

Al Shabaab Governance in Somalia

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Abstract: Viewing the Somali Islamic insurgency movement Al Shabaab as a terrorist or criminal organization strips it of the very possibility of legitimacy. Foreign experts commonly assume that it rules through fear, violence, propaganda and the cynical manipulation of the population's needs. Recent studies however show that Al Shabaab's rule is largely tolerated and that the movement, through tight and predictable governance and a nationalist discourse, has garnered some popular legitimacy. This article places these findings within a critical 'rebel governance' discourse that examines the movement not from a counter-insurgency perspective but through the lens of evolving socio-cultural relations between the population and the insurgents. How does Al Shabaab respond to the demands of the population while, at once, accomplishing its social transformation project replacing fractious clan identities with a nationalist Islamic one? Considering that the main long-term problem facing the Somali people is climate change, while in the short term peace is the most urgent issue, I argue the international intervention in Somalia should take into account existing local governance arrangements, including Al Shabaab rule, instead of trying to replace them with liberal democracy.

The United States and Europe have been funding and participating in the struggle against the insurgent jihadi movement Al Shabaab in Somalia for two decades, while supporting the establishment of a federal state. In 2022, however, Somalia still ranks near the bottom of international lists in terms of state efficiency and near the top in perceptions of corruption, while the federal institutions remain heavily dependent on international support. After the fall of the Afghan government to the Taliban in August 2021, it is worthwhile to explore whether the international community might not face a similar outcome in Somalia. This requires a fresh understanding of the militant organization and how it rules the areas it controls.

Almost all the academic literature, policy papers and news reports about Al Shabaab focus on the group as a criminal terrorist organization. In this paper, based on extensive fieldwork in Somalia and the analysis of Somalia's socio-political history, Al Shabaab is presented as a successful political movement that has established a level of governance that is unprecedented in Somalia. Despite being submitted to the relentless hostility of regional and Western forces and their Somali allies, the movement has expanded its reach in areas nominally under the control of the federal government and consolidated its grip over the Somali population. Its momentum is steadily growing despite occasional setbacks, such as the offensive launched by the new government of Hassan Sheikh Mohamud in 2022-2023.

Recent studies in rebel governance have criticized the 'rationalist-functionalist' approach, where responding to the population's governance expectations through provision of services is simply seen as a more efficient alternative to coercion.² In that perspective, the provision of aid by rebels, for example,

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² Hanna Pfeifer and Regine Schwab: "Politicising the rebel governance paradigm. Critical appraisal and expansion of a research agenda", *Small Wars and Insurgencies* Vol 34 (1), 2023, p1-23. The final article in this special issue on rebel governance, by Megan A. Stewart, "Identity, networks, and learning in the study of rebel governance" (p305-

is a 'hearts and minds' ploy to cheaply acquire the allegiance of local populations facing stress. This rational actor approach leaves little space for political relations between rebel groups and populations, or for how socio-cultural identities change throughout years of stress and conflict, and how this defines the framework of relations between rebels and the various populations they govern.

This paper explores these issues in areas governed by Al Shabaab in Somalia in terms of both agency and structure. It starts with the history of Al Shabaab: how it emerged in response to a popular need for law and order, and has continuously adapted to the times and context. This allows the network to grow and attract recruits, providing it with some legitimacy even though its ideology is generally rejected by Somalis. The second part describes the governance structures of Al Shabaab and how they answer, or not, the needs and expectations of the Somali population. Agency and structure come together in the analysis of how the militants pursue their objective of de-clannifying society while dealing with the exigencies of governance over a clan-society, and what public opinion thinks about the movement, insofar known. In conclusion, the international hostility towards Al Shabaab is reassessed. Does the threat its rule poses to the neighbourhood and the international community justify the investment of billions of dollars and euros a year to maintain and slowly develop the current status quo? Will the growing threat of Islamic State in Somalia and the region lead Western powers to choose the lesser of two evils, as they did in Afghanistan? Given that the main threat faced by Somalis is not even war or politics but climate change, it may be time to consider alternative policies.

Researching Al Shabaab

Al Shabaab has been almost exclusively studied through the lens of terrorism, radicalization, the ideology of global jihad, and as a criminal *mafia*-like organization. Almost all research is performed by people who are paid by, or identify with, Western agendas seeking to eliminate the threat of Islamic terrorism. In the context of the War on Terror, it was difficult to strike another note; doing so made one liable for accusations of sympathy for the enemy. Since 2017-2018 there has been a gradual shift in thinking. The *global* war on terror seems largely over. US negotiations with the Taliban have made 'talking to terrorists', at least some of them, acceptable.³

In the years since 2017, research into Al Shabaab has branched out in a new direction, concerned with their governance. This has provided insights upon which I build here. But the focus on Al Shabaab finances and its structures of rule is still influenced by the counter-terrorism agenda; in comparison, there is much less information about how local government is organized and relations with inhabitants managed (the socio-political and anthropological angles). Data is still scarce, even compared to data on the Taliban, for example. It is therefore difficult to make data-supported general statements about Al Shabaab rule. But one thing is certain: for many years, analysts and policymakers have concluded that the movement is waning, caught in its own contradictions and hugely unpopular. They were wrong. Despite occasional setbacks, it has gradually consolidated its hold over most of South and Central Somalia and retains, as we shall see below, some popularity and legitimacy.

My field research concerning Al Shabaab was conducted in Mogadishu, Beledweyne and Bosaso in several trips between November 2015 and October 2020, and as a security analyst working for the NGO community (2016-2018). On my main research trip (2019), I secured a position as guest lecturer at the Somali International University to escape the 'Green Zone' around Mogadishu International Airport,

315) summarizes the insights gained in the articles of this issue as pertaining to social identities, formation of governance structures and networks of rule, and constant adaptation.

³ Omar S. Mahmood & Abdihakim Ainte: "Could Somalia be the Next Afghanistan?"; ICG brief published on Sep 22, 2021 ([link](#)) on the effect of US-Taliban negotiations in Somalia

where all white foreigners are expected to stay.⁴ Although I could travel freely through central Mogadishu and some outlying areas conducting interviews, it remains a perilous exercise to perform field research about Al Shabaab—not because of the threat of kidnapping or other types of violence,⁵ but because of the Somali National Intelligence and Security Agency (NISA). I was warned they could detain me for interrogation and bar me from leaving or re-entering the country. This has happened to other researchers and foreign NGO staff.⁶ However, I could interview respondents that deal frequently with the militants, and also received more casual feedback from Somalis about daily life under Al Shabaab. I managed to interview one of the founding members of Al Shabaab residing in a town in Somaliland since his release from Guantánamo Bay.⁷ Most of the research used for the present article, however, comes from publications by Somali researchers such as those working for the Hiraal Institute of Policy Studies and Sahan, or for international NGOs such as Life and Peace Institute and Saferworld, as well as from the detailed yearly reports of the UN's Panel of Experts on Somalia.

Extent of Al Shabaab's influence in Somalia

In early 2023, the Harakat Al Shabaab Al Mujahideen (the young Mujahideen movement, as the group is officially called, but I will stick to 'Al Shabaab' for the sake of simplicity) controlled most rural areas of south and central Somalia, one of the regional capitals (Bu'ale), and 12 out of 45 district centres. As Figure 1 indicates, control by government forces is almost always contested. In Puntland (not portrayed in Fig. 1) Al Shabaab controls a mountainous area around Galgala, near Bosaso, and has a strong influence in this port town. In Somaliland Al Shabaab controls no areas, but its militants seem to move freely if they have local clan connections and keep a low profile. Al Shabaab also operates in Somali-populated areas of Kenya and Ethiopia, without controlling any areas there.

Estimates about the number of fighters on Al Shabaab's payroll are low—generally below 10,000. That they manage to control such a vast territory is usually ascribed to their high mobility and their reliance on friendly clan militias. Ground operations led by the EU-funded and UN-supported African military intervention force in Somalia (AMISOM) until 2014 and 'surgical strikes' since then have impacted, but not disrupted, Al Shabaab's influence. Since 2014, the situation depicted on the map above has not changed much, with occasionally a district centre changing hands (often changing back shortly afterwards). AMISOM, renamed ATMIS in 2021, has conducted no major operations, restricting itself to

⁴ To leave this AMISOM-protected enclave, foreigners are supposed to rent two armoured vehicles and four armed security guards for the prohibitive price of 1,200 USD/day at the time of my research. The arrangement I struck with the Somali International University is that I would give my guest lectures for free and help the university with its institutional planning, in exchange for an official invitation (for the visa), accommodation, safe transport, and their support to my own research activities.

⁵ This threat is not imaginary. I asked two Somali friends of which I know they have contacts with Al Shabaab whether the militants would object to me giving guest lectures and doing research, and only booked my trip when they both let me know Al Shabaab had no objection. As I learnt later while watching one of their propaganda films, they did record me and used part of one of my lectures in that film.

⁶ Reports about this kind of detention is rarely made public, because both the security agencies and their victims have a shared interest in discretion. I knew several NGO researchers who had been detained before leaving the country, sometimes missing their flight, for interrogation by NISA. Two of them were declared Persona Non Grata and barred from re-entering the country. This fate also befell Matt Bryden, a senior, Somali-speaking analyst, for being critical of the government.

⁷ Founding member of Al Shabaab interviewed in Bur'o on 5 May 2019. To avoid problems with Somaliland's intelligence services, I had to flout the rule brokered by the UN with Somaliland's Ministry of Interior that doesn't allow foreigners to leave the capital Hargeisa without a police escort. I talked my way through several checkpoints with my rudimentary knowledge of Somali. My informant had become a civil society activist working on journalism and higher education in his hometown Bur'o. Since I was the first white person interrogating him since his internment in Guantánamo Bay, there were tense and emotional moments in the first hour of the interview, then he loosened up. He denied having any current information about Al Shabaab but gave valuable insights about the origins of the movement.

providing security to the federal government, the towns it controls and convoys circulating between them. Over the past decade Al Shabaab has mostly consolidated its hold in the areas where it is present, while expanding its presence in areas officially held by the government. For example, Al Shabaab taxes nearly all businesses and individuals in Mogadishu and other government-held towns.⁸

