



# Al-Shabaab's Takfiri Institutionalization in Somalia and the Unraveling of the Loox-Based Sufi Backbone

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**Abstract:** The historical Sunni-Shafi'i/Sufi backbone in Somalia has, with the post-1990s weakening of state capacity, given way to a Salafi takfiri religious field. The study analyses education, media and sharia channels Al-Shabaab uses to instrumentalize religious discourse, generate local legitimacy and participation in Somalia. The study generates insights on the marginalization of the Sufi tradition, the radicalization of youth and the transformation of state-society relations. It argues that the security problem is sustained not only by military violence but also by an institutional architecture of legitimacy constructed within the religion, education and media ecosystem. Methodologically, the study combines a synthesis of the existing literature, a qualitative content analysis of open-source materials (including sermon and fatwa videos and propaganda outputs), process tracing of the shift from the Loox tradition to madrasa education and the diffusion of sharia courts, and a comparative reading of relations with actors such as Sufi, Salafi, Ikhwan, Islah, and Ahlu Suna Waljamaaca (ASWJ). The findings show, first, that Salafi discourse has spread via madrasa curricula and the online preaching ecosystem, while the dismantling of the Loox system has produced a rupture in local moral pedagogy. Second, the Al-Shabaab model of sharia, centered on takfir, generates a regime of fear and obedience that delegitimizes the constitution and modern law as deviant. Third, some sermons and fatwas without direct organizational ties blur the takfir/jihad threshold and thereby produce implicit legitimacy. Finally, moral contradictions such as women's exclusion from the public sphere, forced marriage, and allegations of sexual violence conflict with the movement's claim to religious superiority and erode its legitimacy. Taken together, these findings indicate that countering Al-Shabaab requires not only military action but also strategies targeting the religion, education and media ecosystem, including the pedagogical reintegration of Loox, capacity building for Sufi institutions, transparency of preaching platforms and counter-narrative mechanisms, and protective services for women and youth. The study provides a framework that contributes to policy formulation and implementation by operationalizing the understanding and practice of religion in Somalia.

**Keywords:** Loox, Al-Shabaab, Somalia, Takfir, Radicalization

**Öz:** Somali'de tarihsel Sünni-Şafi/Sufi omurga, 1990'lar sonrası devlet kapasitesinin zayıflamasıyla Selefi tekfirci bir din alanına yer değiştirmiştir. Bu çalışma "el-Şebab, dini söylemi hangi eğitim-medya-şariat kanalları üzerinden araçsallaştırarak yerel meşruiyet ve katılım üretmektedir?" sorusundan hareketle ilerlemektedir. Çalışmanın temel sorusu, Somali'deki Sufi geleneğin marjinalleşmesi, gençlerin radikalleşmesi ve devlet-toplum ilişkilerinin dönüşümüne işaret etmektedir. Çalışma, güvenlik probleminin sadece askeri şiddetle açıklanamayacağını, din-eğitim-medya kanalları üzerinden inşa edilen kurumsal meşruiyetin bu problemi yeniden ürettiğini gösterdiği için önem taşımaktadır. Ayrıca, mevcut literatürün sentezini, vaaz ve fetva videoları ile propaganda materyalleri dahil açık kaynakların nitel içerik analizini, Loox'tan medreseye dönüşümü ve şariat mahkemelerinin yayılımını süreç izleme ile, Sufi, Selefi, İhvan, Islah ve Ahlu Suna Waljamaaca (ASWJ) gibi aktörlerle ilişkilerin karşılaştırmalı okunmasını bir araya getirmektedir. Bulgular, medrese müfredatı ve çevrimiçi vaaz ekosisteminin Selefi söylemin yayılımını hızlandırdığını, Loox'un tasfiyesinin de yerel ahlaki pedagojide bir süreklilik kırılmasına yol açtığını ortaya koymaktadır. Diğer bir bulgu, el-Şebab modeli şariat, tekfir merkezli bir korku ve itaat rejimi üreterek anayasayı ve modern hukuku sapkınlılaştırmaktadır. Ayrıca örgütle doğrudan bağı olmayan kimi vaazlar ve fetvalar, tekfir/cihat eşliğini muğlaklayarak örtük meşruiyet

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üretmektedir. Son bulgu ise kadınların kamusal alandan dışlanması, zorla evlilik ve cinsel şiddet iddiaları gibi ahlaki çelişkiler, örgütün dini üstünlük söylemiyle çatışmakta ve meşruiyeti aşındırmaktadır. Nitekim bu bulgular, el-Şebab'la mücadelenin sadece askeri değil, din-eğitim-medya ekosistemini hedefleyen Loox'un pedagojik yeniden entegrasyonu, Sufi kurumların kapasite inşası, vaaz platform şeffaflığı ve karşı anlatı mekanizmaları, kadın ve gençlere yönelik koruyucu hizmetler gibi stratejiler gerektirdiğini göstermektedir. Çalışma, dini alanın ele geçirilmesini analitik olarak operasyonelleştirerek literatüre ölçülebilir bir katkı sunmaktadır. Aynı zamanda politika tasarımıyla kullanılabilecek somut bir mekanizma haritası üretmektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Loox, el-Şebab, Somali, Tekfir, Radikalizm

