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Projecting Power: Proto-State-Building by Sunni Islamist Rebel Groups

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The Somali Sunni Islamist insurgent/rebel organization Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen (Al-Shabaab), (1) arguably one of Al-Qaeda's most successful and resilient regional affiliates, continues to control and exercise governing authority over a large swath of central and southern Somalia. Al-Shabaab's rebel-insurgent proto-state has existed for over a decade, this despite the fact that the group is opposed by the international community and the numerically and technologically superior military forces of the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) and Somali federal government forces that receive significant support – financial, military and logistics training, and, in the case of the U.S. military, also operational intelligence – from the U.S. and the European Union Training Mission in Somalia (EUTM-S). (2)

Since it began capturing large swaths of territory including major cities and towns beginning in mid-2008, Al-Shabaab's leadership has been very clear about its interest in establishing civil mechanisms of governance alongside the continued pursuit of its insurgency against the internationally-backed Somali Federal Government (SFG), AMISOM forces, and the governing administrations of the five Somali regional states within the republic. (3) For example, in mid-November 2008, after capturing the key southern Somali port city of Kismaayo in August followed by a string of major towns on their move northward towards the federal capital of Mogadishu, Al-Shabaab gathered hundreds of local residents in the square of the important port town of Marka (Merca), which is less than a hundred kilometers from Mogadishu, to announce the start of a new political and social order. One of Al-Shabaab's then senior leaders and a founding member, Mukhtar "Abu Mansur" Robow, delivered a speech in which he outlined the insurgent group's plan to introduce 'law and order' after years of banditry, highway robbery, and warlordism. (4) Similar scenes played out in the town squares of other newly-captured towns and other major urban centers. (5)

Anchored in Al-Shabaab's interpretation of Islamic law (shari'a) and jurisprudence, the new insurgent proto-state civil administration, Robow said, would crack down on socially destabilizing crimes such as highway banditry and wanton robbery, sexual assaults, and killings by targeting criminals and people who "spread corruption in the land" (known in Islamic law as "fasad" or "mufsid fi-l-ard.") (6) Al-Shabaab's attempt to restructure Somali society in territories under its control was to be achieved by building a defined and bureaucratized, yet also flexible, system of civil governance, one which sought to win over, at the very least, the acquiescence if not the full-throated support of local populations.

To ground their proto-state ambitions in an aura of socio-historical and religious legitimacy, Al-Shabaab has drawn on the power of symbols and symbolic repertoires (collections of symbols, traditions, and socio-political processes used by groups to deliver specific messages) that invoke Somali historical memory as well as

This article draws upon my current and ongoing book project, *Islamizing Rebel Governance: Jihadi Insurgencies and Symbolic Power*, which I began while a pre-doctoral and then a post-doctoral research fellow with the International Security Program at the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government. I thank audiences there as well as at presentations at Georgetown University, the Atlantic Council, the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, George Mason University, and the U.S. Military Academy at West Point for valuable feedback and suggestions.

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ethno-religious identity. The insurgents have tried to recast Somali history and identity to create and secure a new transnational identity based on both Somali ethno-nationalism as well as Sunni pan-Islamic identity. This appeal was initially developed and deployed to, in part, give Al-Shabaab a leg up against their primarily clan-based Somali Islamist rivals, such as the Hizbul Islam (Islamic Party) militia coalition. (7) Similar socio-political processes have played out in recent decades in other parts of the Muslim-majority world as Sunni Islamist insurgent organizations in fractured societies, including Islamic State, have tried their hand at civil governance – attempting to mold local audiences’ understandings of their own identities as well as of Islam and governance by playing off of conflict dynamics.

“Islamizing” Rebel Governance: The Interplay between Religion, Politics, & Society

Rapid territorial expansion by Al-Shabaab and Islamic State, combined with their stated desire to construct and implement a civil, proto-state governance component as central to their campaigns – while continuing to wage armed insurgencies – presents them with a set of new challenges about how to engage with local civilians, in particular how to present the envisioned rebel socio-political order as both a viable and legitimate alternative to the existing state government. It also poses rebel leaders with the challenge of how to balance their limited human, financial, and material resources. Islamist rebel groups like Al-Shabaab have an advantage in that they have access to a historically and culturally resonant body of social and political regulations from which to draw upon in the form of Islamic law and various types of jurisprudence, including political jurisprudence and regulations, known as “siyasa al-shar’iyya” or “shari’a politics,” which they can recast and deploy according to their ideological preferences and strategic needs. (8)