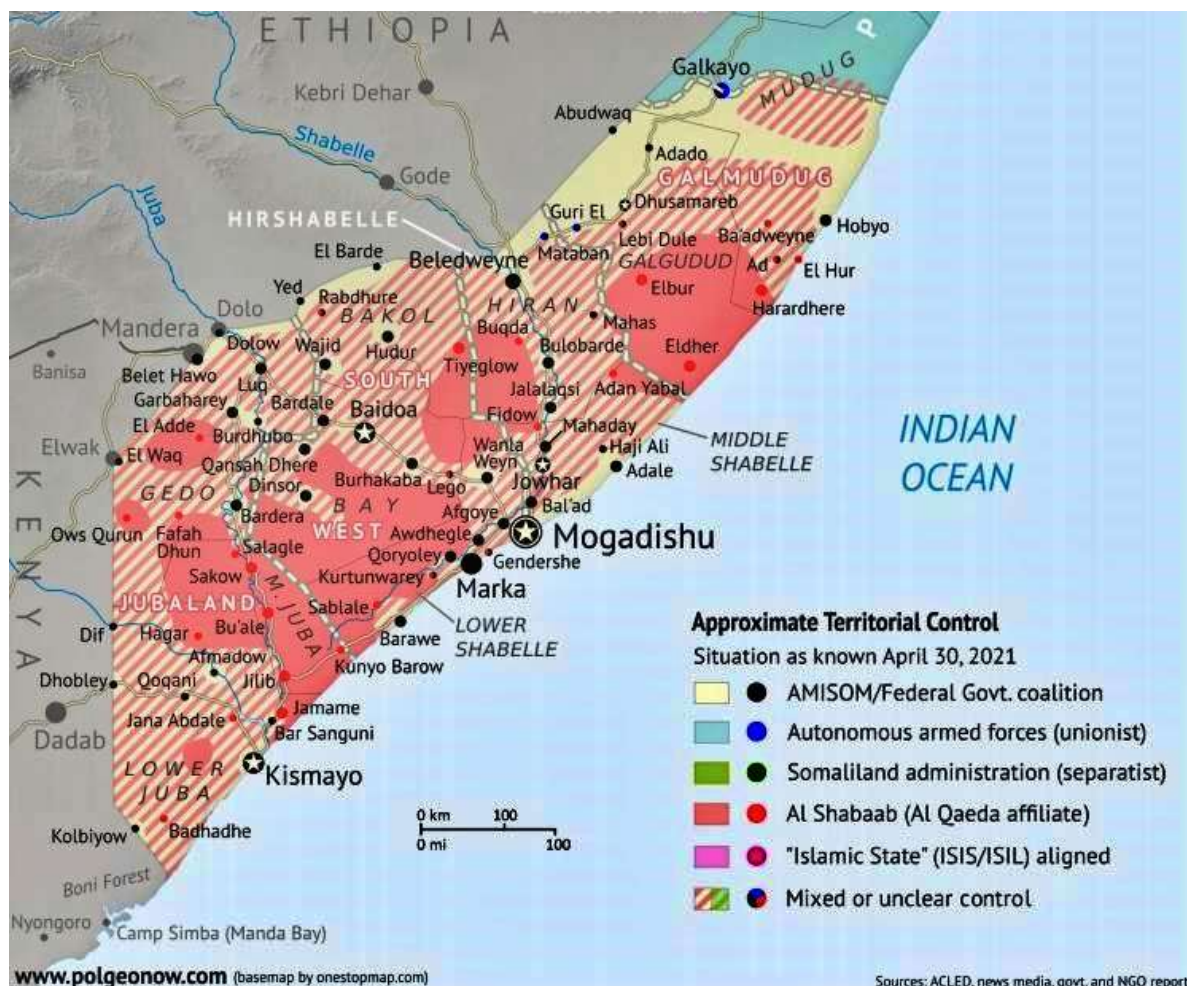


Figure 1 : Cropped map showing areas of influence of Al Shabaab and government forces in south and central Somalia in April 2021. Source: www.polgeonow.com.

Al Shabaab has thoroughly infiltrated the federal government. As one senior Somali security analyst mentioned, “they don’t even need to infiltrate; they can just show up. No background checks are performed”.⁹ Even in the National Intelligence and Security Agency, positions are for sale, and Al Shabaab has enough resources to buy them.¹⁰ Given the venality of parliamentary politics and Al Shabaab’s ample resources, they are in a position to influence legislation and political deals. For example, a year after his 2017 election, President Farmajo stopped nearly all military operations against Al Shabaab, leading to a *de facto* truce. According to veteran analyst Matt Bryden, this was the result of a deal brokered by Farmajo’s national security advisor.¹¹ But it seems Al Shabaab has no plans

⁸ Hiraal Institute for Policy Studies 2020: “A Losing Game: Countering Al Shabab’s Financial System”; p6-7

⁹ Interview with a senior security official in Mogadishu, March 2019.

¹⁰ Ibidem. For a full account of NISA’s venality, providing insights on how easy it is to infiltrate by militants, see Ingiriis, Mohamed Haji 2020b: “Predatory politics and personalization of power: The abuses and misuses of the National Intelligence and Security Agency (NISA) in Somalia”, African Affairs Vol.119 (475), 251-274

¹¹ Bryden 2021: “Fake Fight. The Quiet Jihadist Takeover of Somalia”.

for a takeover of the federal government from within. They use their contacts for information gathering, the release of prisoners, influencing policy and for other dealings with the federal ruling elites.

The new government by Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, inaugurated in 2022, has initiated a general offensive against Al Shabaab, capturing some areas in Galmudug and Middle Shabelle with the help of friendly clan militias and US support.¹² It is doubtful whether this will lead to permanent territorial gains or an increased presence of the Federal Government in South-Central Somalia.¹³ The reliance on local clan militia, observers have noted, undermines the development of national armed forces.¹⁴ Given the ferocious counter-attacks by Al Shabaab on government targets unleashed since the government offensive began,¹⁵ Mohamud's administration may decide to sue for a truce, like the previous one.

Al Shabaab's influence over Somali public life has steadily increased over the past decade, and there is no apparent solution to roll it back.

Al Shabaab and the Islamic State

Islamic State presence in Somalia has been waxing and waning since 2015. It started with a split in the Al Shabaab group of about a hundred fighters operating in Puntland (Galgala, near Bosaso); almost half of them joined the Islamic State, leading to clashes between Al Shabaab and the new IS faction. In 2016, this Islamic State group, swollen to about 200 fighters, temporarily occupied a district east of Bosaso (Qandala), making international headlines. But this faction was clan-based and its appeal to other clans was very limited. In 2018, a new branch of the Islamic State appeared in Mogadishu; it attempted to 'tax' businesses in a similar way to Al Shabaab, establishing a protection racket. They were defeated by an offensive of Al Shabaab's intelligence and security branch (*amniyat*). In 2021 reports surfaced again of an increased Islamic State presence, again manifesting itself through taxation efforts in Mogadishu and Bosaso. In one report, the Islamic State in Somalia has become the main conduit for financial support to other IS groups in Africa.¹⁶

The Islamic State appeals to a different kind of audience than Al Shabaab. It has a more modern and global-politics oriented outlook, appealing to educated Somalis in the diaspora and in Somalia, who feel disempowered and do not identify with Al Shabaab's pragmatic and nearly parochial 'jihad'. Given the relative success of Islamic State groups in other African countries, it seems likely the movement will continue to attract Somali recruits, also from within Al Shabaab, whose intelligence branch is highly concerned with defections to its rival.

Al Shabaab as a socio-political actor

In the following analysis of Al Shabaab I first consider it as a social actor, examining its connections to the rest of Somali society and how these developed and changed over the years. In section 2 a structural

¹² Schmitt, Eric in New York Times, Feb 27, 2023: "U.S. Commandos Advise Somalis in Fight Against Qaeda Branch"

¹³ Heather Nicell (Janes) as quoted in Schmitt 2023 op. cit., and Omar Mahmood (regional expert working for the International Crisis Group, ICG) in personal communication, Dec 2022.

¹⁴ E.g. Fooday, Abdulkadir in The Africa Report, Feb 8, 2023: "Is Somalia's three-pronged approach winning the war against Al-Shabaab?"; or Omar Mahmood, ICG (personal communication, Dec 2022).

¹⁵ Between October 2022 and February 2023, Al Shabaab attacks on government targets in Mogadishu, Kismayo, Beledweyne and Mahas resulted in more than 200 fatalities and many more injured. See UN Security Council S/2023/109 "Report on the Situation in Somalia" of Feb 16, 2023 by the Secretary General p 4/18.

¹⁶ Confidential report this author worked on for the EU; see also news about the killing of Bilal Al Sudani by US special forces in Northern Puntland; he was considered the main financial engineer for several Islamic State operations in Africa. E.g. BBC, Jan 27, 2023: "Bilal al-Sudani: US forces kill Islamic State Somalia leader in cave complex" ([link](#)).

analysis of Al Shabaab rule is presented, while in the third and last section an ‘agent-in-structure’ approach is used to understand how Al Shabaab deals with Somalia’s clan society.

The Origins and Evolution of Al Shabaab

Al Shabaab, according to its own narrative and several Somali experts, formed in 2002¹⁷ as a non-clan based militia that volunteered to support the Sharia Courts of Mogadishu. These courts had formed in response to a popular demand for justice and peace, to curb the power of the factional clan leaders that each ruled separate sections of the city with their unruly militia since government collapse in 1991. The business community needed law and order to operate across clan lines and supported the operation of the courts and the militias that enforced their rulings. Al Shabaab’s leaders had a background in Al Itihad – a sharia-based militant faction (1991-1996) that was the only one not based on clan in Somalia’s civil war, that was not very successful despite its appeal, and that was placed on the USA’s list of designated terrorist organizations shortly after 9/11, although the organization had disbanded years earlier – and/or the Afghan jihad. They were young and wanted to renew national politics by replacing Somali fractious clan identities with a national Islamic one, a goal shared by many of the modern-educated Islamic clerics and the business community.

From 2002 to 2004 a Somali government in exile was formed in Nairobi, Kenya, in a process brokered by Ethiopia and Kenya with international support and funding. The resulting Transitional Federal Government (TFG) included many of the warlords Somalis despised. Efforts to assert its authority in Somalia led to renewed conflict. Mogadishu’s courts allied with other sharia courts throughout the country to form the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), which swept through south and central Somalia (the other areas of the country, Puntland and Somaliland, having established their own autonomous regional authorities in the 1990s) with amazing speed in 2004 and 2005. This sparked alarm within the War on Terror community that Somalia was becoming the next haven for international terrorism. Early 2006, Al Shabaab defeated an ‘anti-terrorist’ coalition of warlords supported by Ethiopia and the US, propelling it to instant national popularity and allowing the ICU to briefly rule over a pacified country.

In the last days of 2006 Ethiopian troops invaded Somalia to eliminate the Islamic Courts Union and install the TFG in Mogadishu. The ICU disbanded but not Al Shabaab, who spearheaded the resistance against the Ethiopian invasion (Dec. 2006 – Jan. 2009) that was first seconded, then replaced by AMISOM, a UN-mandated African peacekeeping force with troops from Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, Burundi and Djibouti. This increased Al Shabaab’s popularity as a nationalist movement among Somalis.¹⁸ Initially, many of its fighters died confronting the superior Ethiopian army in open battle; the organization then converted to guerrilla warfare and ‘rebel governance’, using the implantation it had gained by its alliance with the Islamic Courts in many parts of south and central Somalia. It took until 2011 for AMISOM to expel Al Shabaab from Mogadishu, allowing the federal government to drop the label ‘transitional’ in 2012.