## Introduction

When the religious backbone is unsettled in a society, not only forms of worship but also the source of authority, language of law and morality of everyday life are thrown off balance. In Somalia, especially over the last three decades, the religious and social order shaped for centuries by the Sunni, Shafi'i and Sufi traditions has shifted towards a markedly different field in which a Salafi takfiri interpretation has gained prominence. This has happened amidst the post-1990s collapse of the state capacity. The most visible and consequential actor in this shift is Al-Shabaab (*Harakat Al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen*), a terrorist organization that emerged in 2006 from the armed wing of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) as a continuation of al-Ittihad al-Islami and drew both local and global attention through actions it legitimated with religious references. Alongside its repertoire of violence, the group has re-framed the religious field through networks built across education, media, preaching and a sharia judiciary configured to its own line.

The existing scholarship describes in detail Islam's historical place in Somalia and the roles of Sufi orders such as the *Qadiriyya*, *Salihyya* and *Ahmadiyya* in social solidarity and dispute resolution. From the coastal cities into the interior, an ecosystem of madrasas and Sufi lodges, together with local pedagogical practices like the Loox<sup>1</sup> tradition, has produced moral socialization from childhood and religious scholars have served as legitimate reference points in inter-clan mediation. However, Gulf-centered education and funding streams have increased the visibility of Salafi texts and instructors since the 1990s. During this period, the state's weakening capacity to provide order accelerated the fragmentation of authority within the religious field. After the dissolution of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) in 2006, as a continuation of al-Ittihad al-Islami, and subsequent regional interventions, Al-Shabaab embarked on experiments in alternative governance by establishing courts, tax collection, and

1 The term Loox, often rendered as 'wooden tablet' or 'writing slate,' denotes, in Somalia's traditional Qur'anic education, a pedagogical method whereby the student writes verses on a wooden tablet, reads and memorizes them, then erases and rewrites them. In short, this is a write-read-repeat-erase cycle centered on the wooden tablet (Loox).

security mechanisms at rural and urban nodes. It amplified its narratives at home and abroad through media units such as al-Kataib. This process did not remain confined to Somalia's borders but generated an arc of attraction and influence extending into Kenya, Ethiopia, Tanzania and beyond.

In the literature, Al-Shabaab's historical origins, ideological ties to al-Qaeda, organizational structure, tactical shifts and regional security effects have been examined extensively. Yet three critical gaps persist. First, mechanisms of religious exploitation are often discussed under broad rhetorical headings. There is still no detailed mapping of how these mechanisms operate through institutional channels such as curricula, madrasa organization, the dismantling of the Loox tradition, the economy generated by sermons delivered in local mosques or online platforms, and the functioning of sharia courts. Second, there exists a "gray zone" of discourse, used by actors with no direct organizational linkage to Al-Shabaab, which blurs the thresholds of takfir and jihad and, through oblique formulations, leaves the door ajar to violence. The role of fatwas in producing implicit legitimacy, and the use of ambiguous language and key terms, has not yet been measured with quantitative indicators. Third, narratives of moral contradiction concerning women's position in the public sphere (together with forced marriage, allegations of sexual violence, and practices such as drug use such as khat) remain understudied even though field reports frequently stress their salience in eroding local legitimacy. In addition, the pedagogical and intergenerational effects of dismantling the Loox tradition, the protective role of Sufi institutional density, and the relational spaces involving actors such as Ictisaam, Islah, and Ahlu Suna Waljamaaca (ASWJ) are often treated in a fragmented manner.

This study addresses these gaps by explaining the mechanisms through which Somalia's religious field and authority architecture have shifted from a Sunni, Shafi'i, and Sufi backbone toward a Salafi takfiri orientation. The focus is on mechanism-based societal change driven by the breakdown of state enforcement and curricular standardization, external funding and training networks, and insurgent governance practices, rather than on a uniform, state-orchestrated discursive or policy turn. The study examines how Al-Shabaab exploits Islam, the extent to which religion shapes Somali society, and how state-religion-society relations have been transformed. Using examples, it shows the roles played by religious figures in the rapid spread of takfiri and jihadist instruction in Somalia, the marginalization of the Sufi tradition, and the increasing susceptibility of youth to radicalization. The study analyzes the roles of Salafi media channels such as Midaat TV, Waddani Abdullahi and others to provide proof of how Al-Shabaab has gained a covert sphere of influence in state-controlled locales through interpretations that exhibit ideological affinity with certain religious institutions.

Supporting this core inquiry are several sub-questions. How do transformations in religious education, such as the dismantling of Loox and the homogenization of curricula, and the ecosystem of local and online sermons shape diffusion and participation? Does the historical density of Sufi institutions exert a protective effect against radicalizing discourse and organizational penetration? How does the visibility and enforcement of the Al-Shabaab model of sharia calibrate the balance between fear, obedience, and legitimacy? In addition, how do restrictions on women and associated moral-contradiction narratives erode the movement's local legitimacy?

