

Al-Shabaab to Hold Online Q&A

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Yesterday, the Somali Islamist militia al-Shabaab announced that it was taking questions from jihadi forum users for an 'open meeting' with its official spokesman, Sheikh Ali Dhere. The group will take questions via email and private forum messages until Saturday, at which point they will be answered by its spokesman in a video.



In a move which suggests a continuation of the burgeoning relationship between the Somali militia and al-Qaeda, the announcement by al-Shabaab's *al-Kataib* Media Foundation was made through the Global Islamic Media Front (GIMF), al-Qaeda's main jihadi media centre.

This type of online question and answer session has been used by jihadis in the past, with the most famous example being the one conducted by al-Qaeda's chief ideologue Ayman al-Zawahiri when he took questions between December 2007 and January 2008. This was done against the backdrop of the heavy criticism he had received from former al-Qaeda thinker Sayyid Imam al-Sharif (also known as Dr Fadl), and suggests that jihadi groups set up sessions like this during times of hardship. With al-Qaeda having just suffered what is perhaps its worst year since its creation, al-Shabaab are sensing a loss of momentum in the global jihad and shrinking morale among its supporters. It will be hoping to use this session to allay the fears of its followers and encourage them to refocus their efforts.

Content Analysis

This announcement should be seen in the context of al-Shabaab's recent efforts to expand its global reach through use of its own alternative media. The question and answer session is described by the press release as 'a connecting link between the mujahideen commanders and the muslim ummah', and demonstrates the value that the al-Shabaab leadership, which has begun to put more emphasis on the group's online media profile over the last twelve months, places on its ability to produce, disseminate and control its own alternative media network.

The creation of alternative media allows a group such as al-Shabaab to reach its target audience and provide it with the requisite information that will help attract new recruits as well as strengthen the resolve of existing members through providing them a conduit through which they can interact with

more senior and respected individuals within the organisation.

Al-Shabaab also intends to make use of the new technology and media available to it, claiming that it will publish the list of questions, as well as the subsequent answers, 'in public forums and social networking sites.' The announcement asks that supporters also help publicise the meeting by collating the lists of questions and republishing them on other forums.

The group welcomes questions from supporters and detractors alike, stating that 'the meeting is open to everybody, muslims or non muslims, jihad supporters or those who disagree with them'. Al-Shabaab will likely be hoping to use tough questions as an opportunity to answer the various criticisms leveled against its activities in Somalia.

Relevance to Western Jihadism

Al-Shabaab's intentions appear to be to fill the vacuum in the production of English-language jihadi propaganda left by the deaths of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula's (AQAP) Anwar al-Awlaki and Samir Khan, who were the chief producers of these types of materials. In recent months, the group has released a number of English-language materials formulated specifically to recruit and insight Muslims in the West. For example, Omar Hammami, the best known Western face of the group, recently released a sermon entitled 'Lessons Learned' which is the lengthiest and most detailed works he has produced in English.

Although the session with Sheikh Dhere will be conducted in Arabic, the group also specifies that it will take questions written in English and there will very likely be a full English translation made available shortly after the session is broadcast.

Western participants in the session who support al-Shabaab and are perhaps intent on assisting or joining the group are likely to use the opportunity to ask questions regarding religious rulings. Among the more pressing issues for them will be clarification on the obligations upon Muslims who live in Western countries and whether it is incumbent upon them to migrate to Somalia and other theatres of jihad in order to assist the *ummah* (global Muslim nation).

As part of its strategy to recruit Western Muslims, al-Shabaab launched its own Twitter account late last year, and will possibly publicise the question and answer session on its feed. Surprisingly, given the number of fluent English speakers now involved with al-Shabaab, the press release lacks the level of literacy found on the group's Twitter account, which often mocks its Somali detractors for their spelling mistakes when criticising the militia on their accounts.

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