Foreign terrorism experts became obsessed with two aspects of Al Shabaab that both seem to have been more rhetorical than real: its links to Al Qaeda, and the foreign fighters it recruited. Both raised the profile of what would otherwise have been a local insurgency to a global jihadist threat, and thus a deserving target in the Global War on Terror. The foreign fighters, in retrospect, seem to have been almost entirely Somalis from the diaspora and Muslims from other East African countries, not seasoned

¹⁷ Interview by Jamal Osman of senior Al Shabaab leader Mahad Karate, Channel 4, aired on 15 June 2022 (<https://youtu.be/KVSw0E9Y1RI>). Confirmed in personal interviews with a founder of Al Shabaab, May 2019, and with the senior expert of Al Shabaab Mohamed Mubarak, June 2022.

¹⁸ The veteran observer of Somali affairs Roland Marchal called Al Shabaab a ‘military populist Jihadi organisation’. Marchal 2011: “The Rise of a Jihadi Movement in a Country at War. Harakat al Shabaab al Mujahedden in Somalia”; p35. See also: Marchal 2009: “A tentative assessment of the Somali Harakat Al-Shabaab”.

frontline Al Qaeda trainers as initially surmised. Al Shabaab pledged allegiance to Al Qaeda in 2008 and a liaison was reportedly established in 2009, but it was only in 2012 that Al Qaeda accepted Al Shabaab as a member organization.¹⁹ This did not lead to significant operational links (such as financial, arms and expertise transfers) between the organizations; relations between the two organizations have remained mostly political.²⁰

The affiliation with Al Qaeda seems to have contributed to a falling out between Al Shabaab's leader Godane (2007-2014) and many of the other leaders, who were killed or retired from the organization. Godane, however, did not intend Al Shabaab to become an Al Qaeda 'franchise', but jealously safeguarded the organization's autonomy. The contestation of Godane's leadership came from both diaspora and local sides. While diaspora fighters desired a more internationally oriented, Al Qaeda-aligned jihad, local commanders such as Mukhtar Robow advocated for a better integration with the population and its needs. They were concerned about the popular backlash created by Al Shabaab's refusal of foreign aid during the 2011-2012 drought, and the draconian imposition of unpopular Sharia-based moral codes.

The 'purge', as it became known (2012-2013), led to the expulsion of these dissenting voices, including most foreign fighters, from Al Shabaab.²¹ It resulted in the domination within Al Shabaab of ideologues over pragmatists.²² Reportedly, some of the purged pragmatists were in favour of negotiating with the first federal government led by Hassan Sheikh Mohamud (2012-2017). Godane, however, made it clear he had no interest in a dialogue with the new government. From 2011 to 2014, AMISOM recaptured territory held by Al Shabaab, notably Kismayo (2012), depriving it of its urban bases. The subsequent large-scale attacks by Al Shabaab on AMISOM bases and civilian/government targets in Mogadishu, and those in retaliation against AMISOM troop contributing countries Uganda (2010) and Kenya (Westgate Mall 2013, Garissa University 2015) seemed to confirm that Al Shabaab was truly a terrorist organization.

First-hand information from areas governed by Al Shabaab was scarce, but international humanitarian actors present in Al Shabaab-controlled areas until their expulsion between 2009 and 2011 showed some (reticent) admiration, admitting that the insurgents had earned some legitimacy among the population and that their governance was tight and orderly. The prevailing view among counter-terrorism experts, however, was that Al Shabaab governed through fear and repression alone.

Most Somalis observe that Al Shabaab has become more violent, intolerant and extremist since the purges. This is often explained as a result of the sustained violence Al Shabaab itself has endured at the hands of government forces, AMISOM, bilateral Ethiopian and Kenyan armed forces, and US drones. Nonetheless, as a result of the purging away of more moderate leaders and attacks against civilian targets, support for the movement among ordinary Somalis fell. The October 14, 2017, truck bomb at the busy Zobe intersection in Mogadishu, killing more than 500 persons, prompted—for the first time—popular demonstrations against Al Shabaab in several towns and cities throughout Somalia. This led many observers to predict its imminent demise, but this did not occur.

¹⁹ Marchal, Roland 2018: "Une Lecture de la Radicalisation Djihadiste en Somalie" in *Politique Africaine* #149, 89-111 ; p90.

²⁰ The UN Panel of Experts on Somalia report from October 2022 indicates it has found no evidence of alleged links between Al Shabaab and other 'Al Qaeda franchises' in the Arabian Peninsula or Africa.

²¹ Ken Menkhaus describes how this purge was fought over social media, discrediting the organization in the eyes of many of its supporters. Menkhaus 2014: "Al-Shabaab and Social Media: A Double-Edged Sword".

²² Göldner-Ebenthal 2019: "Salafi Jihadi Armed Groups and Conflict (De-)Escalation. The Case of al-Shabaab in Somalia"; p20.

Conceptualizing Al Shabaab

Clearly, most foreign experts have misunderstood Al Shabaab. Whether viewed as a terrorist organization belonging to the Al Qaeda family or as a criminal (profit-seeking) gang, Al Shabaab is seen as a group extraneous to local society, seeking to impose foreign elements (an imported ideology, transnational criminal practices) on a weakened but basically unwilling society. The premise behind these views is that Somalis would prefer the internationally backed federal government, if they had a chance to join it, but that Al Shabaab is holding them hostage.²³ However, given their poor analytical and predictive performance, these perspectives on Al Shabaab should be questioned. Contemporary theory about rebel governance provides some new perspectives.

In a 2018 article, Stathis Kalyvas suggested decoupling violent jihadism from both religion and terrorism, analysing it instead as revolutionary insurgency—not fundamentally different from the Marxist rebel groups of the 1950s to 1970s.²⁴ A fundamental difference is the aspect of territoriality. While terrorism, religious fanaticism and organized crime have long been seen as essentially non-territorial (or de-territorialized) networks, an insurgency is territorial by definition, and entails establishing functional relations with the local population. Network organizations need not cultivate these, but insurgents must. Composing with local social forces entails a degree of adaptation and the capacity to offer something that the population needs.

Therefore, though the strict Salafi worldview of Al Shabaab has certainly been important in structuring its group identity, in their efforts to control Somali territory and populations they faced challenges and opportunities similar to other non-state armed groups engaged in a civil war, and had to be pragmatic about it.

What Somalis needed most crucially was (and is) peace, order, justice and a minimum of collective services. In development jargon this is ‘governance’, but it may also be called predictability. Michael Skjelderup notes that *“A key finding from this growing body of literature [on rebel governance] is that territories governed by NSAGs [non-state armed groups] often establish alternative political and social orders with a relatively high level of predictability, both for the armed group itself and for the civilian population within that territory.”*²⁵ The counterinsurgency expert David Kilcullen notes that *“it is often the predictability inherent in the existence of rules, not the content of the rules themselves, far less the popularity of a given government, that creates the feeling of safety which allows for a normative system to function”*.²⁶ This desire for predictability and the practical acceptance of those that bring it, should not be confused with ideological alignment or acceptance. As Ana Arjona puts it, *“Absence of resistance from the civilian population is not synonymous with active support or sympathy with the non-state armed group or its ideology”*.²⁷

It appears that, from the outset, Al Shabaab has been proficient in bringing predictability to the areas it rules, a governance habit it had developed when it was allied with the Islamic Courts Union. The level of administration the militants brought to areas they controlled was unprecedented since the civil war.²⁸ Reports of crimes or clan conflict from the areas they control are rare. Al Shabaab wields an effective monopoly of violence.

²³ As a supposedly well-informed Nairobi- and Hargeisa-based analyst, I also believed this for years.

²⁴ Kalyvas 2018: “Jihadi Rebels in Civil War”.

²⁵ Skjelderup 2020: “Jihadi Governance and Traditional Authority Structures: Al-Shabaab and Clan Elders in Southern Somalia, 2008-2012”; p1177.

²⁶ Kilcullen 2013: “Out of the Mountains: The Coming Age of the Urban Guerrilla”; p137.

²⁷ Arjona 2017: “Civilian Cooperation and Non-Cooperation with Non-State Armed Groups”; p760.

²⁸ Crouch & Abdi 2019: “Community Perspectives Towards Al Shabaab. Sources of Support and the Potential for Negotiations”.

The notion of rebel governance allows for to conceptualize Al Shabaab violence and taxation differently. If one adopts the point of view that the sole legitimate authority in Somalia is the Federal Government, then Al Shabaab's monopoly of violence in the areas it controls is criminal, and its taxation is extortion. On the other hand, if one accepts that Al Shabaab exerts rebel governance over these areas and that its rule is considered at least as legitimate as that of the federal government, its law and order operations and taxation are 'state-constitutive' in the terms of classical political theory.²⁹

One could go a step further and wonder whether Al Shabaab is not a social movement. There seems to be an incompatibility between the idea of social movement and the coercive violence that Al Shabaab employs as rulers. Nevertheless, the origins and initial popularity of Al Shabaab were caused by its response to a groundswell of popular exasperation with criminality and clan-based politics. It retained or even increased its popularity by leading the fight against the internationally sanctioned Ethiopian invasion. Since the purges and the establishment of the Federal Government of Somalia it has lost much of its popularity, but as we shall presently see the movement still appeals to a significant part of the Somali population.

Recruitment: the appeal of Al Shabaab

Al Shabaab has forcibly recruited fighters, obliging communities to hand over a quota of children for indoctrination from a young age. This fact is often cited by Somali commentators and underlined by analysts, but only a small percentage of the members join that way.³⁰ Many other analysts of radicalization insist on socio-economic factors, mainly poverty. Joining Al Shabaab would be a way out of misery and 'becoming someone' with a gun. This is certainly a pull factor, but the main motivation Ingiriis observes in his fieldwork is political and security related. Experiencing injustice at the hand of the government or foreign troops, or clan elders, pushes many people into the arms of Al Shabaab. This tallies with the finding, in an extensive UNDP study on what motivates Africans to join extremist groups, that *exposure to state violence is the principal motivation for joining violent groups*, before (the commonly assumed) socio-economic or religious and ideological factors.³¹

*"The most powerful reasons for young, dispossessed men to join Al-Shabaab are grievance-based motivations, especially [in] areas around Mogadishu. Al-Shabaab exploits the growing grievances against the government's lack of ability to distribute power and resources equally among the Somali clans. The young men joining the insurgency movement consider the Mogadishu government and other clan-based federal states in the country as externally-imposed predatory power machines based on patrimonial political cronyism (...) Many young men in Mogadishu complain about their perceived powerless position and talk about the possibility of changing the status quo through violence."*³²

In some areas of Somalia where the conflict between pro-government forces and insurgents has been particularly intense—such as Lower Shabelle and Lower Juba—reports of abuses by government-aligned forces have led numerous people to join the insurgency.³³ The Ethiopian invasion of 2006-2009 sent many Somalis into the arms of Al Shabaab; the operations of AMISOM troops have had a similar effect.³⁴

²⁹ Think of Charles Tilly's works on the role of state violence and Norbert Elias on the role of taxation in state formation; Tilly 1985: "War Making and State Making as Organized Crime" & Elias 1939: "The Civilizing Process".

