



WARGELIN
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The Prisoners of Jihad: Al-Shabaab's Foreign Terrorist Fighters

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Executive Summary

- Al-Shabaab's foreign terrorist fighters (FTF) remain operationally useful but have lost most of the collective influence, autonomy, and protection they possessed during the group's early years. They are still present across the organization, including Jabha, Amniyat, finance, Da'wa, education, training, and advisory roles.

- The value of FTF as fighters and specialists has not translated into equal institutional standing. Their current position is defined by dependence on Somali-controlled departments, restricted movement, weak access to welfare, and limited ability to defend their interests inside the organization.

- This deterioration developed over many years. The death of influential foreign leaders, former leader Ahmed Godane's consolidation of authority, the killing of internal rivals, the changing composition of the FTF community, and the later on ISIS-Somalia challenge weakened their position. Under the current leader Ahmed Diriye, the separate structures led by FTF were dismantled. Foreign fighters were integrated into ordinary departmental chains of command, their financial affairs placed under the finance department, and their movement became subject to strict authorization. The group preserved their

labor and expertise while removing the institutional space through which they could seem as indispensable.

- FTF community inside al-Shabaab is large but significantly weak. Current estimates stand at approximately 1,600 - 2,000 members, in addition to their families. About 99% percent are East African, with Ethiopians forming the largest group, followed by Kenyans and Tanzanians. Only a small fraction come from countries outside East Africa. This composition is important because the newer community does not possess the same religious prestige, international networks, financial resources, or strategic influence associated with the earlier non-East African generation of foreign jihadists.

- The central argument of this report is that many FTF have become prisoners of the jihad they joined. Their loyalty is questioned, their movement is controlled, their families depend on the organization, and quitting the jihad carries severe personal and security risks. Their frustration is real, but it should not be mistaken for organized opposition. Internal divisions, mutual suspicion, fear of punishment, and the absence of independent leadership prevent common action. They remain capable of fighting for al-Shabaab even while feeling abandoned. This contradiction is the defining feature of their current FTF condition.

Introduction

In March 2023, Ahmed Iman Ali, aka Abu Sinira, appeared in the middle of Jilib market selling watermelon and juice from a small wheelbarrow booth. Iman was not an ordinary community member. He is a senior Kenyan foreign terrorist fighter, head of the Mujahirin¹ dawah², and an important figure in al-shabaab propaganda machinery. His presence at the stand for two consecutive days immediately attracted attention. Senior al-shabaab members holding religious and propaganda positions do not normally undertake such activity in public, especially in Jilib, where organizational behavior is closely observed.

Most of those who purchased watermelon and juice were other foreign fighters. Among them was Salman al-Muhajir, aka Moallim Salman, a Kenyan and the head of the group's FTF Department, who visited deliberately to support Iman and demonstrate solidarity. The activity was not a commercial venture intended to generate meaningful income. It was a symbolic protest designed to make visible the financial hardship and neglect that foreign fighters believed the organization had ignored. Because the protest used an ordinary market activity, it carried a message without openly confronting the leadership.

The incident began with a debt of USD 600. Approximately nine months earlier, Iman had approached Salman seeking help to repay money borrowed from local businesses in Jilib to meet his family's basic needs. Salman repeatedly promised assistance, but the money did not arrive. Both men eventually concluded that the finance department had little interest in resolving the hardship, despite Iman's rank, long service, and organizational importance. That small activity transformed a private grievance into a public embarrassment, a senior religious figure associated with the jihad was seen selling fruit to pay a family debt.

The following day, Iman was summoned to the group's administration office and questioned for several hours. He was accused of encouraging mutiny, shaming the organization, spreading harmful propaganda against the image of the jihad, and damaging morale. The investigation expanded to everyone who had purchased a slice of watermelon or a cup of juice. The group questioned them, including Salman, and accused them of supporting the same act. No arrests followed, but all received warnings and were instructed not to repeat such behavior.

After the interrogations, Iman received

¹Muhajirin: is the term al-shabaab uses to denote foreign terrorist fighters.

²Department in charge of preaching and indoctrination.

the USD 600 required to settle the debt. The group solved the visible problem but left the underlying grievance untouched. The incident exposed the leadership's greater concern with organizational image and discipline than with the welfare problem that produced the protest. It also showed how quickly even a peaceful symbolic act could be treated as a security threat when FTFs are involved.

