Al Shabaab Governance: Illiberal Modernization?

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Abstract: *Recent studies suggest that Al Shabaab's rule is tolerated among Somalis and has garnered some legitimacy through predictable governance, the provision of justice and a nationalist Islamist discourse. Based on extensive field work and recent scholarly research, this paper describes how Al Shabaab has successfully evolved through two critical junctures from a social movement to a quasi state-like structure. Al Shabaab outperforms the Somali state in most fields of governance. The legitimacy this brings does not translate into popularity: Somali respondents rarely align with the movement's ideology or wish to be ruled by it. Nevertheless, the movement is fundamentally transforming the Somali sociopolitical order, harnessing clan power to impose a Weberian legal-rational, albeit illiberal type of rule.*

Introduction

Al Shabaab's influence over Somali public life has steadily increased, and its apparent ease in operating within government-controlled areas suggests that it is deeply embedded in Somali society. The Islamist militants not only directly govern many rural areas of Somalia, including nearly one quarter of all district capitals in Somalia (excluding Somaliland), but they also co-govern nearly all areas held by the federal government outside Puntland (UN Panel of Experts 2021, 50 & ACLED 2024). Even in the capital Mogadishu, businesses and senior civil servants admit paying taxes to Al Shabaab and to make use of their governance systems, for example the Islamic courts.

There is no apparent solution to reduce the group's influence. Whether it takes over government or not, it will remain a player to be reckoned with in the near future. To treat it as a criminal terrorist organization that must be eliminated has not, up to date, been effective in dealing with it. It seems imperative to gain a better understanding of the movement and why it has lasted so long.

How does Al Shabaab govern the territories it rules in Somalia? How have the militants managed to grow and consolidate their grip over Somali society over the past two decades

in an environment of constant political and military hostility? Not many academic studies have been made of Al Shabaab as a political organization. The movement has mostly been studied as a violent jihadist insurgency in policy-oriented papers. This research is generally performed by people who identify with Western ideals of liberal democratic statebuilding and human rights, or who share the assumption that Al Shabaab is a negative entity that must be overcome. Fortunately, over the past years, a growing body of work, both in academia and policy papers, examines Al Shabaab more dispassionately (e.g. Crouch 2018, Crouch & Abdi 2019, Harper 2018, Ingiriis 2020, Marchal 2019, Mubarak & Jackson 2023, Shire 2021, UN Panel of Expert reports 2019-2024). I draw heavily from these papers.

Besides these secondary sources, this paper relies on 70 primary sources interviewed in or around Somalia between 2019 and 2022 for my PhD thesis on The State in Somalia; and on my experiences working as a security analyst for the international NGO community (2015-2018), with frequent travel to provinces and districts. The interviewees, including senior international experts and Somalis (members of civil society, of the academic and research communities, working for the UN or NGOs, and government employees), were questioned about their experience with aspects of Al Shabaab rule. A founding member of Al Shabaab was among them.

Elsewhere I have analysed the complicated and sometimes unorthodox methodology of performing academic research in a conflict area (Al Miah, Kluijver & Tsandzana 2024). Formal approaches are doomed to fail, so the researcher in a conflict setting must rely on personal networks and establish links of trust and support to navigate these networks. Several entry points into the social context of the research topic are necessary, knowing that the closest one can get to objectivity is by multiplying and balancing subjective points of view (Al Miah ea 2024, 60). Given the conflict endemic in Somali society, I have chosen to anonymize most quoted sources to protect them from repercussions. Public foreign sources or Somali writers with views readily accessible online are quoted normally.

In this article the movement is first analyzed as a social actor that was transformed through two critical historic junctures. In the second part, its current governance structures are examined, with a focus on how Al Shabaab manages the public realm. The agent and structure come together in part three, where the complex question of how the militants deal with Somali's clan identities is addressed. In part four an analysis of Somali public opinion, insofar it is known, shows that while only a minority shares the group's ideology, its governance is nonetheless considered legitimate, especially compared to that of the foreign-backed federal government. Finally, we reach the paradoxical conclusion that the group is modernizing Somali society in a Weberian manner, introducing a legal-rational governance structure above clan politics for the first time in Somali history.

1. Al Shabaab as a sociopolitical agent

In the following analysis of Al Shabaab, I consider it as a social actor, examining its connections to the rest of Somali society and how these developed and changed over the years, going through two major critical junctures in 2006-2007 and 2011-2013.

Origins of Al Shabaab

During the late 1970s and 1980s, political repression under Somalia's dictator Siad Barre forced most Somali Islamists into exile. Some fled to countries like Saudi Arabia and Pakistan and enrolled in religious schools. Several of Al Shabaab's early leaders, including Aden Hashi Ayro (2006-2008) and Ahmed Abdi Godane (2008-2014), fought in the Afghan jihad.[1] Meanwhile, labor migration to Arabia since the late 1970s, and the relocation of many Somali businessmen there during the privatization drive of the 1980s (which accelerated after state collapse in 1991) provided a successful experience of modern sharia-based governance to many Somalis. To Islamic scholars, businessmen and migrant workers alike, it appeared a unified Islamic identity could transcend the clan-based divisions in Somalia, which had precipitated the country into civil war, and allow the resurrection of their country (Barnes & Hassan 2007).

One of the first vectors of these new Islamist ideals was Al Itihaad al Islamiya, a militant group that operated from 1983 until 1997. Al Itihaad was notable for being one of the few groups in Somalia's civil war that was explicitly not clan-based. From 1991 to 1996, it successfully governed parts of the Gedo region (Menkhaus 2005, 13). It was expelled from the area by Ethiopian troops concerned about Islamism spilling into the restive Ogaden region. Although the organization then collapsed and its members disbanded (making its designation by the USA shortly after 9/11 as a 'listed terrorist organization' slightly absurd), its ideals and main protagonists lived on; they would later form the ideological backbone of Al Shabaab (Menkhaus 2002; Marchal 2001).

The collapse of the Somali central government in 1991 left a power vacuum filled by a patchwork of clan militias, who governed clan-defined rural areas and neighborhoods of Somalia's main cities. Amidst this chaos, Mogadishu's Sharia courts emerged to restore order and offer justice. These courts gained the backing of the city's powerful business community, whose commercial activities transcended clan boundaries. The judges of the Islamic courts and the cross-clan militias who enforced their rulings often had a background in Al Itihaad (Hansen 2013, Marchal 2011, Maruf & Joseph 2018).

