergencies, facing extreme poverty and other third world calamities in addition to the stigmas of a politicized environment, did not chose this life for themselves and therefore deserve help to be liberated from such atrocities. When used effectively, this ideological weapon will defend against forces that threaten the sanctity of Somalia's cultural existence. The general public must therefore adopt their own version of neo-neutrality, in which funding and other aid is sent to Somalia with acknowledgement of the probability that at least a portion of that funding or aid will be intercepted by Al-Shabaab. As one Somali citizen declared when responding to the blockading of supplies to a refugee camp due to security concerns, "we cannot eat security; we need something to eat and medical help" (Somalia: ICRC Suspends Aid Deliveries 1). To this extent, the neo-neutral humanitarian imperative obliges humanitarian workers, as well as the rest of the world to do just this: help.

**Conclusion:**

Complex emergencies such as that currently existing in Somalia are sustainable because the politicized forces active in such areas, such as Al-Shabaab, are able to utilize manipulation tactics that are adaptive in nature and are constantly adjusting in order to take advantage of the weak and resource deprived general population. The humanitarian actors with access to certain degrees of control through means of resources should therefore employ their abilities to end this politicized power cycle by not only delivering aid supplies and other services to the general public, but also by exercising their influence to, at the very least, discourage the political status

quo.  This is not to imply that humanitarian actors should all be transformed into politicized aid distributors, however, it is to suggest the notion of silence (or the absence of action) as a means of consent to the behavior of terrorist groups.  Herein lies the concept of the neo-neutral regime and imperative within the realm of humanitarian space.  These concepts require a reframing of humanitarian work on the part of humanitarians themselves, as well as the general public.  They encompass lessons to be learned throughout the duration of Somali's complex emergency and the application of such lessons to achieve a brighter future.

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