From Founding Partners to Marginalized Members

The current treatment of foreign fighters is sharply different from their position during the group's early years. Foreign jihadists were seen as partners in the jihad project and members of its founding generation. Many shared ideological orientation, personal networks, and Al-Qaeda affiliation with al-Shabaab's Somali founders. They were not confined to frontline duties. They helped shape strategic direction and participated in important military, religious, technical, propaganda, and organizational activities.

A significant proportion of this early FTF generation came from the Middle East and the wider Arab world, particularly Egypt and Sudan. Smaller numbers arrived from Europe and North America. They brought capabilities the emerging

organization did not yet possess in sufficient depth such as combat experience, religious credentials, technical knowledge, financial resources, external contacts, and familiarity with transnational jihadist networks. These assets gave several foreign figures direct access to senior local group leaders and allowed them to influence decisions beyond the formal positions they held.

Their status rested on both utility and scarcity. al-Shabaab needed the knowledge, connections, and prestige they carried, while local capacity in some specialized fields was still limited. This created space for foreign fighters to retain their own leadership arrangements, manage aspects of their internal affairs, and participate in discussions about the direction of the group. They could act as a community with recognized interests, not simply as individuals assigned to Somali-controlled departments.

That balance changed as the group matured. The organization accumulated experience, trained Somali personnel, and developed internal systems capable of absorbing functions once associated with foreign expertise. Dependence on outsiders gradually decreased. At the same time, the political cost of allowing respected FTF members to maintain

independent networks became more visible to the leadership. Skills still remained valuable, but independent influence became less acceptable.

Therefore, the change was both personal and structural. FTF members moved from a position in which their expertise created bargaining power to one in which the organization could separate their skills from their political standing. The group continued to use them in combat, training, medicine, explosives, propaganda, preaching, and other specialized areas while steadily reducing the collective autonomy through which they could influence policy or provide protection to each other.

This history explains the depth of present resentment. Many foreign fighters now understand that their community was once treated as an essential component of the jihad project. The contrast between the prestige of the establishment period and current daily treatment produces a sense of betrayal that cannot be explained by salaries alone. Their complaint is that the organization accepted their sacrifice, knowledge, and families, then marginalized them after

their independent value and political influence declined.

The Decline of Foreign Fighter Influence

The decline of foreign terrorist fighter accelerated under the group's previous leader Ahmed Godane. Several influential foreign jihadists possessed their own reputations, relationships, and visions for the group. Godane increasingly viewed such figures with suspicion and considered independent centers of authority a threat to his effort to centralize control. The issue was not opposition by all foreign fighters. It was the possibility that respected foreign and Somali figures could form a rival political and ideological bloc beyond the leader's direct control.

The deaths of senior foreign leaders, including Fazul Abdullah Mohammed and Bilal al-Berjawi removed figures who had carried influence, expertise, and international standing. Their loss weakened the ability of the foreign fighter community to participate in high-level affairs. Leadership consolidation then turned this gradual decline into a deliberate confrontation. The June 2013 opera-

³The leader of al-Qaeda's operations in East Africa was shot and killed in June 2011, after accidentally driving into a Somali government military checkpoint on the outskirts of Mogadishu

⁴The British-Lebanese al-Shabaab commander, who served as a high-ranking militant under Fazul Mohamed, was killed in January 2012 in a U.S. drone strike targeting his vehicle outside of Mogadishu

⁵Ibrahim Afghani and Moallim Burhan were shot dead by al-shabaab's assassination executing Godane's direct orders after a period of grievances. For more info see: Inside al-Shabaab (Maruf and Joseph)

tion against senior opponents, including Ibrahim al-Afghani and Sheikh Moalin Burhan, demonstrated that prestige from the founding period would not protect those seen as challenging Godane's authority.

The killing of Omar Hammami, aka Abu Mansoor al-Amriki, in September 2013 reinforced the message. The US citizen Hammami was one of the most visible foreign fighters in the group. His death showed that international profile, propaganda value, and foreign identity did not provide protection when leadership loyalty was questioned. It also discouraged other foreign fighters from treating public reputation or external connections as a source of independent power.