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[1] Discussion with one of Al Shabaab's founding members (Burco, May 2019) confirmed in the 'Gitmo files' released on Wikileaks. See also Marchal 2011.

Al Shabaab formed in 2002[2] as a group of young people united around the Sharia court movement. Its name, meaning 'the youth' in Arabic, indicated both its desire to rejuvenate national politics and to link it to wider developments in the Islamic world. It was initially a social movement rather than a militant one. "*We were young, idealistic and full of ideas about how to turn this country around. What united us was that we did not think about clan*" explains one of the founders, who at that time was a journalist.[3] Its members, supported by powerful businessmen and respected judges, sought to mobilize Somali youth to join them, establish the rule of sharia law and enforce peace (Marchal 2009, 388). Al Shabaab's formation initially went unnoticed. It was first mentioned by analysts in 2006 when it was regarded as the armed forces of the Islamic Courts Union, ICU.

The ICU was a coalition of local sharia courts that formed in 2004. In the chaos caused by international efforts to establish a counter-terrorist Somali government through coalitions of warlords, the ICU quickly gained popularity as it positioned itself as a national alternative to factional clan leadership. It swept to power in central and southern Somalia from 2004 to 2006. Northern Somalia had embarked on a separate trajectory, achieving social peace through civilian power-sharing among clans. Somaliland declared independence in 1991, while Puntland formed in 1998 as an autonomous region of Somalia.

The ICU's connections to Al Itihaad and figures involved in the Afghan jihad attracted the hostility of the United States and Ethiopia. They funded an 'Alliance for the Restoration of Peace and Counter-Terrorism' of warlords that backed the 'Transitional Federal Government' (TFG) set up in Kenya under UN, EU and US auspices between 2002 and 2004. This alliance was however crushed by Al Shabaab in early 2006. For a brief period in 2006, the ICU governed the capital and much of Somalia. This period saw relative peace and security, with inhabitants enjoying a level of stability and freedom of movement that had been absent since the fall of Siad Barre. The ICU's rule also created an environment conducive to the operations of foreign NGOs, which had struggled to function under the previous warlord-controlled regime (Barnes & Hassan 2007; Abild 2009). However, the success of the ICU and the rising influence of Al Shabaab in the context of the War on Terror alarmed both Western and regional powers.

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[2]While most sources give 2004 or 2005 as the date of formation of Al Shabaab – e.g. Barnes & Hassan (2007, 3), Maruf & Joseph (2018, 34-35), Menkhaus (2007, 372), Marchal (2009, 283); Hansen (2008, 17) writes that "Former Shabab members claim the name Shabab, meaning 'youth', was adopted between 2004 and 2005" – the 2002 date was confirmed by another founding member of Al Shabaab (Mahad Karate, in an interview by Jamal Osman aired on Channel 4, 15 June 2022) (https://youtu.be/KVSw0E9Y1RI), as well as by the specialist of the movement Roland Marchal (personal communication Paris, 2022), revising his earlier assertion.

[3] Interview with one of the founders of the movement in Bur'o, 5 June 2019.

First critical juncture

In early December 2006, the UN Security Council called for an African intervention force, IGASOM, to help the Transitional Federal Government establish itself in Somalia. By the end of that month, Ethiopia, with tacit US support (Maruf & Joseph 2018, 44), invaded Somalia to defeat the Islamic Courts Union, marking the most violent episode in Somali history since the 1991-1993 civil war. While the ICU disbanded to avoid bloodshed, Al Shabaab emerged as the key resistance against the Ethiopian invasion.

This invasion transformed Al Shabaab into a powerful political-military movement. Fighting against the Ethiopian forces, later replaced by AMISOM troops (a UN-mandated African peacekeeping force successor to IGASOM), Al Shabaab gained popularity among Somalis as a nationalist movement (Marchal 2011, 35). Al Shabaab successfully painted foreign troops—largely from Christian countries—as "crusaders" and the TFG as an "apostate government". Initially, many Al Shabaab fighters suffered casualties against the superior Ethiopian army, prompting a shift to guerrilla warfare and rebel governance. At its peak (2007-2011), Al Shabaab controlled major ports like Mogadishu, Kismayo, and Merka, engaging in international trade. It wasn't until 2011 that AMISOM expelled Al Shabaab from Mogadishu, allowing the federal government to establish itself in the capital in 2012. A subsequent Kenyan invasion in 2012 also pushed Al Shabaab from the second largest port of Somalia, Kismayo. The first critical juncture saw Al Shabaab change from a minor social movement to a nationalist fighting force providing rebel governance to populations under its control.

Second critical juncture

Al Shabaab pledged allegiance to Al Qaeda in 2008, establishing a liaison in 2009, but it wasn't until 2012 that Al Qaeda formally accepted the group. This relationship didn't lead to substantial operational collaboration (Marchal 2018, 90); rather, it remained primarily political. The affiliation with Al Qaeda caused tensions within Al Shabaab. Discontent arose from both local commanders, who advocated for better integration with the Somali populace, and diaspora fighters who desired a more global jihadist agenda. The "purge" (2011-2013) led to the expulsion of dissenters, including many foreign fighters, and the sidelining of pragmatists who favored negotiations with the new federal government led by Hassan Sheikh Mohamud (2012-2017). Nationalist Salafis became ascendant within Al Shabaab.

The organization's increasing ideological rigidity translated into harsher governance measures, including forced compliance to their interpretation of sharia and a hostile attitude towards foreign aid. After having tried to bring aid agencies under their control – which these agencies, bound by counter-terrorism financing rules, could not consent to – Al

Shabaab asked them to leave. Many if not most of the estimated 260,000 deaths during the 2011-2012 famine occurred in areas under their control. Attacks on civilian targets, including a 2009 assault on a graduation event of medical students in Mogadishu that killed 25, further tarnished Al Shabaab's image. High-profile attacks in Uganda (2010) and Kenya (Westgate Mall 2013, Garissa University 2015) solidified its reputation abroad as a modern terrorist organization imposing its rule with violence on a reluctant populace.

The purging of moderate leaders and the increase in violence against civilians led to diminished support among ordinary Somalis. The devastating truck bomb attack in Mogadishu on October 14, 2017, which killed over 500 innocent bystanders, sparked unprecedented public demonstrations against Al Shabaab. But despite predictions of its collapse, the group persisted. In hindsight, its survival was due to two factors. First, despite occasional military incursions by AMISOM and Somali security forces, and airstrikes and drone attacks, areas under militant control were relatively peaceful and secure, and better governed than government controlled areas, where predatory behavior by officials was (and remains) the rule. Second, the purges had enhanced Al Shabaab's internal cohesion and its ideological coherence as a ruling authority. The second critical juncture thus consolidated the group's legitimacy, despite an apparent loss of popularity. This will be further explored below.