³⁰ Ingiriis 2020a: "The Anthropology of Al-Shabaab: The Salient Factors for the Insurgency Movement's Recruitment Project". He notes that those that joined this way are often the most fervent 'brainwashed' fighters. But many captured AS fighters falsely allege being forcibly conscripted and 'brainwashed', to escape public wrath and qualify for more mild treatment (personal discussions with deradicalization experts).

³¹ UNDP 2017: "Journey to Extremism in Africa".

³² Ingiriis 2020a:365-366.

³³ Crouch 2018: "Counter-Terror and the Logic of Violence in Somalia's Civil War. Time for a new approach"; p16.

³⁴ Botha & Abdile 2014: "Radicalisation and al-Shabaab Recruitment in Somalia".

One should not exaggerate the crimes committed by East African forces fighting under the AMISOM banner,³⁵ but their echo has resonated through Somali society, amplified of course by Al Shabaab media. Federal Government forces are also credited with fuelling grievances through the unruly conduct of war and law & order operations, and clan-based targeting. Finally, US drone strikes cause resentment among local populations, especially as they often seem to hit the wrong target.³⁶ In Somalia as in many other theatres of the war on terror, counterinsurgency and counter-terror operations seem to be not only generally ineffective, but have an adverse effect.³⁷

The feeling of injustice and powerlessness at addressing grievances is compounded, for many young Somalis, by the perceived inaction of their elders. In general, the youth is exasperated by the immobilism of the older generation, and by egotistical (or clan-oriented) efforts for improving its members personal situation, rather than that of society as a whole.³⁸

Although grievances may be the main push factor, the pull factor is important. Al Shabaab projects an image, both collectively and its leaders personally, of being in control of their lives, fighting for a noble cause (Somali independence) guided by religion. Unlike the federal government, it seems free of corruption, double standards and dissimulation (*taqiya*). It practices what it preaches. The self-identity it projects is that of young, determined resistance fighters who live a pure Islamic and nomadic (non-materialistic) life, like the Prophet's companions, and whose objective is to save Somali society from a foreign invasion that threatens to ruin it and turn it away from religion. In addition, if one compares the glitzy and professional-looking productions of Al Shabaab's media arm 'Al Kataib'³⁹ to that of the government or the free press, it is easy to understand that Al Shabaab's image may appeal more to the young generation. Al Shabaab, after all, means 'the youth' in Arabic.

As a resistance movement, Al Shabaab is motivated by the nationalist goal of liberating the country from the control of foreigners. The Kenyan occupation of Jubaland is a main concern in their communications and actions,⁴⁰ and their propaganda against the Ethiopian presence is similarly virulent.⁴¹ Behind the 'visible face of the colonization' (AMISOM troops), Al Shabaab mainly blames the USA and the UK. Both countries have military bases in Somalia and are key partners of the Federal Government and AMISOM in providing intelligence on Al Shabaab. Although the insurgents do not prioritize Western targets in Somalia, they reason that as soon as the foreign forces depart, the federal structure will collapse. Given

³⁵ The crimes taken most seriously by Somalis were sexual exploitation of minors and the killing of civilians (Williams 2016: "AMISOM under Review"; p45. See also Human Rights Watch 2010: "Harsh War, Harsh Peace. Abuses by al-Shabaab, the Transitional Federal Government, and AMISOM in Somalia" and Human Rights Watch, 2017: "Somalia: AU Should Release Investigation into 14 Civilian Deaths"). Taken together, however, AMISOM troops did not commit many crimes compared to other troops at war and there may be a bit of a racist undertone in some of the Somali and international critiques against its soldiers.

³⁶ Amnesty International 2019: "The Hidden US War in Somalia: Civilian Casualties from Air Strikes in Lower Shabelle".

³⁷ Crouch 2018; see also Suri 2016: "Barbed Wire on Our Heads. Lessons from Counter-Terror, Stabilisation and Statebuilding in Somalia".

³⁸ Marchal 2018:104.

³⁹ Al Kataib's productions are hard to find on the internet today, as they are systematically banned as terrorist propaganda. For a neutral analysis of Al Shabaab messaging until 2016 see Peter Chonka: "Spies, Stonework, and the Suuq: Somali Nationalism and the Narrative Politics of pro-Harakat Al Shabaab Al Mujaahidiin Online Propaganda", *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 2016.

⁴⁰ See for example the interview with an Al Shabaab Sheikh in Life and Peace Institute 2014:18: "*Kismayo and the Juba regions [are] controlled by Kenyans who can do whatever they want. Ethiopians also invaded the country and captured towns without permission. All these things show that the country is getting out of hand. The country has entered into a sphere of darkness.*"

⁴¹ The official website of Al Shabaab caasimada.net, when visited in January 2022, carried several articles in English critical of Jubaland politics; one of them reminding readers that 'the corrupt Madobe' (President of Jubaland since its creation in 2013) is kept in power to do Kenya's bidding ([link](#)).

that the East African troops (except Djibouti), the main donors of the federal government and most NGOs are from Christian countries, Al Shabaab accuses them of a Christian crusade against Somalis, which effectively mobilizes resistance among young Muslims.

Joining Al Shabaab, finally, is often not as individual a decision as the rational actor-based models of specialists in the Counter Violent Extremism industry assume. It seems that many recruits are suggested by clan elders (who may be either motivated by the grievances mentioned above, or are coerced into providing fighters or trainees).⁴² Finally, the socio-economic pull factor is also substantial. Al Shabaab offers a more comprehensive and predictable package to its recruits than the government does to its soldiers. Meals are provided, salaries are paid on time, brides or bride money are provided after a certain number of years of service, time-off is provided for establishing a home and family, promotions are merit-based and, for believers, entry to heaven is assured when killed in action, while surviving widows and children are supported by the movement.

Although Al Shabaab may not be a social movement as such, it does seem to be the result of social dynamics, and it builds on a social desire for change. The change desired is more order in, and control over, one's life. To this can be added the motivation, for some Somalis, of believing they are participating in a positive collective pursuit: the transformation of a society on the brink of collapse.

The ethical appeal of Al Shabaab is non-negligible, adding to its social legitimacy. Many Somalis that are not part of the movement confer legitimacy to their effort to overcome clannism, impunity and corruption, replacing them with justice and equal treatment. Nonetheless, respondents in different surveys state their disagreement with Al Shabaab's ideology. They dislike the lack of freedom of speech and movement, and the unreasonable violence and harshness of Al Shabaab, notably their disregard for civilian life. They also resent Al Shabaab's authoritarian rule. And almost no Somali outside Al Shabaab's ranks agrees with their religious views, notably their supposed superiority and right to denounce other Muslims as unbelievers, justifying killing them (*takfirism*). Most sheikhs and ulama of Al Shabaab are not respected as religious scholars outside the movement.⁴³

Details on Al Shabaab 's Rule

After a brief presentation of the organizational structure of Al Shabaab, I will first zoom in on their fiscal policies, and then, summarily, on how they manage the public realm, notably through their courts and their humanitarian and rural development activities.

Executive Structure

Al Shabaab's executive structure used to be shrouded in mystery. Over the past years, the names and positions of many Al Shabaab officials have become known; one can find them, for example, in the UN Panel of Experts 2021 report.⁴⁴ This is partially due to a concerted intelligence gathering effort, but it is facilitated by the increasing transparency of Al Shabaab itself in its communications. This might indicate a growing self-confidence of the movement that permits it to work on the public profile of its leadership, thereby increasing its legitimacy among the population.

⁴² Marchal 2018; Ingiriis 2020a.

⁴³ Crouch & Abdi 2019: "Community Perspectives Towards Al Shabaab. Sources of Support and the Potential for Negotiations" in Keating, Michael & Waldman, Matt (eds) "War and Peace in Somalia: National Grievances, Local Conflict and Al-Shabaab", Oxford University Press.

⁴⁴ Pages 41-47 of the UN Panel of Experts on Somalia report 2021.

Al Shabaab is led by an Amir (ruler); since 2014 this is Ahmed Umar, also known as Ahmed Diriye or Abu Ubaidah. He is advised by a council of elders and assisted by an executive council. The latter has a chairman, deputy chairman and leaders of the departments of defence, intelligence, finance, fatwa (religious decrees), da'wa (missionary activity), humanitarian affairs, and regional governors. Al Shabaab has divided the territory it controls, fully or partially, into 9 or 10 regions that overlap partially with existing and historic regions.

This administrative structure is replicated at regional and district levels, with an advisory and an executive body consisting of the same departments. Security and defence units exist at the regional, but not district, levels. Regional and district governors have a fair amount of autonomy but they are rotated to avoid clan nepotism. At the village level, there are often only two representatives: one for administrative affairs, and another for religious and legal issues.

This executive structure has no specific originality; it resembles state structures elsewhere, which has the benefit for friend and foe alike of being easily recognizable. However it is very streamlined, both in its minimalist structure and in its operation, as the following sections on fiscal policies and justice demonstrate.

Fiscal Policies

The following descriptions are mainly based on two sources: the UN Panel of Experts (called the Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea until 2018),⁴⁵ and the studies of the Mogadishu-based Hiraal Institute for Policy Studies.⁴⁶

The main focus has been on how Al Shabaab collects, transfers and spends fiscal revenue. This documentation effort is intended to support a disruption of financial flows to Al Shabaab, western agencies involved in the War on Terror being impatient at the lack of progress on the military front. It also reflects a growing perception of Al Shabaab as a mafia-like criminal gang. The emphasis of the UN Panel of Experts since 2018 on these networks is evident in their reporting; they have also suggested measures to disrupt these flows.

Al Shabaab raises fiscal revenue by taxing nearly all economic activity in south and central Somalia. It has access to the cargo manifests at the Port of Mogadishu, and knows exactly which business imports what, and its value. It keeps detailed registers of all businesses and knows exactly how much to tax them, from the largest companies to the drivers of *bajaaj* (Indian motorized three-wheelers). When tax disputes arise, Al Shabaab provides the documentary evidence on which their claims are based, and they are rarely contested. In a survey of 2020, the Hiraal Institute found that 44 out of 50 businesses in government-controlled-towns (including all those in Mogadishu) admitted paying taxes to the insurgents.⁴⁷

Al Shabaab also requires all people in south and central Somalia to pay income tax, including senior officers of the Somali National Army. Farmers pay taxes on their harvests and their livestock, and once more when they sell them. Transports are also taxed, both the trucks themselves and the value of their cargo. In addition to these taxes, a different fiscal department of Al Shabaab collects yearly *zakat* tax, which according to sharia should amount to 2.5% of the net wealth of an individual (above a certain threshold). Finally, a variable war tax (*infaaq*) can be levied when Al Shabaab deems it necessary. Tax collection is so systematic that the remark made by the high-level Al Shabaab defector Mukhtar Robow

⁴⁵ UN Monitoring Group on Eritrea and Somalia report 2018; UN Panel of Experts reports on Somalia 2019, 2020, 2021 and 2022. These are all available on the UN Security Council website.