Al-Shabaab, beginning in mid-2008, began setting up a centralized, hierarchical leadership and administrative apparatus to govern territory. This apparatus included regional administrations headed by shadow governors who oversaw offices for political affairs and relations with local civilians, including influential clan and sub-clan elders from among the civilian population, taxation, education, religious affairs and missionary propagation or “da’wa,” police forces (the “Jaysh al-Hisba” or “Army of Verification”), a judiciary system of courts, frontline military forces (the “Jaysh al-Usra” or “Army of Hardship/Difficulty”), and a capable intelligence and internal security body known as the “Amniyat.”

Symbolic Power and Rebel Rule

Symbols, including shari’a and Islamic sacred history, are recast and de (or re-) historicized by Al-Shabaab and other Islamist proto-state rebel groups in an attempt to create a new sense of identity that claims legitimacy by invoking an idealized vision (or version) of history, setting ‘myths in motion.’ (9) Al-Shabaab, for example, invokes an idealized and ahistorical notion of a fully unified global (Sunni) Islamic community, the ummah, and the construction of an “Islamic state” as the cure-all for all the ills that plague the contemporary Muslim world, calling for a return to a “golden age” of Islam and an Islamic civilization that did not exist historically but which, rhetorically, serves as the moral economy argument for the Islamist rebel socio-political project.

Al-Shabaab, Islamic State, and other proto-state Islamist rebel groups seek to enforce an “official Islam” as a state ideology through socialization including exerting control of education (such as restructuring school curricula, controlling mosques, and developing official religious discourse), and linking religion with legitimate political authority. Al-Shabaab specifically recasts revered Somali historical and national heroes, many of whom were intimately connected to Sufism or Islamic mysticism (of which Al-Shabaab is highly critical), as ‘Somali Islamic’ figures. One such figure is the “Mad Mullah,” Muhammad Abdullah Hassan, a Somali Sufi leader who led a series of rebellions against British, Italian, and Ethiopian colonial authorities between 1899 and 1920 and who succeeded in establishing the short-lived ‘Dervish State.’

Ideology is not static and is constantly changing even in groups such as Al-Shabaab and Islamic State as the initial preferences of rebel leaders are impacted by a range of other factors and dynamics including pre-existing socio-cultural identities, local power relations and histories, and the specific conflict dynamics and a rebel organization's changing goals. The multifaceted formation and evolution of a rebel organization's ideology and changes to its ideological preferences and related operational strategies are at the center of Sunni Islamist insurgent/rebel proto-state projects.

The sociological process of 'framing' – meaning the ways in which an organization casts its narratives and strategic messaging, including bids for new recruits and financial/material support – and the use of symbolically-laden sets of messaging and mobilization narratives allow Al-Shabaab, Islamic State, the Afghan Taliban, and other Islamist organizations to deploy soft power to augment their limited military forces and resources, which often pale in comparison to those of their foes. (10) Groups including Al-Shabaab and the Afghan Taliban also continue to run parallel governing systems, including judicial systems, that local residents go to to resolve cases not necessarily because they actively support or even like the rebels but due to simple issues of availability and efficiency. (11)

Al-Shabaab Today

After suffering several years of territorial, military, and political setbacks from 2011 to the first half of 2015 when it was pressed by a series of offensives by AMISOM, SFG, and allied clan-based militia forces as well as then non-AMISOM Ethiopian military forces, Al-Shabaab succeeded in not only re-stabilizing itself but also, since the autumn of 2015, regaining a significant amount of territory and re-expanding the reach of its military forces, its covert cells, and tax collection including into the heart of Mogadishu. (12) Al-Shabaab has also succeeded in planting moles inside parts of the SFG as well as important local government bodies including the Mogadishu mayor's office, as evidenced by a July 24, 2019 insider suicide bombing that killed then-mayor Abdirahman Omar Osman. It was carried out by one of his aides, a blind woman, who was working for Al-Shabaab alongside at least one other employee. (13)

The insurgent group continues to exercise either day-to-day governing authority or a regular presence in large parts of southern and central Somalia, including right outside of Mogadishu, turning much of the countryside outside of the major cities and towns into dangerous no-man's land and cutting off the major highways. Al-Shabaab also continues to be able to penetrate deep into areas of Mogadishu to launch coordinated, multi-stage attacks on government buildings and hotels where the insurgents allege AMISOM, SFG, and foreign officials congregate as well as on military bases, as in January 2020 on the Manda Bay base used by the Kenya Defence Forces (KDF), U.S. military forces, and Department of Defense contractors. (14) Since 2019 Al-Shabaab has also claimed at least thirteen small-scale maritime attacks, for example, those on SFG military boats traveling off the coast of the strategic port town of Marka and the Bajuni Islands off the coast of Kismaayo.