Balance of power today

Since the internal purges, Al Shabaab has not experienced another critical juncture.[4] Under the leadership of (Abu Ubaidah) Ahmed Diriye since 2014, the organization has consolidated its power and improved its structural capacities but undergone no major changes. Estimates of Al Shabaab's fighters range from 5,000 to 12,000 (Hiraal Institute 2018d, UN Panel of Experts 2024, 9). Despite this relatively small fighting force, Al Shabaab maintains control over large areas through mobility and reliance on local clan militias.

It is confronted by a much larger fighting force consisting of the Somali National Army (32,000), the federal police (40,000) and several thousand members of the National Intelligence and Security Agency as well as close to 15,000 troops from Kenya, Ethiopia, Uganda, Burundi and Djibouti under ATMIS, the successor of AMISOM since 2021. The

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[4] During a final review of this article, I became aware of the following report of Karin Göldner-Ebenthal published by the Berghof Foundation in 2019: "Salafi jihadi armed groups and conflict (de-)escalation: The case of Al Shabaab in Somalia". She describes three "strategic shifts" in the evolution of Al Shabaab. The first two correspond closely with the critical junctures I identify: she calls shift 1, in 2009, "consolidation and governance" and shift 2, 2013, "the purge". The author identifies a third shift: "reacting to popular backlash" after the October 2017 truck bombing. Although Al Shabaab certainly perpetrated the attack, they never claimed it, because of the public anger it provoked. See also Shire 2021, 14. With hindsight, what Göldner-Ebenthal identifies as a strategic shift rather seems a tactical move.

Somali forces are supported by trainers, drones and air support from Western countries, Turkey and the UAE while AMISOM/ATMIS, entirely funded by the EU, has received technical and logistical support from UNSOS and Western countries. Recent analysis argues that the Somali armed forces lack cohesion and morale, remain dependent on foreign support, and do not seem capable of defeating Al Shabaab (Williams 2019; Williams 2024). ATMIS's mandate ended late 2024. It has been succeeded by the African Union Support and Stabilization Mission in Somalia (AUSSOM), but at the time of writing (March 2025) the new mission has been hamstrung by political conflict between Ethiopia and Somalia as well as by funding problems and has only partially deployed.

Federal government rule is based on power sharing among clans. This has led to the failure not only of efforts to build national security forces, but also of attempts by international organizations to establish modern governance structures (Kluijver 2023). International funding – at least 50% of government revenue, likely much more – is channeled by clan leaders to their constituencies through power-sharing arrangements, instead of being used to improve governance (Menkhaus 2018). Since the establishment of the federal government in 2012, national political reforms, such as agreeing on the constitution or holding universal elections, have stalled.

International attempts to provide essential services through the UN and NGOs to the population, and secure its buy-in for the political process – what is often referred to as 'stabilization' in policy papers – have largely failed due to clan-based corruption and self-serving behavior by the ruling elites. In short, the federal government is failing on nearly all fronts of governance, allowing Al Shabaab to gain an advantage. Al Shabaab has also deeply infiltrated the federal government, giving the movement leverage to influence legislation and political negotiations.[5] For example, after President Farmaajo's election in 2017, military operations against Al Shabaab virtually ceased, suggesting a tacit agreement between the government and the insurgents (Bryden 2021).

The new government led by Hassan Sheikh Mohamud (2022-present) initiated a military offensive against Al Shabaab in the summer of 2022. To achieve its initial successes, the Army relied on local clan militias and US support, suggesting it is not capable of taking on the insurgents on its own.[6] In towns recaptured by the government, like Adan Yabal and Moqokori, Al Shabaab continues to exert control, effectively convincing or coercing the returning population not to cooperate with government forces. The federal government's record of ineffective governance has led to local skepticism about its staying power, so civilian leaders maintain ties with the insurgents anyhow (Mubarak & Jackson 2023). By mid-2023, the momentum of the offensive waned, with many areas reverting entirely to Al

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[5] Interview with the previous National Security Advisor to the President; Mogadishu, 26 February 2019.
[6] Omar Mahmood, regional expert working for the International Crisis Group, Brussels, 12 May 2022.

Shabaab control. Attacks in 2023 and 2024 on government targets and military installations in highly protected areas (such as the Emirati-run army training camp on Jazira Beach, attacked on 10 February 2024) indicate that Al Shabaab's striking power is intact.

In Puntland, Al Shabaab has a presence in the Galgala mountains near Bosaso and wields influence over this port town and over Galka'yo, but it has little influence over the Majerteen clans that dominate this autonomous federal state. In independent Somaliland, the group has no territorial control, but it operates (non-violently) through clan connections, as I was told by an opposition politician[7] and two national security specialists[8] (see also IGAD 2016 on how Al Shabaab used Somaliland as a back office to prepare an attack in Ethiopia).

2. Al Shabaab's governance systems

Having examined Al Shabaab as an evolving social agent, we will now turn to its structural and governance aspects. Al Shabaab's leader is supported by an advisory council (including senior militants and clan elders, see below) and an executive council, which consists of several departments, including defense, intelligence, finance, justice, missionary activity/education, health/humanitarian affairs, and regional governance. This structure is replicated at regional and district levels, with similar advisory and executive bodies (UN Panel of Experts 2020, 44). While regional and district governors enjoy some autonomy, they are rotated to prevent clan favoritism (interview with junior lecturer in political science, Mogadishu, 6 March 2019). Village governance is simpler, usually with one representative for administrative affairs and another for law and order. The structure is not very innovative and resembles state systems from Somalia's past, with the benefit of familiarity for the population. What sets it apart from previous governance systems is that authorities enjoy no impunity, and its expediency, notably in implementing fiscal policies and justice.