The study's core argument is that the principal factor explaining Al-Shabaab's persistence and local impact is not mere military capacity but the capture of the religious field. The organization constructs a takfir-centered regime of legitimacy and fear by dismantling the Loox tradition and centering a Salafi curriculum, by circulating discourse across media and sermons, including the gray zone and by configuring a sharia judiciary to its own line. It excludes the constitution and modern law by declaring them illegitimate or deviant. In doing so, it sustains both violence and the appearance of its legitimacy. This mechanism accelerates as the Sufi tradition is marginalized, for Sufi institutions have historically functioned as a buffer against radicalization through mediation, the localization of moral pedagogy, and community-based solidarity. As this buffer recedes, the education-media-judiciary triangle is more easily synchronized, and the organization's dominant narrative becomes normalized in the public sphere.

This study is important in twofold. First, by addressing Al-Shabaab not only by asking, "who did what, where," but also by asking how, and through which institutions, Al-Shabaab produces legitimacy, it consolidates themes scattered across the literature into a single map of mechanisms. Second, it grounds the policy debate in measurable evidence rather than isolated cases. Indicators such as the density of Sufi institutions, the share of gray-zone sermons, and the degree of homogenization in education can be used directly both to conduct analysis and to design interventions. In this way, the study makes visible the logic and objectives of a religion, education and media strategy that goes beyond military instruments. It advances an approach in which this article's findings translate into an integrated set of policy implications, whereby the pedagogical reintegration of Loox, capacity building for Sufi institutions, transparency of sermon platforms and the production of counter-narratives, and protective services for women and youth are treated as mutually reinforcing intervention lines and therefore designed together.

The study moves the analysis of the reconfiguration of Somalia's religious field beyond the rise of radical discourse by centering the interaction of institutional

channels. It conceptualizes Al-Shabaab's model of sharia as a technique of governance. It traces, at the level of mechanisms, the trajectory from Loox-based moral pedagogy to madrasa-centered instruction, and from preaching platforms to court and penal practices. In doing so, it offers a measurable and transferable contribution both to the theoretical literature (on insurgent governance, takfir, and the capture of the education domain) and to the policy sphere, in terms of prioritization and intervention design.

The article proceeds as follows. The next section outlines the theoretical framework and research design, specifying how the study traces mechanisms across the education–preaching/media-judiciary channels. It then reconstructs the Loox-based pedagogical backbone and the historical role of Sufi institutions in moral socialization, dispute resolution, and religious authority. The subsequent sections examine the post-1990s authority vacuum and the institutionalization of Salafi preaching and madrasa networks, before analyzing Al-Shabaab's insurgent-governance practices through what this study terms the “Al-Shabaab model of sharia” and its takfir-centered boundary making. Building on this, the article maps the education and media pipeline, including the gray-zone sermon/fatwa ecology, and assesses how these channels contribute to implicit legitimacy and recruitment. It then turns to legitimacy erosion by examining moral contradictions and gendered coercion practices, and situates these dynamics within Somalia's broader religious-actor ecology. The conclusion summarizes the mechanism map and derives integrated policy implications for prioritization and intervention design.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Somalia is an overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim society in which the Shafi'i school is predominant and Sufi institutions have historically structured moral socialization and mediation. This matters here because contests over religious authority directly shape legitimacy, governance and social regulation under conditions of fragmented public authority.

This article adopts a mechanism-based framework that treats Al-Shabaab's endurance not primarily as a function of coercive capacity alone, but as the outcome of religious-field capture intertwined with insurgent governance practices. The core claim is that legitimacy and compliance are reproduced through the interaction of institutional channels that link moral pedagogy, discursive diffusion and coercive legal practice. In the Somali case, this interaction becomes visible where locally embedded pedagogies are displaced, where boundary-making discourse is normalized through preaching and media ecosystems, and where a court-centered coercive order

converts takfir into a governing technique. For analytical clarity, this study refers to the latter as the “Al-Shabaab model of sharia,” emphasizing that it is not simply a generic invocation of sharia but a takfir-centered apparatus designed to produce obedience and delegitimize constitutional and statutory law.

A key concept in this mechanism map is Loox, a hands-on model of Qur’anic learning practiced in Somalia for centuries in which students write verses on wooden tablets and memorize them under the supervision of a teacher. Loox education has historically extended beyond memorization. Through *adab* (ethical comportment), ritual instruction and teacher-mediated authorization. It helped reproduce local religious authority and social embeddedness within the ‘ulama–family–mosque triangle. In the logic of this article, Loox therefore functions as a historically rooted component of moral socialization and authority formation. Its disruption is analytically important because it can widen the authority vacuum in which alternative, more exclusionary pedagogies and preaching economies gain traction.