⁴⁶ Hiraal Institute for Policy Studies: 2018a: "The AS Finance System" and 2020: "A Losing Game: Countering Al-Shabab's Financial System".

⁴⁷ The UN Panel of Experts found that 12 out of 15 businesses surveyed in Kismayo also paid taxes to Al Shabaab.

to UN officials visiting him, that *“The furniture in this room, the water on the table, the chair you are sitting in, it has all been taxed by Al-Shabaab”*⁴⁸ is probably factual.

It appears tax compliance is nearly universal. Receipts are issued upon payment. Tax disputes are settled in court; refusal to pay tax (without a court procedure) is countered with violent collection measures. Somalis resent the tax burden, which they find exaggerated, but concede that they seem to be calculated and levied in a fair and predictable manner. When truck drivers have the option of reaching their destination over government-controlled or insurgent-controlled roads, they choose the latter.⁴⁹ Taxes are less, fully predictable, and a receipt is provided that can be shown at subsequent checkpoints to avoid double taxation. On government-controlled roads, in contrast, each checkpoint can levy whatever ‘tax’ it wants, and no receipts are provided. These ‘taxes’ are pocketed by the checkpoint soldiers and their commanders.

Taxes collected by Al Shabaab are deposited in bank or mobile money accounts, or transferred by cash to a central location. The Hiraal Institute assumes that a low estimate of Al Shabaab tax collection is 15 million USD per month. Based on partial information collected by monitoring several bank accounts used by Al Shabaab in Mogadishu and evidence collected in Kismayo, UN data suggest a much higher amount. Both groups of researchers agree that Al Shabaab generates a considerable surplus.⁵⁰ Registers at roadblocks or district-level tax collectors are painstakingly hand-written, recording all transaction details. Al Shabaab’s finance officers are themselves controlled by internal security. There is only one instance known, over the past years, of an Al Shabaab tax collector fleeing with his proceeds (a paltry 2,500 USD).

UN Experts found in 2019 that Al Shabaab routinely uses the commercial banking system, but efforts deployed since then to intercept these payments have not succeeded. The UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) supports the federal government’s efforts for developing policies against money laundering and the financing of terrorism, but within the ruling elites there is opposition against enforced reporting and monitoring, undermining the implementation of these reforms.⁵¹ Al Shabaab uses cryptocurrencies for international transactions, and for keeping its reserves safe.⁵² But most of Al Shabaab’s financial transactions are by mobile money. In 2018, the World Bank reported that about 155 million mobile money transactions, worth \$2.7 billion, were recorded in Somalia each month, and that mobile money had superseded the use of cash in Somalia, with over 70 per cent of adult Somalis regularly using mobile money services. With such a volume of transactions, it is difficult to track Al Shabaab transfers.⁵³ For the time being, Al Shabaab does not have to worry about disruption of its financial systems. Given that it has informants everywhere, it receives sufficient advance warning of any new measures to anticipate and adapt to them.

Regarding Al Shabaab expenditures, there is basically no data⁵⁴. It seems Al Shabaab finances are centrally managed in a budgetary process, in which cash is provided to the departments and the regions

⁴⁸ Interview of Mukhtar Robow by researchers from the UN Somalia and Eritrea Monitoring Group, Feb 2018; United Nations Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea 2018; p109.

⁴⁹ Transparency Solutions for DFID 2016: “Beyond Isbaaro: Reclaiming Somalia’s Haunted Roads”. This extensive piece of field research on the routes between Mogadishu and Beledweyne is confirmed by sources close to the author working on humanitarian convoys and distribution in south and central Somalia.

⁵⁰ UN Monitoring Group on Somalia and Ethiopia 2018, p26 §84: *“Al-Shabaab is likely generating a significant budgetary surplus; money is not a limiting factor in its ability to wage its insurgency.”* In 2020, the Panel of Experts came to a similar conclusion: *“Al Shabaab generates “a significant budgetary surplus, some of which is invested in property purchases and businesses in Mogadishu.”*

⁵¹ This complaint by the UN Panel of Experts on Somalia in 2020 was reiterated in their report of October 2022.

⁵² Confidential report for the EU that I co-authored.

⁵³ It is understood that Somali mobile phone operators have made deals with Al Shabaab to avoid the destruction of their infrastructure and keep them as customers.

⁵⁴ The UN Panel of Experts, 2020, asserts that Al Shabaab’s expenditure in 2019 was 21 million USD, of which 16.5

for spending. Salaries seem to be always paid on time, a feat the federal government rarely manages. For the rest, anecdotal evidence points in different directions. Education, small-scale development and infrastructure rehabilitation work does take place, but seems not very capital-intensive. Humanitarian aid is provided when necessary, but Al Shabaab relies on Gulf charities to supplement its *zakat* collection. Al Shabaab invests in commercial operations in the areas it controls, but also muscled its way into the formal economy by compelling successful businesses in Mogadishu to sell part of their shares to them.⁵⁵ The UN concludes that "*Al-Shabaab's domestic revenue generation apparatus is more geographically diversified and systematic than that of the Federal Government or the federal member states*"⁵⁶.

An often overlooked achievement of Al Shabaab is self-sufficiency. It was long suspected that Al Shabaab received money from abroad (from Eritrea and Al Qaeda), but today experts agree that the movement is self-sufficient and even generates a considerable budgetary surplus. The Somali state, in contrast, has been systematically dependent on foreign sources of funding since the pre-independence period. For national elites, the State was – and still is – primarily a portal to access global material and symbolic resources, which can then be distributed to their constituents through patronage networks. From that external rent-seeking perspective, self-sufficiency makes no sense. If the conflict between Al Shabaab and the federal government and its supporters would cease, Al Shabaab could put its fiscal revenue to better uses than warfare and terrorism.

Management of the Public Realm

James C. Scott coined the term 'Seeing Like a State' to describe how the collection of detailed data on the population, the economy and the terrain allows states to exercise an absolute form of power. Many of the earliest recorded documents of humankind are detailed records of taxes due and paid, suggesting this data is essential for state formation. Al Shabaab clearly shares this obsession. Not only do they produce and use written evidence for fiscal purposes, but they have a more general obsession with paper documents, as humanitarian organizations working in Al Shabaab-controlled areas found out in the late 2000s. They were required to produce CVs with education certificates for all of their staff. Bourdieu noted that an essential function of the state is as a 'central bank of symbolic capital'.⁵⁷ The state guarantees the authenticity and acceptance of all kinds of paper documents, from paper money to diplomas and land ownership deeds. Al Shabaab outperforms the central government in this aspect too.

It is precisely this function of the state that distinguishes taxation from extortion. "*Taxation is indistinguishable from extortion in the absence of a legal framework that justifies its imposition*", Mara Revkin notes in a case study of Islamic State taxation in Iraq and Syria; therefore, "*the Islamic State has used its legal system to legitimize and justify economic activities that might otherwise resemble theft (...); courts and judges are directly involved in administering and legitimizing the tax policies*".⁵⁸ Somalis also have recourse to courts when they want to contest their taxation requests. Al Shabaab has done its best to make its taxation *legal*.

million was spent on military activities and 5 million on its security apparatus—leaving nothing for the rest of its departments and regions. This is in flagrant contradiction to its own assessments of income, and with common sense, so I have chosen not to take this sum into account here.

⁵⁵ See details given by the UN Panel of Experts 2020, p12 §33. A report by the Foundation for Defense of Democracies Center on Sanctions – Fanusie & Entz 2017: "Al Shabaab: Financial Assessment" – notes that AS is "deeply embedded within Somalia's economy".

⁵⁶ UN Panel of Experts 2020.

⁵⁷ Bourdieu, Pierre 1994: "Rethinking the State: Genesis and Structure of the Bureaucratic Field" in *Sociological Theory* Vol. 12 (1), 1-18

⁵⁸ Revkin 2016: "Legal Foundations of the Islamic State"; p32.

One of their most unpopular measures is the ban on qat (often referred to by its Swahili term *miraa*), to which many adult males (and some women and children) are addicted.⁵⁹ The ban is prompted as much by public moral concerns as by macroeconomic concerns. The narcotic is grown in Kenya and Ethiopia, and a big chunk of Somalia's national income and foreign exchange is spent on it.⁶⁰ The federal government, in contrast, raises revenue by taxing qat, a measure Al Shabaab finds immoral.

In 2018 Al Shabaab banned the cutting of trees and the use of plastic bags in territories it controls, seeking to stop deforestation⁶¹ and reduce the number of livestock (especially camels) that die from plastic bag ingestion. This produced sarcastic comments internationally, about 'eco-terrorists' that chop off hands and blow up innocent civilians, but ban plastic;⁶² however, their bans are respected and probably have a positive impact on the environment.⁶³

Al Shabaab's tight control over the population and the economy allows it to conduct well-informed public policies. For example, it monitors quotas of export crops, like lemons and sesame, to ensure that no individual producer exceeds his quota, but also to avoid the replacement of crops grown for the domestic market (which they prefer) by export-oriented production.⁶⁴ This may not amount to scientific resource management, but it leads in that direction. There is not much data about economic development in Al Shabaab-ruled areas, but they seem to develop at least as fast as government areas. For instance, in Jubaland, the Al Shabaab-held towns of Jilib – considered the 'capital' of Al Shabaab – and Saakow have grown faster over the past decade than the government-held capital Kismayo.⁶⁵

Justice

One of the most studied aspects of Al Shabaab governance is their judiciary system. The insurgents run a tight judiciary. Even the residents of Mogadishu travel to the Islamic courts in Afgooye, a district on the outskirts of the capital almost entirely controlled by Al Shabaab, to seek redress on any matter, even domestic issues. Cases are dealt with immediately and, most importantly, decisions are enforced. Women may expect fair treatment within the parameters of sharia law as interpreted by the conservative militants (and shared by most Somalis).

The formal, State-run justice system has never functioned well in Somalia, nor did it have much penetration in society. Beyond the upper echelons of society, justice was always based on customary law, a non-codified corpus of arrangements between clans and their lineages that integrates aspects of Sharia. Somalis may have become familiar with the *idea* of courts based on constitutional law and dreamt about a functioning formal legal system; but their legal experience of the state was shaped by military tribunals until 1991, and then as today elites seemed above the law. When the State collapsed in 1991, customary law allowed clans to broker peace agreements and continue self-governance at a local level, but it could not provide a society-wide solution to conflict. Sharia stepped in to address this

⁵⁹ Odenwald et al. 2007: "The Consumption of Khat and Other Drugs in Somali Combatants".