Fiscal policies

Al Shabaab raises revenue by taxing nearly all economic activities in southern and central Somalia. It maintains detailed records of businesses to ensure tax compliance (UN Panel of Experts 2020, 9). In 2020, 44 out of 50 businesses surveyed in government-controlled cities reported paying taxes to the group (Hiraal 2020, 2). Taxation extends to agricultural products, livestock, vehicles and goods transported, and *zakat* (2.5% of wealth above a certain threshold, paid yearly as religious charity). Al Shabaab can additionally impose a variable war tax when deemed necessary (UN Panel of Experts 2021, 17). Income tax seems

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[7] Interview in Hargeisa, 8 May 2019
[8] Interview in Hargeisa, 18 June 2020.

rare, and only seems to be levied on some government salaries; even senior military in the Somali National Army pay the militants (Hiraal 2020, 6-7). Of particular concern is that Al Shabaab, through infiltration of the government, seems to have unlimited access to cargo manifests and financial information, allowing precise taxation demands.

Funds are deposited in bank, mobile or internet accounts, using mobile money systems, bank transfers, cash and crypto currencies. Although taxation by the militants has generated significant attention over the past decade (UN Panel of Experts reports since 2017), efforts to strangle financial flows, orchestrated by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime with the Somali Federal Government since 2020, have been sluggish due to non-compliance by Somali financial institutions and insufficient pressure from the federal government (UN Panel of Experts 2023, 28 & 2024, 17).

Estimates suggest Al Shabaab collects around $160 million per year (UN Panel of Experts 2024, 15). In turn, the group's expenditures are estimated at around $120 million per year. While some funding goes to education and development projects, most tax revenue supports military efforts and is spent on salaries, which (unlike the government) the militants pay in full and on time. The surplus is mostly invested in the Somali economy. The UN Panel of Experts reported in 2024 that Al Shabaab had established an 'investment committee' (p16) to invest in legitimate businesses. and occasionally compels companies in Mogadishu engaged in economically strategic activities to share ownership.

Compliance is high; disputes are settled in court, and non-payment can lead to violent collection methods or punishment. Most reports (e.g. by the Hiraal Institute and the UN Panel of Experts) describe Al Shabaab taxation as extortion, and focus on the violence meted out to Somalis who attempt to escape taxation. A recent report on the issue is titled 'Terror and Taxes' (Bahadur, 2022). But researchers at the Hiraal Institute note that some businesses agree with the services the militants provide in return, notably security (Hiraal 2020, 8). The director of a Somali NGO working in rural areas explained to me that Somalis find the tax burdens imposed by the militants heavy, but 'fair' since they are predictable and transparent and can be successfully appealed to in Sharia courts. Somalis do not compare Al Shabaab taxation to an ideal, but to that by the government, where a hefty bribe paid to tax collectors is usually sufficient to avoid being taxed a seemingly random amount, as two wealthy businessmen in the capital told me.[9] Checkpoints manned by government forces are experienced as a particular nuisance by road-users.

Al Shabaab has achieved a level of fiscal self-sufficiency that contrasts sharply with Somalia's historically aid-dependent state institutions. Unlike the Somali government, which relies on foreign funding, Al Shabaab's revenue generation is self-sufficient, systematic and

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[9] Interviews in Jazira Hotel on 6 October 2020 and at Shabeel Resort, 27 February 2019.

geographically diversified. This financial independence bolsters their operational capabilities and complicates local and international efforts to counter the group's influence. Moreover, the group has created state-like legal frameworks through which it legitimizes its fiscal authority. This is crucial in distinguishing taxation from extortion (Nozick 1974).

Management of the public realm

Al Shabaab not only gathers information for fiscal purposes but also enforces strict administrative control over humanitarian organizations in areas it controls. When Al Shabaab takes over an area, humanitarian groups are required to re-register and submit staff CVs, activity reports, and inventories. These documents are then frequently used against them (Marchal 2011). Fearful of abductions or extortion by the militants on the one hand, and of falling foul of counter-terrorism financing legislation on the other (despite 'carve-outs' for life-saving assistance), international NGOs avoid operating in areas held by the militants.[10]

Among Al Shabaab's most unpopular policies are the bans on smoking and qat (a narcotic stimulant widely used by Somali men). These bans are driven not only by moral, but also by economic concerns. Qat does not grow in Somalia and is imported from Kenya and Ethiopia, draining Somalia's economy. The federal government taxes qat imports, a practice Al Shabaab decries as immoral (Life and Peace Institute 2014, 19). The group has enacted environmental regulations, including bans on tree-cutting, charcoal production and plastic bag use. Although this drew international ridicule (New York Times 2018), it likely has a positive environmental impact. In a recent deal with the Saleban clan of the Habar Gedir, Al Shabaab named the obligation to protect the local environment as one of the conditions to allow continued clan self-governance (Mubarak & Jackson 2023, 19).

Al Shabaab promotes self-reliance through its media, advocating for the consumption of local foods over imported products like rice and pasta. The group portrays local produce as healthier and more beneficial than imported soft drinks filled with 'chemicals' (Harper 2018, 81). This discourse of economic nationalism is framed through religious rhetoric (Chonka 2016, 12). Al Shabaab regulates the export of cash crops like lemons and sesame to ensure that domestic markets are not undercut by export-oriented production (Hiraal Institute 2020, 7). While data on economic development in Al Shabaab-controlled areas is scarce, some areas under its control, like the cities of Jilib and Saakow in Jubaland, have grown faster than the nearby government-controlled regional capital Kismayo (Mubarak & Jackson 2023, 12).

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[10] As security coordinator for the NGO sector in 2016-2018, I found activities by international organizations in Al Shabaab held territory were constrained more from the threat of being found out by risk-averse donors than from local security concerns.

In education, Al Shabaab has replaced most religious schools with institutions it controls, known as Islamic Institutes, where attendance is compulsory. The curriculum mainly focuses on Koranic studies. While local communities are allowed to establish their own non-religious schools, Al Shabaab imposes curricula and textbooks, which are often in Arabic—a language not widely spoken in Somalia (Hiraal Institute 2018c). Al Shabaab's poor record in providing education is among the most criticized aspects of the group. The Hiraal Institute points out that many current Al Shabaab leaders have only secondary-level education, a shift from earlier leadership, many of whom held university degrees. Al Shabaab's use of indoctrination is generally disliked, but their moral appeal on Somalis to further the public interest by behaving like good Muslims does resonate widely (Crouch 2018, Mubarak & Jackson, 2023).