Conclusion: The Challenges of Al-Shabaab's Socially Embedded Proto-State

Islamist rebel organizations engaged in proto-state-building projects utilize a combination of narratives to frame their arguments and operations with incentives and strategic, and ideally selective, use of force to attract civilian support. Al-Shabaab, Islamic State, the Afghan Taliban, and other Sunni Islamist rebel proto-state groups seek to promote an image of historical and religious authenticity together with a reputation for (relative) capability as part of their challenge to internationally-recognized state governments.

Growing out of a Somalia-centered context and conflict environment, Al-Shabaab, despite the globalist aspects of its ideology, cannot and does not ignore local and regional dynamics

and identities – such as pan-Somali nationalism and clan identity – but rather seeks to tap into them and reshape them according to its own strategic interests, creating a “glocal” identity. Al-Shabaab, in competition with the SFG and the Somali regional state governments, uses symbols and symbolic power to strengthen in-group ties while also bidding for the support and cooperation or, at least, the acquiescence of local civilians, including other preexisting, powerful social groups such as Somalia’s powerful clans and sub-clans as well as members of the Somali business community. In so doing, Al-Shabaab further embeds itself socially, posing a more substantial challenge to the SFG and Somali regional states as well as East Africa more broadly as well as to the security of the Red Sea and western Indian Ocean regions.

Welcoming Dr. Christopher Anzalone to MES

After a long search, drawing a very impressive pool of candidates, the search committee selected Dr. Christopher Anzalone as the new research assistant professor at Middle East Studies, Marine Corps University. MES and Krulak Center welcomed Dr. Anzalone in mid-January 2021. Dr. Anzalone earned a B.A. in history and religious studies at George Mason University, an M.A. in Near Eastern studies at Indiana University-Bloomington, and a Ph.D. in Islamic, Middle Eastern, and African studies at McGill University.

His research areas and interests include political Islam and Muslim political thought with a focus on the Middle East, East Africa, and South Asia, religion and politics, religion and violence, Shi’ite Islam and contemporary Shi’ite movements, Islamic narratives of martyrdom and self-sacrifice, and civil wars and insurgencies. He has published in journals, scholarly books, and online platforms and presented extensively on these topics, including to the U.S. Department of State, U.S. Central Command, U.S. Special Operations Command, Public Safety Canada, and the U.K. Foreign & Commonwealth Office.

Previously he was a visiting assistant professor of history, government, and Islamic studies and a postdoctoral scholar at George Mason University and a pre-doctoral and then postdoctoral research fellow with the International Security Program at Harvard University’s Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs. He is an affiliated scholar with George Mason University’s Center for Global Islamic Studies.

Situated within the framework of the growing scholarly literature on rebel governance, Dr. Anzalone’s current book project, *Islamizing Rebel Governance: Jihadi Insurgencies and Symbolic Power*, looks at the rise of Sunni Islamist rebel proto-state-building projects in Somalia and the Middle East through a comparative lens. The book examines the use of symbols, symbolic repertoires, and symbolic power as a type of strategic soft power used by these organizations to advance their governance ambitions.

References

(1) The group’s name translates to the “Movement of the Mujahideen-Youth,” the term “mujahideen” (singular: mujahid) meaning literally one who “exerts effort” or “strives.” The term is most often used in the Islamic phrase, “al-jihad fi sabil Allah” or “striving/exerting effort in the path or for the sake of God.”

(2) See the official websites and social media accounts of the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) at <https://amisom-au.org/> and the European Union Training Mission in Somalia (EUTM-S) at <https://www.eutm-somalia.eu/>.