⁶⁰ Life and Peace Institute 2014:19

⁶¹ For years Al Shabaab earned money by taxing the charcoal trade, produced by burning trees, and sold mostly in the Gulf countries (for sheeshas). See Rawlence 2015: "Black and White: Kenya's Criminal Racket in Somalia". Profits in the sugar trade, imported through Kismayo and smuggled over the border to avoid high Kenyan tariffs, and in the charcoal trade (going in the other direction) accrued equally to the Kenyan Defence Forces, the Jubaland administration of Madobe, and Al Shabaab.

⁶² E.g. in the New York Times on the 4th of July 2018: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/04/world/africa/somalia-shabab-plastic-bags.html>

⁶³ A documentary made by Channel 4 journalist Jamal Osman in the Al Shabaab-held town of Jilib, Middle Juba, posted [online](#) on 15 June 2022, shows how Al Shabaab checkpoints enforce the ban on plastic bags.

⁶⁴ Hiraal Institute for Policy Studies 2020:7.

⁶⁵ One can observe this on Google Earth thanks to the timeline function, comparing the three towns. With thanks to Mohamad Mubarak for pointing this out.

absence through the vector of the Islamic Courts; as noted, Al Shabaab was born on the back of the sharia courts and the provision of justice remains their primary means to obtain legitimacy, even above law enforcement.

This represents a profound change in Somali society. As one analyst noted: *“We face a pre-modern society. Most people in Somalia have never dealt with modern laws, they haven't even felt governed. Al Shabaab in that sense is a modernising force, as they are exposing Somalis to being governed by the Rule of Law, a system which exists outside and beyond the people that populate it”*.⁶⁶ Sharia was not alien to most Somalis when the courts first appeared, but there are differences of consequence with how it was applied under customary law. The first is the rotation of judges who are no longer elders from the community—the clan identity of a judge is in general not revealed, and nobody should be able to guess it from his verdicts.⁶⁷ The other is individual instead of collective responsibility, which is the norm in *xeer*, customary law. When a person of clan A kills a person of clan B, according to *xeer* the entire clan A is responsible for paying blood money, even relatives in distant cities. If the elders from both clans cannot reach an agreement through customary law, clan B is entitled to kill any person from clan A in revenge. Sharia law puts an end to these cycles of revenge killings by holding the murderer responsible, not his clan.

A final point of importance about Al Shabaab's justice system is that nobody is above the law. Senior membership of Al Shabaab does not exempt one from the courts, which retain their independence from political oversight. One may note, in passing, that the provision of impartial justice and the absence of impunity is also a major legitimizing factor for Taliban rule in Afghanistan⁶⁸, as it was for the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.⁶⁹

The international community seems to have developed a blind spot for justice, focusing its attention on the establishment of the Rule of Law and the building of institutions through which justice *could* later be served, but rarely is: national elites, while passing laws, usually manage to place themselves out of its reach, often by giving little independence and enforcement power to the judiciary. This leaves common people hunkering for true justice, a service provided by Islamists.

Humanitarian relief and development

In 2017, international experts declared Somalia was facing a possible famine. The UN sounded the alarm and collected more than a billion USD for its humanitarian appeal, but none of this funding could go to areas controlled by Al Shabaab (because they refuse aid, and counter-terrorism financing guidelines prohibit it). Al Shabaab organized its own aid operation, supported by private charities from the Gulf who do not fear the long arm of Western counter-terror agencies.⁷⁰ Throughout Somalia there were almost no deaths due to the drought, so by that measure Al Shabaab performed at least as well as the UN, the Federal Government and the many NGOs working with them.

⁶⁶ Interview with senior Somali analyst in Mogadishu, February 2019

⁶⁷ This was revealed by two interviewees; one expressed surprise (and satisfaction) that nobody in his home community in Lower Shabelle knew from which clan the AS judge was. The other made a similar statement about a judge in Bulo Burde, Hiraaan.

⁶⁸ Adam Baczko in “La Guerre par le Droit. Les Tribunaux Taliban en Afghanistan”, Karthala 2016, considers that justice provision is what rooted the Taliban in Afghan society and led them to be accepted by the majority of Afghans, even though, as in Somalia, this does not mean Afghans agree with their ideology and religious views.

⁶⁹ Revkin 2016, p30 notes that “Many Syrians and Iraqis interviewed for this paper reported that the Islamic State earned the trust of residents of their towns and cities by rapidly resolving local disputes” and that “Anecdotal reports from Syria and Iraq indicate that the Islamic State punishes its own members at least as often as it punishes civilians.”

⁷⁰ BBC news, 22 March 2017: “Somalia food crisis: Has al-Shabab adopted new approach to food aid?” ([link](#))

The international perspective on Al Shabaab's humanitarian and development efforts is solely through the lens of counterterrorism and insurgency.⁷¹ This is not surprising, given that Western aid provision is often rationalized as a means to 'stabilize' contested areas, by providing the population with a peace dividend and a reason to support government control (and access to foreign aid) instead of the insurgents. This reflects a worrying politicization of aid,⁷² but it is not evident that Al Shabaab has the same utilitarian view of humanitarian assistance.

Since 2009, Al Shabaab has recurrently stated that their main objective in terms of humanitarian development is to increase food production in Somalia, rather than import it.⁷³ They claim humanitarian aid provided by Western agencies ruins local food markets – even suspecting a deliberate intention to increase the dependency of Somalis on foreign aid⁷⁴ – and makes people lazy.⁷⁵ Al Shabaab requested foreign agencies to buy the produce of Somali farmers; if this was insufficient, they advised agencies to procure food through existing trade networks rather than importing the agricultural surplus from rich countries. This would strengthen the rural economy.⁷⁶

Dealing with the insurgents obviously put aid agencies in an impossible conundrum. But “comprehensive dialogue with Al-Shabaab at all levels appeared to be the single most important action aid agencies could take to reduce the risk of diversion and improve the prospects for long-term access to areas under its control” as Jackson and Ainte noted in 2013.⁷⁷ As most agencies did not engage the movement through dialogue, they were banned. The subsequent drought of 2011-2012 caught Al Shabaab unprepared, and most of the victims – of an estimated total of 250,000 famine deaths – fell in areas they controlled. Many were not even allowed to travel to government-held areas to access aid. This caused popular anger, and the organization since then improved its aid delivery, funded largely by the Somali population through *zakat*. Some of the population in rebel-held territories has moved to government-held areas to access aid in the long drought that has afflicted the country since 2017, but there is no mass exodus to government areas to access aid.

In the first section Al Shabaab was analysed as agent; as a movement within Somali society that successfully responds to the desire for non-clan based justice, law and order, and for national self-determination; in this second section its structures of rule have been examined in terms of rebel governance, and it has been found to perform well in a technical sense: it is self-sufficient, wields an effective monopoly of violence and has imposed a legal-rational system of administrative rule upon all Somalis living in the areas they control, and even, partially, over those in areas officially controlled by

⁷¹ For example, this statement by the UN Panel of Experts in 2021 shows the international body is skeptical of Al Shabaab's alleged concerns with the well-being of the Somali population: “*Al-Shabaab has already begun to exploit the impact of climate change by providing communities with protection from flooding, acting as a service provider to communities that receive little support from the Government*” (p4; my emphasis).

⁷² As readers may know, this has been a major factor of debate in development studies. For an account of how donor politics trumped aid concerns in the run-up to the 2011-2012 famine, see Maxwell & Majid 2016: “Famine in Somalia: Competing Imperatives, Collective Failures, 2011-2012”; p119-120

⁷³ As explained to an NGO worker by Al Shabaab governor for Lower Shabelle, Abu 'Abdalle, and relayed to me by the NGO worker, now working for UNSOM, in an interview in Mogadishu on 11 March 2019.

⁷⁴ Mukhtar Robow, when he was still one of the leaders of Al Shabaab, wrote in 2009, to justify the movement's banning of foreign aid, that “*WFP developed a culture of timing when communities are harvesting their farms and they normally bring food at that time, and we understand that this is to demoralize/jeopardize farming*”; “Translation of Al-Shabaab Ban on Food Bearing USA Flag in the Regions they Control”; copy of letter circulated to foreign agencies, also published on <http://www.somaliweyn.org>, 1 November 2009.

⁷⁵ Life and Peace Institute 2014:21

⁷⁶ Interview with veteran Somali NGO worker who negotiated with AS in Bay & Bakool areas in 2009-2012, March 2019. See also Mwangi 2012: “State Collapse, Al-Shabaab, Islamism, and Legitimacy in Somalia”; p525-526

⁷⁷ Jackson & Aynite 2013: “Talking to the Other Side” p21.

the federal government. The order it imposes is predictable. Nevertheless, it has been noted that Somalis do not necessarily want to be ruled by Al Shabaab, and seem to disagree with its ideology.

In the following this contradiction will be explored as we examine how Al Shabaab attempts to impose its rule on clans and transform Somali society. For although Al Shabaab's main struggle is against the federal government and those who support it, in terms of local governance it is mainly pitted against the clan-based social order that has undermined national politics since the days of anti-colonial resistance.

3 - Al Shabaab and Social Transformation

At the local level, Somalis have always been governed by clan elders and customary law (*xeer*), with the exception of religious rural communities, ruled by Sufi sheikhs and their interpretation of sharia, often also backed by self-governing councils. The colonial state (1880s-1950), the UN trusteeship council government (1950-1960), the independent state (1960-1991) and the formal polities that have emerged since state collapse never provided more than a thin and distant layer of state rule, especially among rural communities and the urban poor.

Customary rule is egalitarian: each adult male (defined not by age but by the possession of property or children) is considered 'an elder' and has an equal right to speak. Decisions are taken by consensus, and mandates to represent the community are imperative, not executive; this means that representatives have no autonomy to negotiate or enact policies, but must follow the instructions received from the community (leading to lengthy negotiations between communities, as representatives must consult with their constituencies at every step).

This consensus-based system has maintained a degree of socio-political order in Somalia for hundreds, if not thousands of years. The image of Somali clans always at war with each other is not supported by evidence: peaceful relations between clans prevailed. But this self-governing political order has made the establishment of permanent hierarchies such as the State or the Rule of Law difficult, if not impossible. The independent Somali state denied and even outlawed clan identities, but it fell prey to the narrow clan politics of its dictator, Siad Barre. Today the most commonly heard complaint about politics in the Federal Government (and Somaliland) is 'clannism': the appropriation of positions of power by lineage groups, nepotism and patronage. Somalis consider that national development and permanent peace will not be possible as long as clan lineages fight among each other for power.

Dealing with Clans

Al-Shabaab's leadership initially planned to side-line clan leaders by forging an egalitarian organization that would transform Somali society. Most of the original al-Shabaab leaders were strongly inspired by jihadi-Salafi ideology and had limited regard for the local clan elders and their customary justice.⁷⁸ But, as Al Shabaab conquered new areas and had to govern them, their attitude towards clan became more pragmatic.