Justice

Al Shabaab's provision of justice is widely recognized as one of its governance successes (Hansen 2013, 84; Jackson & Aynte 2013, 14; Crouch and Abdi 2019; Marchal 2019; Harper 2018, 96-98). Residents from Mogadishu travel to Al Shabaab-controlled areas to seek judgments in its Islamic courts, known for their swift and decisive rulings, that are implemented by the militants in Mogadishu as well as in almost all other locations supposedly controlled by the federal government. This efficiency contrasts starkly with the federal justice system, which suffers from long delays, corruption, and lack of enforcement, with elites enjoying near-total impunity (Gündel, Berg, and Ibrahim 2016, 21-23).

As seen above, law and order have been central to Al Shabaab's mission since the movement's inception. Over the years, Al Shabaab's courts have grown increasingly Salafist, adopting harsher interpretations of sharia (Harper 2018, 97-98). Local courts vary somewhat in their application of rules concerning for example dress codes, qat, and Western music, but the overall trend is toward stricter enforcement. Although some people criticize Al Shabaab's courts, particularly regarding defendants' rights (Maruf and Joseph 2018, 87-88), they are nearly always preferred to government courts.[11] Though Al Shabaab's patriarchal and conservative judgments may not align with Western liberal standards, they are considered fair by most Somalis. Perhaps counter-intuitively for Western readers, one study showed that Somali women view Al Shabaab's courts positively, noting that within the framework of Sharia law, which is experienced as more progressive than customary law, they can expect justice (ICG 2019, 6).

One reason for the popularity of Al Shabaab's legal system is its simplicity. A Dutch-Somali entrepreneur who resettled in Hargeisa contrasted Al Shabaab's straightforward laws, which

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[11] This was stressed by all my interviewees, including a Banadir court judge (Mogadishu, 9 March 2019), although he insisted they had no legal authority to deliver justice outside the federal justice sector.

can fit on a few pages, with the complex legal texts in the federal system, where laws for any given subject can run into hundreds of pages. These lengthy documents, usually written by foreign-trained consultants, are inaccessible to the average Somali, creating a sense of legal arbitrariness. In contrast, Al Shabaab's rules are clear, predictable, and blend Sharia with customary law; their familiarity makes them more widely accepted.[12]

A junior lecturer at the Somali International University and a veteran UNSOM Human Rights officer both highlighted that Al Shabaab's justice system operates independently from political oversight. Judges are rotated and their clan identity is typically kept secret, ensuring impartiality.[13] Even senior members of the group are subject to its courts, as no one is exempt from the law. Harsh punishments such as amputations or stonings are used sparingly and are reserved for the most serious offenses, serving as warnings to others. This explains why citizens are rounded up to watch public punishments, another practice of Al Shabaab universally disliked by Somalis.

Sharia law was familiar to most Somalis when Al Shabaab's courts were established, but the group's interpretation introduced significant changes. While Sharia used to be subservient to clan society, it now stands above it, as a senior analyst working with the government pointed out.[14] Thus, Sharia law as practiced by Al Shabaab replaces the collective responsibility upheld in customary law (*xeer*) with individual responsibility. Under *xeer*, if a member of one clan kills someone from another clan, the entire clan is held accountable, which can result in cycles of revenge killings. Sharia law, by holding only the perpetrator accountable, represents a significant shift in Somali society's approach to justice. This reversal in the order of legal precedence, placing the responsibility of the individual above that of the group, has a potentially monumental impact on the fabric of Somali society, demoting (without removing) the role of clan within social life. All interviewees I spoke to, as well as respondents in studies quoted above, consider this a positive development, even though some would prefer Western law to be above *xeer*.

Humanitarian relief and development

Since 2009, Al Shabaab has emphasized food security as a key objective, advocating for increased domestic food production over reliance on imports. It argues that Western humanitarian aid, particularly from the UN, disrupts local markets and fosters dependence. A veteran Somali NGO worker with experience in negotiating access described how this

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[12] Interview with Khaalid Hassan in Hargeisa, 30 April 2019.
[13] Interviews in Mogadishu on resp. 6 and 11 March 2019. The junior lecturer and his extended family had not been able to ascertain the clan identity of the local sharia judge in his home community, and the human rights officer concurred that this was central to Al Shabaab's image of judicial impartiality.
[14] Interview with a Somali think tank director on 26 February 2019.

criticism was leveled at him by local Al Shabaab officials; however he could not convince his NGO directors, who needed to distribute the donor-arranged food aid they had received.[15] Al Shabaab's leaders have urged the UN to purchase food from Somali farmers or import it through local traders to avoid damaging the economy (Life and Peace Institute 2014, 21).

By establishing the Office for Supervising the Affairs of Foreign Agencies in 2009, Al Shabaab sought to reclaim sovereignty, positioning itself as an authority independent of and above foreign aid (Mwangi 2012, 525-526). In 2010, Al Shabaab claimed significant increases in agricultural yields, purportedly enough to feed half a million people without external aid (Smith 2010). Although the famine, a year later, raised doubts about these claims, the group's focus on food sovereignty has remained constant.

Since 2012 the group has improved its own aid delivery, largely funded through the *zakat* it collects from the Somali population, but also supported by Islamic charities in Gulf states and beyond[16]. In 2017 the UN claimed its intervention in Somalia averted possible famine. However, no starvation deaths were reported in Al Shabaab-controlled areas either, suggesting the group's publicized aid distribution efforts were not only propaganda, but also effective. Al Shabaab also engages in humanitarian development work. For example, after floods along the Juba river in 2023, Al Shabaab organized the construction of riverbank protection walls and the rebuilding of damaged homes (UN Panel of Experts 2024, 38-39).

State-constitutive rebel governance

Stathis Kalyvas (2018) argues that territory-bound violent jihadism should be viewed as a form of revolutionary insurgency, like that of Marxist rebel groups, rather than as transnational organized crime, as governments commonly see it. Unlike non-territorial terrorist organizations, insurgents must cultivate relationships with local populations, offering something they need. For Somalis, the critical need was peace, order, justice, and basic services (Skjelderup 2020, 1177), which amounts to "governance". From its early days, Al Shabaab has provided predictability and order in the areas it controls. The administrative capacity the group has developed is unprecedented in Somalia, also compared to pre-civil war state governance. While crime and clan conflict appear endemic features of Somali society over at least the past half century, they are relatively rare in Al Shabaab territories (Crouch & Abdi 2019). Al Shabaab exercises a total monopoly of violence in areas it controls. Possession of an unregistered weapon, for example, is a punishable offense.

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[15] This Somali NGO worker had negotiated humanitarian access with Al Shabaab in several parts of the country since 2009; interview in Mogadishu on 11 March 2019.