In late 2013, Godane replaced Jehan Sarwan Mostafa, aka Ahmed Guray (US citizen), with Salman al-Muhajir as head of the foreign fighter community. Salman came from a newer East African foreign fighter generation whose authority was more limited and more closely dependent on the Somali leadership. The replacement reflected a wider shift. al-Shabaab no longer wanted the foreign fighter portfolio to be led by a figure with extensive independent jihadist networks who could possess the ability to bargain with the central leadership.

The changing composition of recruit-

ment supported this outcome. Middle Eastern and Arab numbers declined while East African recruitment increased. Many newer East African fighters entered frontline roles without the religious authority, combat history, money, international contacts, or leadership standing held by some earlier arrivals. Their numbers increased, but their collective political weight decreased. A larger foreign fighter population did not create stronger representation.

The group also invested in Somali capacity in fields where foreign specialists had once been difficult to replace. This was a long-term insurance policy against dependence on FTF. By transferring knowledge and building local expertise, the leadership reduced the risk that foreign personnel could withhold critical capabilities or use technical scarcity to demand influence. Foreign fighters remained useful, but usefulness became a function assigned by the organization, not a foundation for collective autonomy.

The ISIS-Somalia Challenge and the Crisis of Trust

The emergence of ISIS Somalia in 2015, produced the decisive crisis between al-Shabaab and its foreign fighter community. ISIS-Somalia created an alternative center of jihadist allegiance and

offered dissatisfied members a different pathway. Some foreign fighters encouraged support for it. Few numbers have succeeded in defecting to the new jihadist group, while others were arrested, imprisoned, or killed during an anti-ISIS campaign. The arrested numbers ranged between 200 – 400. These events changed the group's understanding of FTF from a community requiring management into a potential internal threat.

The concern was broader than actual defection. The group leadership increasingly treated foreign identity, transnational connections, and dissatisfaction as indicators of possible vulnerability. Foreign fighters were considered more open to ISIS-Somalia recruitment, foreign intelligence penetration, or involvement in internal dissent. This suspicion affected members who had not supported ISIS-Somalia. Loyalty was judged through the behavior of the community as a whole, and uncertainty became sufficient grounds for tighter monitoring.

The anti-ISIS campaign also exposed how little protection foreign fighters possessed once accused. Without representation in the judiciary or the Nuqaba council, they lacked trusted institutional channels through which to challenge

allegations, accelerate cases, or mobilize respected intermediaries. A local member may draw on clan elders, family networks, or influential local figures to deal in such occasions. A foreign fighter, especially one without strong Somali family connections, has far fewer options. Espionage accusations therefore create a condition of near-total dependence on the same apparatus conducting the investigation.

This environment encouraged silence and self-policing. Foreign fighters learned that private frustration could be interpreted as ideological disloyalty, sympathy for ISIS-Somalia, or preparation to defect. Members also accused one another of spying for their countries of origin. Mutual suspicion developed between nationalities and within individual national groups. The leadership benefited from these divisions because a community consumed by internal mistrust is less able to organize around common grievances.

The crisis of trust did not lead al-Shabaab to remove foreign fighters. The organization still needed their manpower and, in some cases, their technical or religious capabilities. The response was to retain individuals while dissolving the political meaning of the

⁶Nuqaba is the council of elders in which each elder represents a specific tribe or clan.

community. Foreign fighters would remain inside the group, but under stronger surveillance, dispersed chains of command, restricted movement, and financial dependence.

The Dissolution of Foreign Fighter Autonomy

In 2017, after the anti-ISIS purge, Ahmed Diiriye, the group's current leader, implemented measures that effectively ended the remaining autonomy of FTF members. The objective was not their expulsion. It was to remove their separate institutional identity, prevent independent mobilization, and place every member under the ordinary authority of Somali-controlled departments.

The leadership chain was changed first. Salman al-Muhajir had previously reported directly to Diiriye. He now reports to the group's Deputy leader Abukar Ali Adan, reducing his direct access to the leader and lowering the political standing of his office. Foreign fighter salaries and other financial affairs were formally integrated into al-Shabaab's finance department. Foreign fighters continued to handle limited administrative elements of salary distribution where technical arrangements required their involvement, but authority

over money rested with the finance department. Welfare support and additional assistance were cut or significantly reduced.