Army Brigadier General Miguel Castellanos, the deputy director of operations for U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM), said that he expected the U.S. military will continue to train the Danab brigade until 2027. See Diana Stancy Correll, “AFRICOM Predicts Mission Training Somalia’s ‘Lightning Brigade’ Will Last Until 2027,” *Military Times*, 17 March 2020, accessed: <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2020/03/17/africom-predicts-mission-training-somalias-lightning-brigade-will-last-until-2027/>.

In late January, U.S. Army soldiers from Task Force Bayonet conducted, as part of the East Africa Response Force (EARF) and in support of the Combined Joint Task Force – Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA), and soldiers from the 173rd Airborne Brigade conducted training exercises with Somali federal forces in Mogadishu. See, Staff Sgt. Dustin Jordan, “EARF Conducts Exercise in Somalia,” Combined Joint Task Force – Horn of Africa, 3 February 2021, accessed: <https://www.hoa.africom.mil/article/23852/earf-conducts-exercise-in-somalia>. In early February, U.S. AFRICOM confirmed that the late January training exercise was with the Somali National Army’s (SNA) “Danab” or “Lightning” Brigade, a special forces unit formed with U.S. support in 2014. See U.S. AFRICOM Public Affairs, “AFRICOM Forces Conduct First Engagement in Somalia since Repositioning,” 1 February 2021, accessed: <https://www.africom.mil/pressrelease/33453/africom-forces-conduct-first-engagements-in-somalia-since-repositioning>.

For background on the Danab Brigade, see Max Bearak, “As U.S. Forces Leave, Somalia’s Elite Fighting Unit Fears Becoming a Political Pawn,” *The Washington Post*, 29 December 2020, accessed: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/africa/somalia-danab-us-withdrawal/2020/12/28/9ae978e0-4905-11eb-839a-cf4ba7b7c48c_story.html.