[16] When I was working as analyst of the NGO community in Somalia I had access to names of at least 10 such charities from the Gulf (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar and the UAE) that operated in Somalia regardless of international counter-terrorist financing rules. It is difficult to retrieve this information on the internet.

Al Shabaab's control over violence, taxation, justice and the public realm can be interpreted through the lens of rebel governance. If seen as the sole legitimate authority in its territories, its rule mirrors state-constitutive practices, aligning with classical political theory on state formation as developed by Norbert Elias or Charles Tilly. As the examples of tax calculation suggest, Al Shabaab governance is based on information gathering, a primary instrument of state governance (Scott 2018).[17] In 2022 the UN Panel of Experts reproduced a 'household survey form' that the militants had distributed to all households in a given area (requesting precise information about family members, possessions and revenues) as well as a 'farming permit' delivered by Al Shabaab (UN Panel of Experts 2022, 45 & 84).

3. Transformation of a clan-based society

Al Shabaab's relationship with Somalia's clan-based social order sheds light on how the insurgent group aims to transform society. For centuries, Somali governance has been primarily led by clan elders using *xeer*, customary law (Lewis 1961, Gundel 2006). Clan self-governance is consensus-based: decisions are made collectively, and each male elder has an equal right to voice his opinion. Mandates given to clan representatives are imperative, meaning they must strictly follow the community's instructions without negotiating independently.[18] This process can lead to lengthy deliberations but fosters negotiation skills. Clan elders use *xeer* to resolve disputes both within and between clans. *Xeer* combines clan jurisprudence with elements of Sharia, but it also operates on the principle of might, as stronger clans can disregard the justice claims of weaker clans. This has led to widespread grievances about the fairness of the system, contributing to instability and allowing for the historic abuse of minorities and smaller groups (and women) by dominant clans (men). Despite these grievances, *xeer* has managed to maintain social and political order in Somalia for hundreds of years (Cassanelli 1982).

Customary rule and the principle that each adult male is equally sovereign has made it difficult to establish hierarchical political structures like a central state or the rule of law. The state, first introduced by colonial powers, never displaced clan self-governance, even after independence. Instead, the state became an arena for competing clans (Baadiyow 2017). Countless discussions with Somalis show that clannism, rather than terrorism, poverty, or

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[17] In "Seeing Like a State" James C. Scott argues that collecting simplified data about the population and the economy is primordial to the exercise of state power, naturally leading to authoritarianism.

[18] Examples of how the imperative mandate and consensus works in practice can be seen in detailed accounts of the 1993 Borama Conference which established the structures of Somaliland's state, and the 1998 Garowe conference establishing Puntland. I.M. Lewis' ethnographic study of clan governance in Somaliland, 'A Pastoral Democracy' (1961) remains the most profound exposition on this matter. Although the crucial difference between 'imperative' and 'executive' mandates has become somewhat forgotten in political science, it is well explained in the Venice Commission report of 2009 included for that purpose in the bibliography.

lack of education, is considered the main factor holding back collective progress. Clannism, the practice of allocating power and resources based on clan affiliations, has plagued Somalia's national politics since before independence. The collapse of Somalia's state in 1991 led to a resurgence of clan self-governance unadulterated by formal state structures, accompanied by economic growth, peace and stability. International experts tasked with designing a new Somali state then used self-governing clan areas as 'building blocks' to establish a federal state (Bryden 1999), thus inadvertently formalizing and enshrining clan politics.

Clan-based power distribution remains central to the functioning of the federal Somali government today. Parliamentary seats and government positions are divided along clan lines, and each federal member state is dominated by a single clan family. While this system of power-sharing has helped maintain stability, it has also led to inefficiency, corruption, and abuse of office. Public office is mostly used to distribute resources among clan members and allies, fostering resentment among Somalis who do not belong to the strong lineages and scorn for a system that prioritizes clan connections over merit and national interest (Menkhaus 2018).

Al Shabaab's position on clannism has evolved over time. Initially, the group, along with its predecessors Al Itihaad and the Islamic Courts Union, strongly opposed the clan-based order, viewing it as incompatible with its vision of a unified Islamic state under Sharia law. However, as Al Shabaab began governing territories, it adopted a more pragmatic approach toward clan dynamics. Al Shabaab has utilized clan networks to expand its influence in two regards. First, the group has leveraged clan connections to gain a foothold in new areas. When attempting to take control of a region, Al Shabaab often brings in fighters from non-local clans. If the takeover is unsuccessful, these foreign clans can withdraw without triggering a cycle of revenge killings among the local population. If successful, the non-local clans establish control, minimizing the risk of reproducing skewed power relations among local lineages (Marchal 2011, 48-49).

Second, Al Shabaab has positioned itself as a mediator in longstanding clan conflicts. The group has successfully quelled inter-clan violence in several areas, often gaining local support in the process. One Somali UN staff member described to me how Al Shabaab had ended a century-long feud between two Hawiye clans in Central Somalia. This approach allows the group to establish control over areas where clan conflicts have persisted for generations, demonstrating its capacity to impose peace where traditional authorities have failed.[19] Sharia is then readily accepted as standing above clan law by the population.

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[19] Interview in Mogadishu, 11 March 2019

Some researchers argue that Al Shabaab is dominated by the Hawiye clan family, particularly the Habar Gedir. According to the Hiraal Institute (2018b), 43% of Al Shabaab's top officials are Hawiye, with that figure rising to 56-57% in the group's security forces. However, this does not signify that Al Shabaab is dominated by the Hawiye or Habar Gedir. Their predominance can be explained by historic reasons: Al Shabaab (and the ICU) started out in Hawiye territories. Al Shabaab's current leader is from the minority Dir clan; its previous leader was from the Isaaq clan family, which dominates Somaliland and has no presence in south-central Somalia. Moreover, only clan-based institutions can achieve a perfect balance between clans. If clan balance is not a recruitment factor, an organization is bound to show some imbalance.

In fact, Al Shabaab recruits slightly more among minority clans (Marchal 2011; Ingiriis 2020), who feel disenfranchised by the elite power-sharing deals that underlie the Federal Government (Botha and Abdile 2014, 6; Menkhaus 2018). Members of these clans, including the Somali Bantu, are attracted by the primacy of sharia over customary law in the hopes of addressing historic grievances (Mubarak and Jackson 2023, 18). Some reports, however, mention that the Somali Bantu find themselves discriminated against by Al Shabaab in a similar manner as usual by stronger clans (Benstead, van Lehman and Tanner 2019). On balance, it seems that while Al Shabaab has not succeeded in completely eliminating clan bias among its members, it has traveled further along this path than any previous Somali political formation.