To clarify how threat framing can interact with these dynamics, the article also draws, only in a bounded way, on the Copenhagen School’s securitization framework. Securitization refers to a process through which an issue is framed as an existential threat, enabling claims to use extraordinary measures beyond normal political procedures. Such moves become effective only when they gain sufficient audience acceptance to legitimize rule-breaking practices (Buzan et al., 1998). In Somalia, securitization of the religious domain can be observed through competing threat framings. State actors and external partners portray Al-Shabaab-linked violent extremism as an existential threat to territorial authority, public order and civilian security. Other actors frame rival interpretations as threats to moral order and communal cohesion. Notably, Al-Shabaab itself securitizes the constitutional order by depicting modern law and democratic procedures as existentially threatening to “true Islam,” thereby legitimizing extraordinary coercive measures.

In this article, securitization is not treated as the primary explanatory theory, nor as evidence of a coherent state-led ideological turn. Rather, it is used as a secondary lens to specify a risk condition within the mechanism map. When securitization becomes broad and indiscriminate, treating “the religious field” as a security problem rather than focusing on incitement to violence and organized coercion, it can delegitimize state-linked institutions in the eyes of communities, weaken traditional buffers such as Loox-based moral pedagogy and Sufi mediation networks, and expand the space for gray-zone preaching. In that sense, over-securitization can accelerate the institutional capture of education and preaching ecosystems by takfiri entrepreneurs by lowering trust and amplifying grievance narratives.

Methodologically, the study employs a qualitative, multi-layered design to examine discourse, pedagogy, and institutional practice in tandem. The temporal focus is primarily the post-1990s authority vacuum and Al-Shabaab's rise after 2006. Data sources include open-source textual and audiovisual materials (such as al-Kataib outputs, spokesperson statements, and sermons distributed via mosque recordings and online platforms), official documents such as the Somali constitution, secondary scholarship and institutional reports, and primary and secondary descriptions of Loox pedagogy and Sufi institutional roles. Given limited direct field access, the study relies substantially on open sources and therefore prioritizes transparency in how the corpus is assembled. Materials were selected through purposive sampling to capture variation across organizational outputs, non-organizational preaching content that exhibits discursive proximity to takfiri boundary making (gray-zone materials), and countervailing religious positions where relevant, while also representing the distinct channels through which the mechanism operates. Because organizational materials entail a risk of strategic bias, claims are cross-validated through within-case triangulation with at least two independent sources wherever feasible, and confirmation bias is mitigated through negative-case sampling, actively seeking materials that do not fit the expected pattern.

Analytically, the study combines framing-oriented discourse analysis with process tracing. The aim is to identify the junctures at which Salafi-jihadist discourse diverged from Sufi-mediated moral pedagogy and to trace how that divergence was transferred into the domains of education, preaching/media and legal practice. Mechanism tracing proceeds by linking observable manifestations (such as shifts in pedagogical authority and curricular content, the circulation of takfiri boundary-making claims in sermons and online channels, and court-centered enforcement practices) to the overarching claim that religious-field capture sustains legitimacy production and compliance alongside coercion.

### **The Loox Backbone and the Unraveling of the Religious Field**

The Loox, a religious education model that has endured in Somalia for centuries, is a system that carries the community's religious memory and moral values, rooted in local interpretations of Islam, especially Sufi traditions. In Loox instruction, memorization is conducted under a teacher's supervision and is typically accompanied by basic training in *adab*, ritual cleanliness and communal etiquette. In the Loox system, students not only learn the Qur'an but also acquire moral responsibility, the *adab* of worship, and communal etiquette. Al-Shabaab, however, has categorically rejected this model. It has labeled Loox a "tradition of jahiliyya" and an "innovation

(bid'a)," banned it entirely in areas under its control, and replaced it with Salafi centers aligned with its own ideology. According to the organization's doctrine, the Loox method opens the door to shirk and is incompatible with "true Islam." In this way, the traditional Islamic corpus transmitted for centuries through Loox is interrupted and supplanted by a takfiri curriculum imposed on younger generations.

### **The Sufi Tradition: Qadiriyya, Salihyya, Ahmadiyya; Social Solidarity and Dispute Resolution**

Islam reached Somalia, one of the earliest regions in Africa to receive it, in the first years of the Hijra. Through Muslims who migrated to Abyssinia and under the influence of Yemeni traders, Islam spread rapidly along the East African coast. In this process, commercial and cultural interaction with the Arabian Peninsula led Somali society to embrace Islam and integrate it into its social system.

Somalia's coastal cities (especially Mogadishu, Berbera, Merca and Barawa) were early carriers of Islamic culture. In these urban centers, mosques, madrasas and sharia courts played a pivotal role in organizing Muslim communal life. The Islamic structures that developed in the coastal towns gradually spread inland and were synthesized with clan-based customary institutions. Among the most influential expressions of Islam in Somalia has been Sufism, which gained broad popularity and served as a key vehicle for transmitting religious knowledge and practice. In particular, the Qadiriyya, Salihyya and Ahmadiyya orders have been active across a wide range of domains, from religious education and moral instruction to social welfare and conflict mediation, shaping the country's religious landscape. These orders did not confine themselves to mosques. Through circles of dhikr, lodges (zawiyas/tekkes) and madrasas, they provided religious orientation to society.