Al Shabaab recruits slightly more among minority clans⁷⁹, who have historic scores to settle with the dominant clans and feel disenfranchised by the elite power-sharing deals that are the basis of the Federal Government. As to the more powerful clans, some have very little representation in Al Shabaab

⁷⁸ Skjelderup 2020:1182.

⁷⁹ Marchal 2011 and Ingiriis 2020a.

(e.g., the Majerteen who mostly reside in Puntland), while specific lineages of powerful clans⁸⁰ are well-represented.

Some authors insist that Al Shabaab is dominated by some clans. The Hiraal Institute asserts that the movement is dominated by Hawiye, and that this helps explain the success of the Islamic State that recruits among disaffected non-Hawiye members of Al Shabaab. Hiraal calculated in 2018 that 43% of all top officials are Hawiye, rising to 56-57% in Al Shabaab's security forces.⁸¹

But, besides disregarding the fact that the Islamic State attracts recruits mostly for ideological reasons and cannot be cast as a non-Hawiye alternative to Al Shabaab, there is another flaw in this reasoning that is frequently seen in Somalia. When a non-clan based organization or group is analysed in terms of clan, it is bound to show an imbalance. Because only a clan-based approach can ensure fair representation of each clan family (and within that, of each clan). The Lower House of the Federal Parliament provides an example of a meticulously achieved balance. But, if clan doesn't matter, some imbalance is to be expected because clan was not a factor in the recruitment. It can be explained by historical and geographic factors: Al Shabaab was largely a Hawiye movement in the beginning, because it originated in Mogadishu and other Hawiye areas. That a majority of its leaders are Hawiye does not entail that it is a clan-based organization.

Clan has nonetheless been a major factor in Al Shabaab's expansion in two ways. First, Al Shabaab can use clan connections to gain a foothold in an area. When the movement feels strong enough to attempt a takeover, it brings in members from non-local clans for this effort. If the takeover fails, the 'foreign' members can retreat and a cycle of revenge killings between local clans need not take place. If the attempt succeeds, the foreign clans remain and establish non-clan rule over the local population⁸².

Second, Al Shabaab's expansion has been facilitated by settling clan conflict. Using sharia law and strictly enforcing its verdicts, Al Shabaab has sometimes put an end to cyclical clan vendettas. It then remains in the area to verify implementation, having gained some ascendancy over the leaders of the clans in conflict and some popularity among those who suffered from the conflict.

Once established in a new area, Al Shabaab convenes all the elders and makes it clear that from now on, Al Shabaab rules, and *xeer* is replaced by sharia as adjudicated in Al Shabaab courts. The cooperation of the elders is requested. If they oblige, they can become members of the district or regional advisory council. If they refuse, they are arrested or side-lined. When they are caught working or spying for the government or foreign forces, they can be killed. Elders removed by Al Shabaab are replaced with more compliant elders appointed by Al Shabaab. This selection procedure 'from above' obviously goes against the egalitarian, personal qualities-based mechanism of elders selection 'from within'.

District and regional councils play an important role in local government: deciding on priorities, overseeing the implementation of projects, solving conflicts, helping with education, recruitment and taxation. Thus the clan elders retain an important role, but entirely submitted to Al Shabaab.⁸³ The federal government, in contrast, does not request such a submission, allowing an elder more autonomy and a wider scope for representation of his community. One Jubaland elder, obliged to cooperate with Al Shabaab, said he felt like a 'chicken in a cage'.⁸⁴ Elders also run the risk of being caught up in the global war on terror: in April 2020 the Jareerweyne clan elder Suldan Abbas Mohamed Hajji, identified as Al Shabaab, was killed by a US drone near Kansuma, Jubaland, causing anger among his clan.

⁸⁰ Marchal mentions the Hawiye/Murosade, Hawiye/Duduble, the Hawiye/Habar Gidir/'ayr and the Isaaq/Haber Je'lo; Marchal 2011:47.

⁸¹ Hiraal Institute for Policy Studies 2018b: "Taming the Clans: Al-Shabab's Clan Politics".

⁸² This takeover strategy is described by Roland Marchal, 2011:48-49.

⁸³ The 42 members of the Kismayo shura set up by AS consisted of all the clans, in balance, but represented by people they had chosen (Skjelderup 2020:1180).

⁸⁴ Skjelderup 2020:1184

While clan elders working with the federal government, in Somaliland, and in Puntland and other federal member states are organized by the (non-spatial) segmentary logic of clan society, Al Shabaab organizes them by district and region. At each level of rule there is a head elder appointed by Al Shabaab.⁸⁵ They are supposed to settle clan conflict; to this intent Al Shabaab agrees they can use *xeer*.⁸⁶ However, if that fails or is too slow, Al Shabaab expects elders to hand over the troublemakers to their sharia courts, where they are tried as individuals, not as clan members. The militant organization has imprisoned and otherwise punished elders who refrained from handing over their kinsmen.

Al Shabaab imposes upon elders quotas of fighters, weapons and children their lineages must provide to the insurgency.⁸⁷ The fighters must integrate training camps, the children join 'Islamic Institutes' run by the movement, and the elders themselves must attend yearly camps where they receive religious education and are instructed in Al Shabaab governance priorities and local policies.⁸⁸ These trainings and activities seek to 'declannify' Somali society by imposing a new collective identity, as Somalis member of the *umma*, the Muslim community of believers. Another tool used in this regard are marriages arranged by Al Shabaab between fighters from ethnic minorities or weak clans and 'noble clan' women, something inconceivable until recently.⁸⁹

It seems that in most cases, after a tough and decisive start where Al Shabaab establishes that they are the new authority, relations with the local community—including with elders—soften. Low levels of flight from Al Shabaab areas to government-held areas confirm that most Somalis accept to live under Al Shabaab rule.⁹⁰ The movement has successfully made the transition, as Mancur Olson would put it, from roving to stationary bandits⁹¹, creating a proto-state. To achieve this, they firmly establish themselves as an authority above the clan, instead of replacing clan authority as their ideology posits. It seems to be a temporary policy inspired by pragmatism, and the objective remains to entirely overcome clannism and replace this collective identity with a (Salafi) Muslim Somali identity.

Public Opinion about Al Shabaab

It seems that despite the governance brought by Al Shabaab, Somalis in general reject the movement and would prefer the federal government, if only it functioned. There's a pragmatic aspect to this opinion: if ruled by Al Shabaab, the Somali population would be cut off from the rest of the world, unable to travel and to participate in global affairs. The status of citizen of a pariah state is nothing to look forward to. But the federal state does not function at all, except as a conduit for clan-based patronage, and most Somalis I met have given up the hope that it ever will. As to the population living under Al Shabaab rule, it is hard to know their opinion about the organization, since no polls can be undertaken there. One study published in 2019, however, provides interesting insights.⁹²

⁸⁵ Hiraal Institute 2018b:3.

⁸⁶ Ingiriis 2020a and Skjelderup 2020:1186.

⁸⁷ Marchal & Yusuf 2016:50, Ingiriis 2020a, Hiraal Institute 2018b.

⁸⁸ Hiraal Institute for Policy Studies 2018c: "The Fighters Factory: Inside Al-Shabab's Education System".

⁸⁹ Ingiriis 2020a.

⁹⁰ It is difficult to distinguish the fleeing of populations to government held towns from other reasons for rural exodus (drought, employment opportunities), so precise figures cannot be given. Certainly, there has been flight away from Al Shabaab areas, but it is not massive.

⁹¹ Olson 2000: "Power and Prosperity: Outgrowing Communist and Capitalist Dictatorships"; p6–10.

⁹² Crouch & Abdi 2019: "Community Perspectives Towards Al Shabaab. Sources of Support and the Potential for Negotiations". I have used the manuscript provided by one of the authors. The data is based on a small set of 71 surveys conducted in 2017 with a wide social and geographic ambit, and on more general quantitative data collected by Saferworld from 2015 to 2017. Although the sample is small, its results resonate with what I heard in informal conversations throughout Somalia.

Respondents in this study consider that Al Shabaab is not the source, but rather the symptom of conflict, the drivers of which are *“clannism, injustice, inequality, poor governance and theft of land and resources”*. The appeal of Al Shabaab is enhanced by bad governance by the federal government, especially its clan politics, corruption and injustice. In addition, *“interventions in Somalia by international and regional actors were widely viewed as important sources of conflict.”* The ideology of Al Shabaab is seen as a response to these drivers of conflict, not in itself a driver.

While Somalis appreciate the security and stability Al Shabaab has brought, consistently reserving the highest praise for their justice system, they resent the violence used by the organization and their restriction of liberties, especially the lack of freedom of speech and information (smartphones are banned), of movement and of political association. Torture and assassination are the most hated aspects of Al Shabaab violence. Moreover, *“All respondents disagreed with Al-Shabaab’s religious ideology, and many doubted their claim to be religious”*⁹³, especially because ‘Allah does not permit the killing of innocent civilians’. Although Somalis agree with Al Shabaab’s judiciary mechanisms, one cannot infer that they find Al Shabaab itself just.

In terms of governance, Somalis appreciate that Al Shabaab spreads resources equally or according to need, and that the political influence of clans is reduced by Al Shabaab, neutralizing the inequality between clans and allowing *“people from different clans [to] trust one another”*. *“Al-Shabaab defeated clannism whereas the government is defeated by clannism”*⁹⁴ said one respondent in the survey. The ban on qat is appreciated especially by women, because the drug causes domestic violence and poverty. There is also much praise for the lack of corruption within Al Shabaab. Somalis regret, however, that Al Shabaab does not provide services such as health and development, and chases away NGOs seeking to provide them for free. Some respondents appreciate Al Shabaab’s efforts at providing Islamic education; others dislike this, seeing it as indoctrination. Finally, all Somalis resent the heavy tax burden imposed by the insurgents, especially *zakat*, although they agree that Al Shabaab offers more in return than the government or previous faction-based regional administrations.⁹⁵

All respondents say that the current military approach to Al Shabaab is ineffective and doing more harm than good. Criticism is especially directed at AMISOM (ATMIS). The troop-contributing countries have their own stakes in the Somali conflict, and they say it would be better if AMISOM leaves or changes its role. There is a sense that the government and regional actors are not wholly committed to the struggle against Al Shabaab. There is faith that a reconstituted Somali National Army could deal with the insurgents, but also a feeling that military approaches have been exhausted. Three quarters of the respondents favoured negotiations, and many were positive about Al Shabaab joining the government (not taking it over).

That so many Somalis are in favour of talks between Al Shabaab and the government is not due to an expectation of quick results, but because lengthy talks between Somalis usually result in consensus. As a Somali saying goes, ‘Let us talk’ means ‘let us solve our problems’.