One of the more controversial methods Al Shabaab uses to disrupt clan society is to arrange marriages between fighters from weak or minority clans and (often kidnapped) women from 'noble' clans (Ingiriis 2020:370). Such marriages are traditionally considered taboo among the dominant clans.

Managing clans

Once Al Shabaab establishes control in a new area, they summon elders and make it clear that from now on, sharia, as interpreted by their courts, takes precedence over *xeer*. The elders are asked to cooperate. If they comply, they may be offered roles in an advisory council. Refusal leads to sidelining, arrest, or even death if they are found collaborating with the government (Skjelderup 2020, 1180). Al Shabaab replaces uncooperative elders with more compliant ones, undermining the traditional process of elder selection from within lineages (see UN Panel of Experts 2021, 43-49 for a list of such appointed elders). This continues a pattern initiated in colonial times, when British and Italian rulers would appoint and often stipend a compliant elder. This practice continued during the post-colonial period, when national governments thus bought influence in autonomous local communities. The

current allocation of parliamentary seats to elders by the federal and federal member state governments is in some regards a continuation of that practice.

Al Shabaab, however, organizes elders according to districts and regions, rather than through the segmentary clan logic that governs federal and regional structures. This weakens links between local clan members and their wider clan family, and reinforces links between elders of different clans in the same region. District and regional councils under Al Shabaab play a significant role in local governance, deciding priorities, overseeing projects, and helping with education, recruitment, and taxation. From the district to the national level, Al-Shabaab appointed elders are hierarchically organized (Hiraal 2018b, 3).

Head elders are also appointed within each significant lineage segment (i.e. extended families). They are tasked with resolving clan conflicts using *xeer* when possible (Hiraal Institute 2018b:3). When head elders do not manage to settle conflicts, Al Shabaab expects them to hand over troublemakers to their courts, where individuals are tried under sharia instead of customary law (Ingiriis 2020; Skjelderup 2020:1186). Elders who refuse to hand over their kin can face imprisonment or punishment. Although they maintain some autonomy and influence, elders must work within Al Shabaab's framework, accepting their authority (Skjelderup 2020:1180). Collaborating with the government (for example in elections) can lead to the death of an elder, but Al Shabaab pragmatically allows elders to act as intermediaries between the insurgents and the government for practical purposes like truces, prisoner exchanges, and resolving disputes.

Elders are responsible for meeting quotas imposed by Al Shabaab, which include providing fighters, weapons, and schoolchildren/recruits (Marchal & Yusuf 2016:50; Hiraal Institute 2018b; Ingiriis 2020). Elders are also required to attend annual religious education camps, where they receive training in Al Shabaab governance and policies (Hiraal Institute 2018c) as well as moral guidance. While the insurgents first firmly establish their authority, often with violence, relations with the local community, including elders, tend to soften over time. Instead of replacing clan authority, Al Shabaab has positioned itself above it.

4. Legitimacy without popularity

Measuring the popularity of Al Shabaab is difficult because they are labeled a terrorist organization by the federal government, so vocally supporting them could result in charges of treason. People living under insurgent control have even less freedom to express their political opinions. Conducting a survey in Somalia on this matter is impossible. The impressions provided here therefore stem from my own interviews and encounters while traveling, reports by neutral NGOs, research by Somali analysts, and academic studies. To

judge how (im)popular the insurgents are among Somalis, we will examine first what drives young Somalis to join the group, and then explore how they are seen by the wider public.

Factors of recruitment

Recruitment into Al Shabaab is more often a collective than an individual decision: communities are compelled to provide a quota of armed men to fight for the insurgents or of children to be trained by them (Hiraal Institute 2018c). Although clan elders are under pressure from militants, they may also suggest recruits voluntarily, either because they share grievances with the militants, or because they are hedging their bets by joining both the insurgents and the government (Marchal 2018; Ingiriis 2020). Nevertheless, it seems few recruits have only joined because they had no choice (Ingiriis 2020).[20]

For young men that make an individual decision to join the insurgents, faith does not seem to be the main factor. Political grievances, particularly feelings of injustice at the hand of the government, motivates many to join Al Shabaab (Ingiriis 2020). A UNDP study highlights that throughout Africa, state violence is the key trigger for joining extremist groups, outweighing socioeconomic or ideological factors (UNDP 2017). The same is true for Somalia, where state security forces often have a predatory relation with the population. Federal state violence is often accompanied by US drone strikes, Western, Arab or Turkish special forces trainers and foreign intelligence and logistic support. This fuels Al Shabaab's nationalist-religious claims (Suri 2016; Crouch 2018).

Discontent among youth is exacerbated by the perceived inaction of elders, who are often seen as self-serving and focused on personal gain rather than collective well-being (Botha & Abdile 2014). Young people express frustration with the older generation's immobility and lack of broader societal improvement efforts. Socioeconomic factors, particularly poverty, also play a significant role in recruitment. Joining Al Shabaab is seen by some as an escape from misery and a means to gain status and purpose. The organization is known to take better care of its members than the government by providing timely salaries, marriage incentives, and compensations for the families of deceased fighters (Marchal 2018).

While grievances and opportunity push individuals towards Al Shabaab, the organization also projects an appealing image of adventure and empowerment, framing its struggle for Somali independence and the defense of Islam as a noble cause (Menkhaus 2014) within the larger global context. This attracts both local recruits and foreign support. The professional

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[20] The perception that Al Shabaab relies on forced recruitment and indoctrination is fueled by captured young fighters undergoing foreign-funded re-education, who allege having been forced to join in the hope of qualifying for milder treatment. This was first told to me by a disillusioned Somali staff member of one such re-education center (in Mogadishu, 3 March 2019); and later confirmed by a foreign consultant tasked with assessing re-education efforts (Nairobi, 2 October 2020).

quality of Al Shabaab's propaganda, produced by its media arm 'Al Kata'ib' in Somali, Arabic, Swahili and English often surpasses that of government media, enhancing its appeal to youth (Chonka 2016).