In this context, the Qadiriyya is among the oldest and most widespread orders, reaching Somalia via Sudan and Egypt. The Salihyya spread in Somalia in the late nineteenth century (Ömer Muhammed Muallim Hasan, 2019) under the leadership of Shaykh Muhammad Abdullah Hasan and became a vehicle of religiously referenced nationalism in the struggle against British forces and the Ethiopian (Abyssinian) empire (Mohamed Saeed Farah, 2013). The Ahmadiyya order has been more influential in the northern regions of Somalia (Helen Chapin Metz, 1992, p. 98). These orders also functioned as institutions that provided religious education, social solidarity and inter-clan peace (Abdurahman Baadiyow, 2024; Cabdiraxmaan Daahir, 2025; *Somalia: Sufi Scholar, Followers Killed in al-Shabab Attack*, 2018).

Historically, religious life in Somalia took shape through orders such as the Qadiriyya and Ahmadiyya. Through intergenerational transmission, these orders

disseminated religious knowledge to all segments of society and presented Islam in a peaceful, tolerant and community-centered form (*Islam and Somali Social Order | Conciliation Resources*, 2010, pp. 12–15). This structure, from mosque lectures to *dhikr* circles, reinforced a sense of communal belonging. Sufi sheikhs were respected not only as religious leaders but also as social guides. In times of political crisis, they assumed roles such as brokering peace and mediating inter-clan disputes (Hanretta, 2005, pp. 107–108).

## Post-1990 Authority Vacuum and the Rise of Salafism

Beginning in the 1990s, under the influence of Gulf countries, Salafi thought began to spread systematically in Somalia. Young religious scholars who received training in countries such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates returned to Somalia and became influential within local communities. The Salafi views these scholars introduced clashed sharply with the Sufi tradition. Salafi currents accused the Sufi orders of *bid'a* (innovation) (Özdemir, 2021, p. 3) and superstition, harshly criticizing practices such as *dhikr* and cemetery visitation that occupy an important place in the populace's spiritual life (Abdi Shaykh, 2009; Al Jazeera English, 2009; Alnasiixa Media, 2015). Al-Shabaab went so far as to fuse this Salafi discourse with armed struggle, targeting not only the orders themselves but also the public associated with them. Order leaders, preachers, and shaykhs were declared "apostates" by the organization and subjected to assassination. This led to the weakening of the Sufi tradition in Somalia and the fragmentation of religious authority among the public (Albin-Lackey, 2010, p. 26).

The structural ground that made this ideological diffusion possible was the authority vacuum created by the state's collapse in 1991. With the disintegration of the Somali state, traditional religious institutions were weakened and especially externally funded Salafi institutions, madrasas and civil society organizations stepped in to fill the religious void. Sermons broadcast via mass media, social media campaigns and scholarship programs that sent youth abroad for study, followed by their return, further strengthened the Salafi orientation. These actors offered quicker and more systematic answers to young people's religious questions, making them an attractive alternative to traditional structures. In this period, the influence of scholars educated in traditional centers such as al-Azhar in Egypt declined, while the impact of preachers trained in Riyadh, Mecca or Medina with Salafi-Wahhabi leanings increased. Thus, the religious field in Somalia shifted from the traditional Sufi framework to a rigid Salafi ideology (imam shafici media *عفاشل امام إلى فانق*, 2023).

The influence of Salafi groups manifested not only at the ideological or physical level, but also in the content and method of religious education. In areas dominated by Al-Shabaab, madrasas were restructured according to Hanbali and Wahhabi views, and Sufi interpretations were systematically excluded. This change led to a homogenization of younger generations' religious perceptions and entrenched a form of Islam that is distant from a foundation of tolerance. The tolerant approach and diversity of devotional practice common in Sufi traditions gave way to a single pattern of worship and a rigid jurisprudential reading. This, in turn, caused an erosion of diversity in religious thought within Somali society.

Al-Shabaab's impact on Somali society is felt not only through armed activity but also through religious education, one of the most fundamental dynamics of the social fabric. In recent years, this traditional structure has undergone a marked transformation under the growing influence of takfiri-jihadi interpretations. In areas under Al-Shabaab control, particularly in rural regions, the madrasa system is used to socialize youth into exclusionary religious frames that label state institutions as apostate and the constitutional order as unbelief (Mubarak & Jackson, 2023). Al-Shabaab's approach to education follows a systematic ideological framework. This situation has allowed some curricula and preaching environments to incorporate Al-Shabaab-adjacent content, including **anti**-state and anti-international intervention narratives alongside takfiri-Salafi themes.

Islamic disciplines that could expand children's capacity for reasoning, such as kalam and Islamic philosophy, are neglected or portrayed as forbidden. The organization treats the education system as both an information conduit and a mechanism of brainwashing. A noteworthy point is that, in some regions, religious instruction delivered in government-controlled settings may, often owing to weak curricular standardization and limited oversight, incorporate Salafi-leaning materials and preaching idioms that partially overlap with themes exploited by Al-Shabaab, even without organizational ties. The fragmented governance of education compounds this risk, where schools and religious learning spaces often operate with unregulated or locally determined curricula shaped by funders and networks, raising concerns about ideological content in the absence of standardization and oversight (UNICEF, 2018).