Perspectives for a peace deal

Al Shabaab’s leaders have made it clear they have no desire to enter talks with the government, which they consider illegitimate. Unlike the Taliban, motivated by the desire for international recognition, Al Shabaab has not evidenced interest in talks with international actors either. Although voices seeking a negotiated settlement between the international community, its protégés in Somalia and Al Shabaab are

⁹³ Crouch & Abdi 2019:3/8.

⁹⁴ Crouch & Abdi 2019:4/8, quoting a respondent from Gedo.

⁹⁵ People living in areas controlled by the federal government face double taxation, which is of course considered unbearable; but Al Shabaab taxation, because of the reasons explained above, is considered more legitimate.

increasingly heard both inside Somalia and among international experts, it is hard to think of any external third party that could host and facilitate such talks. In fact, as the Somali scholar Mohammed Ibrahim Shire points out, the only viable interlocutor between the insurgents, the current government and its foreign backers are the clan elders.⁹⁶

As noted, working for the government can get a clan elder killed; but here again, Al Shabaab is pragmatical in practice, and understands that community representatives must also deal with the government, and in practice – as with punishments like the chopping off of thieves' hands or death by stoning for adultery – such punishment is rarely meted out; it is reserved for what Al Shabaab's secret service or judges consider the most egregious cases, as a warning to others. In fact, elders have frequently been used as go-betweens between the insurgents and the government to deal with local issues such as truces, prisoner releases etc. This position increases their autonomy, although they must remain careful not to cross Al Shabaab's red lines.

Besides Al Shabaab, on the government side there are two parties which are also opposed to negotiation: the diaspora bloc that dominates the current federal government, and international military-security actors determined to avoid the takeover of Somalia by jihadists.

In the previous parliament (2017-2022) two-thirds of MPs and many of the senior officials of government had a foreign nationality besides the Somali one. This is largely the result of the flight of the intellectual ruling class from Somalia since the dictatorship of Siad Barre, and especially after the collapse of the state and civil war; but it also underlines the foreign, imposed nature of the contemporary Somali federal state. Diaspora members are seen as reliable partners by foreign donors because they are familiar with the values, systems and language of liberal democracy.⁹⁷ The fact that most members of the Somali diaspora prefer to leave their family abroad can be taken as evidence that they have little faith in the long-term stability of the country. A power grab by Al Shabaab would cause an exodus of this diaspora bloc, and of the modern Somali urban class that identifies with Western values, in a repeat of the Afghan upper- and middle-class exodus after the Taliban takeover in 2021.

Although the notion that negotiations with Al Shabaab may have to take place is becoming more prevalent, including among international security experts, there is little perspective for such talks taking place in the near future. The militants feel they are winning anyhow and only need to wait until donor fatigue sets in and Western impatience with the federal government – which after 12 years has still not agreed on a constitution, nor moved in the direction of general elections – runs its course. Al Shabaab has observed and drawn its lessons from the US-Taliban negotiations in Doha. The federal government and its backers consider Al Shabaab's position is currently too strong to negotiate with them, and that they should degrade Al Shabaab until it accepts a peace deal favourable to the government. Thus the conflict in Somalia is set to continue indefinitely.

Conclusion

International military-security actors should reflect on the results achieved, so far, in the efforts to degrade and delegitimize Al Shabaab. Efforts to increase the effectiveness of the Somali National Army have been, by and large, a failure.⁹⁸ The current handover of responsibility for security from ATMIS to the Somali National Army, planned for the end of 2023, is unlikely to take place. ATMIS and its predecessor AMISOM are almost entirely funded by the European Union, costing it 2 billion Euros

⁹⁶ Shire, Mohammed Ibrahim 2021: "Dialoguing and negotiating with Al-Shabaab: the role of clan elders as insider-partial mediators", *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 15:1, 1-22

⁹⁷ Ken Menkhaus calls this a "'suspended elite', oddly disconnected from their own society" in Menkhaus, Ken 2018: "Elite Bargains and Political Deals Project: Somalia Case Study", UK Stabilisation Unit; p26.

⁹⁸ Williams, Paul D. 2020: "Building the Somali National Army: Anatomy of a Failure, 2008–2018" in *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 43:3, 366-391

between 2007 and 2019. Its incapacity to take back terrain from Al Shabaab and hold it has accentuated EU donor fatigue. Drone warfare or the rare direct involvement of foreign special operation forces have not significantly degraded AS military capacity. Sustained communication campaigns and 'stabilization' efforts trying to convince the Somali population to support the federal government instead of Al Shabaab, and well-funded defection and rehabilitation campaigns to wean militants away from the movement, have experienced some success but Al Shabaab's effective control over population and territory has steadily grown, nonetheless.

An increase in international funding for drone warfare, special operations, defectors programmes and stabilization and service provision may possibly reverse this trend, but this is speculative, and chances are it would result in a stalemate instead of a trend reversal. It is worthwhile to reassess what threat Al Shabaab rule concretely poses to the patrons of the Somali federal government.

There is no indication that Western countries are directly threatened by the Somali insurgents.⁹⁹ Al Shabaab does not pursue a global jihad, but wants to rule its own society (like the Taliban).¹⁰⁰ At the time of writing, the security discourse is shifting from 'Global War on Terror' to 'Red Sea Security'; there seems to be an assumption that a Somalia ruled by Al Shabaab would threaten shipping lanes and stability in the region, but this assumption is not based on any evidence. Al Shabaab has not engaged in acts of piracy, which it condemns.

The more profound reason for the fight against Al Shabaab, which justifies it among Western public opinion, is of a moral nature. The movement is rejected because of its professed values: disregard for women's and other human rights, and for liberal values such as freedom of expression and of association. Al Shabaab is rejected as *barbarian*. Public reports about Al Shabaab invariably focus on issues such as 'terrorism', 'violence' and 'human rights'. An analyst needs access to special sites requiring registration like jihadology.net or risk navigating 'the dark web' to even hear Al Shabaab's own points of view, thoroughly canceled from the public domain. The insurgents are framed as the enemies of Western civilization, and this justifies attacking them in their home territory.

Let's examine this from the Somali point of view. If the vast majority of Somalis agree to be ruled by sharia, why should Western powers object? In terms of rational interests, how is this detrimental to these powers? There are barely any material investments to protect in Somalia, except the State itself, that is set to remain dependent on foreign funding and therefore a liability rather than an asset. The security argument has been dealt with above. The only reason Al Shabaab supporters can find for Western hostility is ideological. Noting that most of the AMISOM troop contributing countries are Christian, Al Shabaab believes that it faces a 'crusade' and refers to democracy as a 'foreign religion'.¹⁰¹

The notion that the international community may be waging a religious war will seem ludicrous to Western observers; but if, as argued above, the main reason for hostility against Al Shabaab is indeed based on moral values, then this accusation may not be that far off the mark. The growing clout of Islamic State¹⁰², whose pretention to wage a global jihad against Western domination poses a more obvious threat to its security, may bring about a change of thinking about Al Shabaab. It could become

⁹⁹ I am not privy to the information intelligence agencies receive, but I have not come across any evidence that Al Shabaab has ever planned a terrorist attack outside East Africa. For a recent critical discussion of the USA's security strategy towards Somalia, see Sarah Harrison: "What the White House Use of Force Policy Means for the War in Somalia", International Crisis Group, 20 October 2022 ([link](#)).

¹⁰⁰ Al Shabaab has consistently explained its operations in Kenya, Uganda and Ethiopia as retaliation for those countries' participation in AMISOM, suggesting such attacks would cease after the withdrawal of those troops. It has however not given up on the 'Greater Somalia' dream, reuniting Somali populations in northeast Kenya and the Ethiopian eastern lowlands with 'the motherland', and this makes its neighbours understandably anxious.

¹⁰¹ A recent reiteration of this point of view can be found in the interview with Mahad Karate, one of Al Shabaab's leaders, 15 June 2022; Jamal Osman 2022 op cit.

¹⁰² The spectacular growth of Islamic State in West and North Africa is described by Luis Martinez in "L'Afrique, le prochain califat? La spectaculaire expansion du djihadisme" Tallandier, Paris, 2023.

‘the lesser of two evils’; in the same manner the US and NATO realized that the fight against the Taliban was allowing Islamic State to grow stronger in Afghanistan.

Perhaps the best way to inflect the unproductive international approach towards Al Shabaab, and Somalia more generally, is to prioritize an approach centred on the interests of the Somali people. Peace should be the priority. As long as foreign nations are willing to use force to defend their values, perceived interests and local allies, there will be no peace. True, a military and political withdrawal from Somalia would probably cause the collapse of the federal state, the takeover of government by Al Shabaab and the exodus of tens or hundreds of thousands of Somalis. This is not a welcome prospect, but it may still be better for the Somali people, in the long run, than another decade or two of war. At least, just like in Afghanistan since the Taliban takeover, there would be peace.

National peace is also necessary for Somalis to confront climate change. According to data of the International Panel on Climate Change, a 3-4 degree rise of temperature and decreasing (and more erratic) precipitation will make most of the interior of Somalia unliveable by 2060.¹⁰³ Besides causing misery in Somalia, this will send streams of climate refugees – maybe even millions – to Kenya, Ethiopia and beyond.

There are alternatives to this depressing prospect. The UN Climate Security Advisor in Somalia Christophe Hodder, appointed in 2020, is experimenting with ‘environmental peace’ by seeking to bring clans in conflict together to take measures to mitigate the effects of climate change, which often give rise to the conflict (e.g. access to waterholes, to pasture).¹⁰⁴ Given the governance capacities of Al Shabaab and their interest in increasing their legitimacy through public service delivery, an ‘environmental peace’ approach of the international community with small amounts of funding focusing on water management, food production, healthy ecosystems and infrastructure could function. Such an effort would have to extend equally to all of Somalia and Somaliland at the local level and let funding decisions be taken through community consensus – in whatever way local communities find most effective.

This would entail a radical change away from the counter-terrorism approach currently followed. But the time is ripe for such radical change, because the path now taken is not only leading to a stalemate, but to a looming catastrophe. Many Somali and international experts that believe in the universality of liberal democracy or have a stake in the current approach might disagree, and perhaps this paper will initiate a welcome debate from which alternative paths can emerge to end the conflict in Somalia, and start dealing with climate change.

The international community has been trying, since colonial times, to make Somali society conform to its ideals (Italian fascism, Soviet socialism, Western liberalism) through the building of institutions and by spreading the appropriate cultural values. It is time to reverse this approach and build instead, pragmatically, on Somali political culture and existing governance arrangements, without being judgmental about them.

END

¹⁰³ For the data, see Chapter 9: Africa in UN IPCC 2022: “Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability”. For the analysis, see for example “Somalia will become almost unliveable in certain areas”, an interview with Christophe Hodder in *Ethics and Armed Forces: Controversies in Peace Ethics & Security Policy* 2021/1 ([link](#)).

¹⁰⁴ Emilie Broek & Christophe Hodder 2022: “Towards an Integrated Approach to Climate Security and Peacebuilding in Somalia”, SIPRI, Stockholm.

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