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- (3) The Somali Republic, in addition to the federal government, includes five semi-autonomous regional federal states: Jubaland, South West State, Hirshabelle, Galmudug, and Puntland. The self-declared independent republic of Somaliland is considered by the Somali Federal Government (SFG) as a breakaway part of Somalia, though Somaliland's government and citizens reject this.
- (4) Al-Shabaab's ability to introduce a semblance of stability, even through the use of harsh methods, was initially welcomed by many local residents, and the group worked to establish mutually beneficial relationships with merchants and other businessmen. The Islamic Courts Union, an umbrella organization for what had previously been localized alliances between local shari'a courts and Somali clans and sub-clans, also pursued a similar strategy in the early 2000s until its collapse in December 2006-January 2007. On this, see Aisha Ahmad, *Jihad & Co.: Black Markets and Islamist Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017) and "The Security Bazaar: Business Interests and Islamist Power in Civil War Somalia," *International Security* 39, no. 3 (Winter 2014/2015), 89-117.
- (5) Accounts of the public announcements in mid-November 2008 by Al-Shabaab leaders to local civilian populations in newly-captured major towns are taken from two insurgent communiqués issued by its internal media department at that time: "The Announcement Concerning the Implementation of the Law of Islam (shari'a) in Marka City in Front of a Large Crowd of Muslims," 13 November 2008 (Arabic), and "Al-Shabaab's Leadership Continues Calling the People to God and Education Them after the Conquest of Most Areas of Lower Shabelle," 14 November 2008 (Arabic).
- (6) For an academic Sunni perspective on "fasad," which is one of the Hudud offenses for which there are set punishments in Islamic jurisprudence, see Jonathan Brown, "Stoning and Hand Cutting—Understanding the Hudud and the Shariah in Islam," 12 January 2017, Yaqeen Institute, accessed at <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/jonathan-brown/stoning-and-hand-cutting-understanding-the-hudud-and-the-shariah-in-islam>.
- (7) Aisha Ahmad, "Going Global: Islamist Competition in Contemporary Civil Wars," *Security Studies* 25, no. 2 (Spring 2016), 353-384.
- (8) For comparative studies of "shari'a politics" by different groups and nation-states across the world, see Robert W. Hefner, ed., *Shari'a Politics: Islamic Law and Society in the Modern World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011). One of the standard analytical accounts of how different Muslim communities around the world adapted to the nation-state-based global order is James P. Piscatori, *Islam in a World of Nation-States* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986). On how Sunni militant Islamist groups interpret Islamic law and jurisprudence, see John Kelsay, "Islamist Movements and Shari'a Reasoning," *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 10, no. 2 (2009), 121-134.
- (9) Kasper Hoffman, "Myths Set in Motion: The Moral Economy of Mai Mai Governance," in *Rebel Governance in Civil War*, eds. Ana Arjona, Nelson Kasfir, and Zachariah Chierian Mampilly (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 226-245.
- (10) The Afghan Taliban has been particularly adept at this. See Thomas H. Johnson, *Taliban Narratives: The Use and Power of Stories in the Afghanistan Conflict* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018). On Al-Shabaab's multifaceted narratives and 'glocal' messaging and operations, see Stig Jarle Hansen, *Al-Shabaab in Somalia: The History and Ideology of a Militant Islamist Group* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013) and Horn, Sahel, and Rift: *Fault-Lines of the African Jihad* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).
- (11) Ashley Jackson and Florian Weigand, "Rebel Rule of Law: Taliban Courts in the West and North-West of Afghanistan," Overseas Development Institute briefing paper (May 2020), accessed at <https://www.odi.org/publications/16914-rebel-rule-law-taliban-courts-west-and-north-west-afghanistan>; Jami Forbes, "The Significance of Taliban Shari'a Courts in Afghanistan," *CTC Sentinel* 6, no. 5 (May 2013), accessed at <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/the-significance-of-taliban-sharia-courts-in-afghanistan/>; Soraya Sarhaddi Nelson, "Taliban Courts Filling Justice Vacuum in Afghanistan," *NPR*, 16 December 2008, accessed at <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=98261034>; Azam Ahmed, "Taliban Justice Gains Favor as Official Afghan Courts Fail," *The New York Times*, 1 February 2015, accessed at <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/01/world/asia/taliban-justice-gains-favor-as-official-afghan-courts-fail.html#:~:text=KANDAHAR%2C%20Afghanistan%20E%80%94%20Matiullah%20Khan%20and,in%20the%20gov,ernment's%20judicial%20system.>; Jason Burke, "Al-Shabaab Plundering Starving Somali Villages of Cash and Children," *The Guardian*, 21 February 2018, accessed at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/feb/21/al-shabaab-extortion-indoctrination-somalia>; and Mustafa Bananay, "Can Military Might Alone Defeat Al-Shabaab?," 21 March 2017, IPI Global Observatory, accessed at <https://theglobalobservatory.org/2017/03/al-shabaab-amisom-extremism-afgoye/>.
- (12) Omar Faruk and Max Bearak, "'If I Don't Pay, They Kill Me': Al-Shabab Tightens Grip on Somalia with Growing Tax Racket," *The Washington Post*, 30 August 2019, accessed at https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/africa/if-i-dont-pay-they-kill-me-al-shabab-tightens-its-grip-on-somalia-with-growing-tax-racket/2019/08/30/81472b38-beac-11e9-a8b0-7ed8a0d5dc5d_story.html; Harun Maruf, "In Somalia, Businesses Face 'Taxation' by Militants," *Voice of America*, 3 December 2018, accessed at <https://www.voanews.com/africa/somalia-businesses-face-taxation-militants>; Abdi Latif Dahir, "Feared Shabab Exploit Somali Banking and Invest in Real Estate, U.N. Says," *The New York Times*, 11 October 2020, accessed at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/11/world/africa/feared-shabab-exploit-somali-banking-and-invest-in-real-estate-un-says.html>; and Mary Harper, "Somalia Conflict: Al-Shabab 'Collects More Revenue than Government,'" *BBC News*, 26 October 2020, accessed at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-54690561>.
- (13) Harun Maruf, "Somalia Assesses Al-Shabab Moles' Infiltration of Government," *Voice of America*, 15 August 2019, accessed at <https://www.voanews.com/africa/somalia-assesses-al-shabab-moles-infiltration-government> and Mohamed Haji Ingiriis, "Insurgency and International Extraversion in Somalia: The National Intelligence and Security Agency (NISA) and Al-Shabaab's Amniyat," *African Security Review* 29, no. 2 (2020), 125-151.
- (14) On Al-Shabaab's messaging about this attack and others as part of a psychological operations (PSYOPS) campaign, see Christopher Anzalone, "Addressing the Enemy: Al-Shabaab's PSYOPS Media Warfare," *CTC Sentinel* 13, no. 3 (March 2020), accessed at <https://ctc.usma.edu/addressing-enemy-al-shabaabs-psyops-media-warfare/>



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