The principal reason is the lack of a centralized standard for religious education in Somalia. A large portion of teachers have graduated from, or been influenced by, institutions in the Gulf shaped by Salafi thought. This situation has allowed Al-Shabaab's ideology to exert indirect influence over certain religious institutions both in rural areas and in major cities.

In this context, Al-Shabaab's activities in the education sector help the organization recruit personnel and crystallize a long-term strategy of ideological hegemony. By

instrumentalizing religion, Al-Shabaab shapes individual minds and reconfigures the social fabric to its advantage. Indeed, religious education in Somalia is conducted predominantly through traditional madrasas. These institutions provide Qur'an-memorization-oriented instruction to children but often lack a systematic pedagogical structure and a modern, coherent curriculum. Consequently, the state's role in religious education remains limited under current conditions (Mubarak & Jackson, 2023). Educational institutions frequently operate with external funding or are administered by religious communities. This has paved the way for takfiri and radical groups to establish significant influence in the field of religious education. In many madrasas funded by Gulf countries, Wahhabi-style interpretations that constitute the ideological foundations of Al-Shabaab have become dominant.

### **Al-Shabaab's Ideological–Organizational Core and Its Conception of Law and Politics**

Al-Shabaab is a radical armed organization founded in Somalia in the early 2000s with ideological and operational ties to al-Qaeda. The group gained direct strength after the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) fragmented in 2006 following Ethiopia's military intervention (Ali, 2008, p. 3; Civins, 2012, p. 121; Reuters, 2006). Established by younger and more radical elements of the ICU, Al-Shabaab advances along a jihadi-Salafi line, fusing religious legitimacy with political violence. From its bases in southern Somalia, the group gradually expanded its control to many cities, including the capital Mogadishu. In particular, between 2007 and 2011 it governed much of the country and set up courts, presenting an alternative governance model. During this period, Al-Shabaab consolidated power through both military operations and mechanisms of social control (Al Jazeera English, 2011).

Organizationally, Al-Shabaab maintains a disciplined yet non-centralized command. Its provincial structures (wilayat) spread across the country manage both military and civilian affairs. Each province includes judges, security officials, finance administrators, and education cadres, an apparatus designed not only to wage war but also to emulate a state (Menkhaus, 2014). At the top sits a leader bearing the title "Emir," under whom operates a Shura Council that makes political and religious decisions. The leadership cohort largely consists of individuals educated in the Arabian Peninsula or other religious centers outside Somalia. Many have internalized Salafi ideology and maintain organic links to al-Qaeda (Belliveau, 2015).

One of the group's strongest assets is the constellation of religious leaders and media channels that underwrite its ideological project. Figures such as Shaykh Fuad Mohamed Khalaf, Ali Dheere, Mahad Karate, and Shaykh Ahmed Godane (the former

leader Abu Zubayr), as well as Hassan Dahir Aweys (*Prospects for Al Itihad & Islamist Radicalism in Somalia on JSTOR*, n.d., pp. 472–477), have served as key providers of religious legitimacy. Through sermons, fatwas, and online broadcasts, these figures exert psychological influence over the public and play a central role in disseminating the group's propaganda.

Al-Shabaab's ideology blends classical Salafi discourse with al-Qaeda's globalist conception of jihad. While Salafism takes the early Islamic period as the model and emphasizes doctrinal purity and opposition to *bid'a* (innovation), Al-Shabaab welds this outlook to political violence, branding any order not grounded in its own rulings as deviance and a legitimate target. In this vein, the group opposes Somalia's constitution, democracy and electoral practices declaring Muslim officials apostates (Dalsoor, 2017; Hegghammer, 2011).

Despite the clause in the Somali Constitution stating, "Islam is the religion of the state," Al-Shabaab practices takfir against the Somali government and anyone cooperating with it, labeling them apostate. Accordingly, it deems armed struggle legitimate to dismantle the existing state structure and establish, in its place, what it views as an authentic Islamic state (Channel 4 News, 2022). A foundational pillar of Al-Shabaab's ideology is its categorical rejection of the nation-state system and modern law. The group stigmatizes Somalia's constitutional order, criminal code and democratic institutions as unbelief and apostasy, casting war against the state as a legitimate jihad. This position entails not only armed struggle but also the projection of an alternative "state." Yet Al-Shabaab's understanding of sharia diverges significantly from the traditional conceptions embraced or imagined by many Muslims. It rests on a radical, takfiri foundation that recognizes as Muslim only those who accept its own interpretations, placing everyone else in the crosshairs. To avoid conflating this regime with classical sharia, this study refers to it as the "Al-Shabaab model of sharia," a model built on an uncompromising ideological template with takfir at its core.