The separate command arrangements of foreign fighters were then dissolved. They no longer operated as a distinct force alongside the broader military structure. Combatants were dispersed across Jabha⁷, and placed under local commanders. They could be assigned to units in any operational area, inside or outside Somalia. Members working in Dawah, helath, finance, training, media, explosives, intelligence, and other specialties were absorbed into their corresponding departments led by locals.

Integration did not formally prohibit FTF members from holding leadership positions. Qualified individuals could still become commanders, trainers, officials, religious figures, advisers, or technical specialists. Yet, their authority came from the department and remained dependent on the central leadership. They no longer exercised power through an autonomous foreign fighter structure capable of defending the interests of the wider community.

In 2020, Diiriye added strict movement controls. Foreign fighters not deployed

⁷Jabha is the group's military structure.

⁸Local towns in Middle Jubba region of Southern Somalia.

⁹The group's office in charge of espionage

to frontline areas were required to live in Jilib, Saakow, or Bu'aale⁸. Leaving those locations without authorization exposed them to severe punishment. Public transport operators were prohibited from carrying foreign fighters who lacked written permission. Checkpoints, security personnel, and local administrators were instructed to enforce the restrictions.

These measures created what could seem a trap. Foreign fighters are spread during operations but concentrated geographically when not deployed. Their salaries, movement, security status, and access to assistance are controlled by departments they do not lead. The leadership could use their skills while preventing them from building an alternative network. The reforms completed the transition from semi-autonomous partners to supervised personnel.

The Current Foreign Fighter Community

Current first-hand estimates place the number of AS foreign fighters between 1,600 and 2,000, including their families. Approximately 99% are from East Africa. Ethiopians form the largest national group, followed by Kenyans and Tanzanians. The remaining non-East African population is estimated at only 30-50

individuals from countries including the United States, France, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Egypt, Morocco, Algeria, the United Kingdom, Nigeria, Sudan, and Ivory Coast.

Foreign fighters are concentrated in Jabha, but they are distributed throughout the organization. They have representatives or personnel in the Shura, Finance, Amniyat⁹, Dawah, Education and training. They also hold advisory functions connected to the group leader Ahmed Diiriye. This presence shows that marginalization does not mean organizational irrelevance. al-Shabaab continues to draw on their manpower, language abilities, religious knowledge, technical skills, and experience.

Their representation is also defined by important absences. Foreign fighters have no representation in the judiciary, regional administrations, or the Nuqaba council. These are not minor omissions. Courts decide disputes and security cases; regional administrations control daily life in the group's-controlled territories, and Nuqaba provide clan-based access, mediation, and protection. Exclusion from these three structures leave FTF members without institutional influence over many decisions that directly affect their lives.

⁸Local towns in Middle Jubba region of Southern Somalia.

⁹The group's office in charge of espionage

The absence of judicial representation makes FTF members vulnerable to abuse and prolonged cases. They cannot rely on judges who understand or prioritize their concerns, and they possess limited leverage when a case is delayed. The absence of Nuqaba representation is equally damaging because the council is rooted in Somali clan structures. Foreign fighters cannot easily use elders to negotiate, seek redress, or protect a member facing accusations. Even long-serving individuals remain outsiders in systems where clan identity shapes access and protection.

This combination creates a clear distinction between functional presence and political power. A foreign fighter may command men in a unit, train recruits, advise a leader, or perform a sensitive technical role. That position does not necessarily protect his family, secure financial assistance, guarantee fair treatment, or provide influence over decisions concerning them. Individual rank is conditional; collective protection is almost non-existent.

The community is therefore large enough to matter operationally but too divided and exposed to act as a unified block. The group has achieved a con-

trolled integration in which foreign fighters are present everywhere they are useful and absent from the structures that could allow them to convert that usefulness into durable political influence.

Prisoners of Jihad

According to former foreign fighters interviewed for this report, daily life of many FTF members is marked by racism, restricted movement, inadequate welfare, and unequal treatment. Verbal abuse and insulting names are common. Foreign fighters may be prevented from marrying Somali women, and their injured members may receive less care or medical support. In physical work, they are frequently used for the heaviest tasks, including transporting heavy loads, digging trenches, and carrying wounded or dead fighters over long distances.

Refusal or exhaustion can bring violence. Foreign fighters may be tortured or killed by Somali members without meaningful consequences. This treatment has created conditions described by former foreign fighters as resembling slavery. The description reflects more than difficult military life. It refers to the combination of compelled labor, weak protection, movement controls, depen-

dence on the organization, and the absence of realistic mechanisms for redress.