Public opinion

Research published by Crouch and Abdi (in Keating and Waldman, 2018) provides valuable insights into how people in Al Shabaab-controlled areas view the group. Respondents consistently describe the insurgency not as a cause of conflict but as a symptom of broader societal problems—namely, clannism, injustice, inequality, and poor governance. On the positive side, the militants' provision of justice and security is most popular, followed by the insurgents' efforts to diminish the social relevance of clan identity, as they reduce inequality and foster trust between people of different clans. Al Shabaab's lack of corruption also earns praise. The leadership is not visibly enriching itself, and resources seem to be distributed equitably among regions. The ban on qat is especially appreciated by women, as the drug is associated with domestic violence and poverty. As to the Islamic education imposed by Al Shabaab, some Somalis appreciate it (considering it better than no education) while others see it as an attempt at indoctrination.

Other aspects of the group are resented. Al Shabaab's indiscriminate violence against civilian targets in government held areas is most strongly condemned, as is its justification for killing fellow Somali Muslims by branding them as 'apostates' (*takfirism*). The movement's legitimacy to define 'true Islam' is doubted. Outside the movement, religious scholars associated with Al Shabaab seem to have few followers. Somalis living under Al Shabaab also regret the group's failure to provide essential services such as healthcare and development. Since the 1980s, such services have mostly been provided to Somalis by foreign NGOs and international organizations, and the militants' efforts to replace them are judged insufficient.[21] The heavy tax burden and ruthless collection methods are also resented, although it is considered that Al Shabaab offers more in return for taxes than the government does (see also Hiraal 20120, 7).

Among people interviewed in Mogadishu, the head of a civil society umbrella organization working throughout South and Central Somalia pointed out that the most hated aspect of Al Shabaab governance is forced religious education, often accompanied by the temporary abduction of boys.[22] Girls are also at risk of being abducted and married off to an Al Shabaab

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[21] It should be pointed out that Al Shabaab has not imposed a ban on foreign humanitarian and development aid, but requires these organizations to work according to its rules and under its general guidance. This is unacceptable for donors funding this assistance. As a consequence, besides a few Gulf-funded charities with low visibility, almost no foreign assistance reaches populations under rebel control.

[22] Interview with Dini Mohamed Dini, director of SOSCENSA, Mogadishu, 7 March 2019

fighter. Parents thus have strong reasons to oppose the group and flee to government-held areas. Among better-educated Somalis, perceptions of the militants are generally very negative. The head of the journalists' union, while being very critical about press freedom under the federal government, decried the total lack of freedom of press or opinion under Al Shabaab rule.[23] Any Somali engaged in the arts, creative expression and independent research fears Al Shabaab. Several of them told me they would immediately flee abroad if Al Shabaab grabs power.[24]

When evaluating Al Shabaab, Somalis tend to compare it with the federal government, which besides its structural deficiencies suffers low appeal. A senior Somali politician stated that "there is no loyalty to the federal government because it lacks a clear program or ideology, unlike Al Shabaab".[25] A reason to support the government, nonetheless, is that it provides access to international resources, both material and symbolic (political support and membership of the international community). Somalis recognize that a future under Al Shabaab would isolate them from the global community, cutting off opportunities for travel and development. This concern lives especially among the Somali elites, but is shared by many Somalis who benefit in some way from foreign assistance. Therefore, while the federal government is seen as dysfunctional, many still hope for its reform.

In summary, it seems the majority of Somalis do not want to be ruled by Al Shabaab because they reject its ideology, but they do not reject the political participation of the group and its prominent role in Somali society. Most respondents in the surveys mentioned above, and those interviewed by the author, believe that the only way out of the current conflict is through negotiations (Shire 2021, 1).

Conclusion: illiberal modernization

Charles Tilly's famous dictum that 'war makes states' (Tilly 1985, 170) seems to be confirmed by Al Shabaab's current state-like approach to governance, which has been forged in years of violent conflict. Another well-known take on the violent or criminal genesis of the state, Mancur Olson's 'roving to stationary bandits' thesis (Olson 2000, 6-10) seems to be validated by Al Shabaab's taxation and public management practices. But one can also examine Al Shabaab's apparent trajectory toward statehood from a rebel governance perspective (Kalyvas 2018 and Stewart 2023). Like territorial rebel movements elsewhere, Al Shabaab

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[23] Interview with Mohamed Moalimu, the head of the journalists' union, Mogadishu, 6 March 2019

[24] Interviews with a US-Somali film director, Mogadishu, 4 October 2020; with the coordinator of a Somali creative arts NGO, Mogadishu, 6 October 2020; and with the director of the Center for Research and Dialogue, 6 October 2020.

[25] Interview with Abdirahman Abdishakur, opposition politician and presidential candidate, Mogadishu, 8 March 2019

depends on popular support. To muster this support, it has focused on addressing basic needs in security and justice by establishing an impartial bureaucratic authority. Al Shabaab's ideological coherence strengthens its legitimacy: even though the public may not share this ideology, it makes the new rulers predictable, thus more acceptable.

But Al Shabaab has a higher aim than simply providing for the governance needs of the populations it controls: it seeks to achieve a sociopolitical transformation in Somalia by creating an Islamic state governed by Sharia. As a senior Somali 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 modernizing force, as it exposes Somalis to being governed by the Rule of Law*".[26] This modernization goes beyond imposing Sharia; it involves transforming relationships between individuals and communities. Al Shabaab imposes individual over collective responsibility, breaks down seemingly impermeable social barriers between clans, and has made an end to the culture of impunity of the mighty. These problems have dogged successive governments from the colonial to the independent period and constitute major stumbling blocks for the legitimacy of the federal government of Somalia.

It is ironic that many of the international community's declared state-building objectives in Somalia are being achieved by its enemies. Indeed, isn't it the goal to facilitate the emergence of a self-sufficient, non-corrupt political order that transcends clan, promotes individual responsibility, is based on the rule of law, maintains law and order, and seeks to develop the country while protecting its environment? Only democracy and a liberal rights regime seem to be missing from the international wish list.

As seen above, perhaps surprisingly, the political order established by Al Shabaab conforms quite neatly to the ideal of legal-rational rule expressed by Max Weber in 1919. Democracy and liberal values were then not part of the equation. Modernization in Prussia, Meiji Japan, fascist Italy, the USSR and China, to name but a few countries, also took place without a democratic system and preponderant liberal values. Perhaps the experiences of these countries offer better comparisons to understand current sociopolitical transformation in Somalia than the paradigm of liberal modernization. *Illiberal modernization* may sound like an oxymoron to most readers, but it is perhaps the best term to describe the transformation of Somali society under Al Shabaab.

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[26] Interview in Mogadishu, 3 October 2020.

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