Yet, the Somali state and society are historically known for deep attachment to Islam. Somalia has been an overwhelmingly Muslim society for centuries, and its constitution identifies Islamic sharia as the legal system's principal source. Al-Shabaab, however, declares the state apostate despite this constitutional posture and imposes its own rigid reading as absolute truth (*Somalia Situation Update*, 2024). Foremost among the texts the group rejects is the Somali Constitution, which it denounces as a system of unbelief due to its references to modern concepts such as democracy, pluralism, women's rights, and human rights (*Individuals Contravening Sharia Law in Al-Shabaab Controlled Areas | European Union Agency for Asylum*, 2025). Al-Shabaab declares politicians who enabled the constitution's adoption to

be apostates and deems their killing permissible, a stance it propagates through sermons to the broader public.

In areas under its control, Al-Shabaab has instituted a sharia regime grounded in classical juristic sources and Salafi exegesis. While drawing on the Hanbali tradition, the group builds a markedly rigid interpretation from the views of Ibn Taymiyya and Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, erecting a religious authority aimed at producing fear and obedience. Alongside armed struggle, it works to erode the Somali state's legitimacy through ideological and religious rhetoric, condemning, as "un-Islamic," the state's relations with international actors, its engagement with the international community, and its support for constitutional processes in the eyes of the public.

### **Repertoire of Religious Exploitation and the Construction of Minds**

Al-Shabaab's strongest strategic instrument is its systematic instrumentalization of Islam in service of its political and military objectives. Building on a classical Salafi-Wahhabi (Haykel, 2014) reading, the group frames religion not only as a mode of individual worship but also as a governing system, a body of legal norms and a political order. Yet it does so through its own narrowly defined lens, one sufficiently distinct from many Muslims' expectations that it is more accurate to call this the "Al-Shabaab model of sharia." In this regard, the group also departs from the interpretive line of Somalia's earlier sharia courts. From this vantage point, it brands the Somali government's constitution and institutions a "system of unbelief" and claims it is a religious obligation for Muslims to wage "jihad" against it (Channel 4 News, 2022).

Al-Shabaab further seeks social legitimacy by asserting that it has built an Islamic order in the education sector across areas it controls. Qur'anic verses and hadiths are concentrated around sharia rulings and the concept of "jihad," and even very young students are socialized within this ideological frame (Mubarak & Jackson, 2023). Qur'anic texts are likewise wrenched from their contexts and reinterpreted to serve the group's violent ideology (imam shafici media 2023, قناة الإمام الشافعي). Although Al-Shabaab's understanding of Islam draws on the classical Salafi-Wahhabi line, it is a militant reading fused to political goals. The group positions its understanding of sharia as an absolute instrument of rule and domination (John L. Esposito, n.d.). Sharia is thus exploited to intimidate the public, silence opponents and establish an ideological monopoly in areas under its control. The group simultaneously excludes other Islamic communities that espouse different interpretations of sharia.

This terrorist organization characterizes systems governed by modern constitutional law as "unbelief," explicitly labeling the constitution, the Somali penal code and contemporary legal institutions "deviant" (*Shariah in Somalia*, 2020). It uses

this discourse both to justify “legitimate” violence and to discredit officials and civil servants by declaring them apostates in the eyes of the public. In Somalia, religion is the principal metric of political and social legitimacy, and the weaker state capacity becomes, the more decisive that metric grows. Actors like Al-Shabaab translate sharia discourse into demands for loyalty and obedience to governance, turning religious language into a primary vehicle for normalizing exceptional practices.

### **The Education Pipeline: Madrasas, Broadcasting, Youth Outreach**

Across Somalia, many Qur'an schools and madrasas, even when not directly tied to Al-Shabaab, teach based on Salafi interpretations that overlap with the group's line. Especially in rural areas and cities where government oversight is weak, some religious institutions are observed to present content consonant with Al-Shabaab's discourse (Illintir, 2019; SAHAY SUUBAN, 2021). Media simultaneously plays an active role in this ideological construction. Preachers whose views are close to Al-Shabaab broadcast on social media platforms and YouTube, directly shaping the mental worlds of youth. Platforms such as Waddani Abdullahi and Midaat TV also produce content that openly or implicitly legitimizes the group's positions (*Al-shabaab yaa dhalay by Sh Umal VS Sh abdirahman Bashiir*, 2022; Sakina Media, 2025a).

In addition, through its media unit known as al-Kataib, Al-Shabaab runs radio programming, video productions, social-media content and magazines, tools for both propaganda and social control (Joseph & Maruf, 2018). These media activities, built especially on narratives of hostility toward neighbors like Kenya and Ethiopia, shape the group's external messaging and are decisive in influencing youth and recruiting new members. Al-Shabaab maintains an educational apparatus at the military, “intellectual,” and pedagogical levels. In religious schools specially established in areas under its control, children receive ideological training in line with the group's worldview (Abdullahi, 2021). Alongside religious instruction, students are taught the group's local *fiqh* rulings and its propaganda (İçişleri Bakanlığı, 2019). Moreover, even in government-controlled areas the group conducts propaganda-oriented educational activities via online platforms, media channels and especially social media. Lessons by preachers aligned with the group's da'wa on YouTube-like platforms reach high view counts among youth, facilitating the diffusion of Al-Shabaab's intellectual influence.