Family responsibility deepens the trap. Many foreign fighters have wives and children living in areas controlled by al-Shabaab. A member who attempts to leave must consider not only his own escape but the safety and future of his family. Financial weakness makes departure more difficult. The same organization that neglects the FTF members still controls the territory, authorization, transport, and security environment on which these families depend.

The foreign fighter community's deep internal divisions prevent shared suffering from developing into collective action because everybody hates everybody, and hostility is equally entrenched within each national contingent. Non-East African fighters often hate and distance themselves from all East African contingents, viewing them as clanish and unreliable. These mutual hatreds are reinforced by constant accusations that members are spying for their countries of origin or acting on behalf of external intelligence services. In al-Shabaab's highly securitized environment, where surveillance is perva-

sive and suspicions of links to ISIS are treated as grave security threats, such accusations can carry fatal consequences.

These divisions serve the group's control even when the leadership did not create every grievance. Foreign fighters who distrust one another are unlikely to organize around welfare, legal protection, or movement rights. They may seek individual favor from Somali commanders or demonstrate extreme loyalty by spying on others. Survival becomes personal, not collective. The leadership faces complaints from isolated individuals instead of a coordinated constituency.

This is why dissatisfaction should not be confused with disengagement. A fighter may hate his treatment and still remain operationally committed, fearful of defection, ideologically attached, or unable to move his family. Others may continue fighting because they have no trusted destination outside the group. They are prisoners in a system sustained by coercion, vulnerability and mutual suspicion.

Conclusion

The deteriorating condition of

al-Shabaab's foreign fighters is not simply the result of discrimination, poor welfare, or organizational neglect. It reflects a deliberate restructuring of power that transformed foreign fighters from influential partners in the jihad into tightly controlled and institutionally dependent personnel. During the organization's formative years, foreign fighters contributed military experience, religious legitimacy, technical expertise, international connections, and access to wider jihadist networks. Many possessed influence that extended beyond their formal positions because AS depended on capabilities that the organization itself had not yet developed.

As the organization matured, however, this relationship fundamentally changed. AS gradually built indigenous Somali expertise, centralized decision-making, dismantled independent foreign fighter structures, absorbed them into Somali-controlled departments, and restricted their movement, finances, and institutional autonomy. The leadership succeeded in separating foreign fighters' operational usefulness from their political influence. Today they

remain present throughout Jabha, Amniyat, Da'wa, finance, education, training, explosives, Shura and advisory roles, yet they possess almost no collective ability to defend their interests or influence decisions affecting their community.

Dissatisfaction among foreign fighters should not be interpreted as an emerging internal opposition movement. Their frustration is genuine, but it is fragmented by deep national divisions, mutual hatred, pervasive suspicion, surveillance, and fear of investigation. The community lacks trusted leadership, institutional representation, and the social cohesion necessary to organize collectively. Instead of producing coordinated resistance, shared grievances have produced isolation, competition, and dependence, reinforcing rather than weakening the leadership's control.

The most important finding is the paradox that defines the current situation of FTF community. Operationally, they remain indispensable. Politically, they are marginalized. Individually, many continue to occupy sensitive military, intelligence, religious, and technical positions, yet collectively they have become one of

the weakest constituencies inside the organization. Their expertise continues to serve AS, but the institutional mechanisms that once allowed them to exercise influence, negotiate with the leadership, or protect one another have largely disappeared. The organization has preserved their labor while eliminating their autonomy.

Ultimately, the foreign fighters who once travelled to Somalia believing they were joining a global jihad have become prisoners of the very group they helped build. Many cannot safely defect because their families remain under al-Shabaab control. Others fear accusations of espionage, association with ISISomalia, or retaliation from the organization. Some remain committed ideologically, while others continue fighting simply because they see no realistic path out. Their continued participation therefore should not be interpreted solely as evidence of loyalty. It is increasingly sustained by a combination of ideological commitment, coercion, family dependence, restricted movement, institutional isolation, and the absence of viable alternatives. In transforming foreign fighters from influential partners into controlled and dependent personnel, al-Shabaab has strength-

ened its internal security while creating a community that is operationally valuable, organizationally powerless, and increasingly trapped within the organization it once joined voluntarily.



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