Driving this spread is not only the state's lack of oversight over religious education but also the erosion of public trust in traditional religious structures. By presenting itself as a “pure Islamic movement” opposed to “corrupt and infidel systems,” Al-Shabaab can appeal to youth. Educational provision is marked by deep gaps in rural areas and displacement camps, spaces the group is quick to fill. One of the most

striking forms of Al-Shabaab's religious exploitation is the doctrine of takfir. This approach functions as an ideological tool that enables the group to declare unbelievers not only state officials but also Sufis and other Islamists outside its ranks (Somali Salafi Media, 2022a). Figures such as Shaykh Hasan Hussein accuse all who embody the modern state of unbelief and preach that salvation lies only in a takfiri line of religion (Daarul Xadiith, 2022). This approach heightens intolerance toward religious and intellectual pluralism, eroding the capacity to conduct theological debate within a framework of forbearance. To legitimize its spiral of violence, the group also routinely foregrounds jihad, stripping the term of its broader religious meanings and instrumentalizing it for political ends (İçişleri Bakanlığı, 2019).

Among the most abused concepts in its Islamic discourse is jihad itself. While classical Islamic literature employs jihad across a wide spectrum (defense, self-discipline, or scholarly endeavor), Al-Shabaab equates it solely with armed struggle (Kaşıkçı & Bülbül, 2023). In the group's propaganda, jihad is presented as "fighting the system of unbelief" and "being exalted through martyrdom," a message that particularly influences youth (Waddani Abdullahi, 2025). Statements by influential religious figures that portray suicide attacks as avenues to jihad normalize such acts in the public eye and help the organization find would-be suicide bombers (Somali Salafi Media, 2022b). Such pronouncements further amplify the impact of Al-Shabaab's religious discourse on ordinary individuals and congregations. For example, endorsements by figures like Shaykh Hasan Hussein Abu Salman, in which some prominent Somali scholars at times justified suicide attacks as "occasions for jihad" (Qaanso Robad podcast, 2020), have indirectly contributed to Al-Shabaab's propaganda. Even when some later criticized the group, their earlier fatwas are known to have drawn many into its ranks. Somali government and the Council of 'Ulama' classify Al-Shabaab as "Kharijite." This is challenged publicly by some scholars and opinion leaders using statements such as "we cannot call Al-Shabaab Kharijite" which has contributed to the "weakening of the Kharijite label" (Ahlusnna, 2023; SAKINA MEDIA, 2025b).

Beyond ideology, Al-Shabaab also exerts control through social services and punitive mechanisms. In practice, the group establishes courts and enforces punishments according to its interpretation of sharia, leading some communities to perceive it as more "just" than the state by comparison. One contributing factor is the influence of views close to Al-Shabaab within religious-education spaces. Some widely followed Somali shaykhs argue that the struggle against Al-Shabaab must first be waged on the intellectual and discursive plane, and they call for confronting Salafi educational milieus that reproduce similar messages on the grounds that Al-

Shabaab feeds on that discourse (*Shariah in Somalia*, 2020; Wacyi Medi شَبَكَةُ الْوَعْيِ, 2022). In this regard, Somali religious scholars stress the importance of critical self-assessment regarding Al-Shabaab. At the same time, the group terrorizes non-compliant individuals with public executions, amputations and stonings that alarm some clerics. In short, Al-Shabaab's use of religion to manufacture both legitimacy and obedience transforms it from a mere terrorist organization into an engine of social engineering.

### Women, Social Control and Legitimacy Erosion in Al-Shabaab-Controlled Areas

Al-Shabaab's ideological and practical approaches toward women reflect the group's understanding of religion and its broader social-engineering project. The group confines women to roles it claims are religiously mandated, seeking to exclude them from the public sphere and confine them to the household. In this frame, women are defined solely through motherhood, wifely duty and loyalty. Gender norms are reproduced via the group's religious discourse. In areas under Al-Shabaab's control, women's presence in public life is severely restricted. Women's employment and participation in political, commercial, or social activities are declared "contrary to sharia" and thus prohibited (*Islam and Somali Social Order | Conciliation Resources*, 2010, p. 24). The group punishes those who defy these bans in various ways, at times resorting to physical penalties such as flogging (*Somalia's Divided Islamists | International Crisis Group*, 2010, p. 12).

Another mechanism of control over women is the institution of marriage. By placing women's marriages under its supervision, the group aims both to secure organizational loyalty and to motivate its fighters. These practices, contrary to Islam, demonstrate Al-Shabaab's instrumentalization of religion. Women married to Al-Shabaab members often acquiesce under pressure exerted on their families by the organization. Such practices reveal a deep contradiction with Al-Shabaab's rhetoric of sharia and moral superiority. While the group seeks to keep these practices hidden, testimonies from affected families have made them widely known, eroding its religious and moral standing in society. Although Al-Shabaab claims to advocate a sharia-based social order, realities on the ground sharply contradict this narrative. Alongside strict rules shaping society, there are grave human-rights abuses among its own ranks, including drug use, forced marriages, rape and coercion of farming communities to cultivate narcotics.

Al-Shabaab's treatment of women completely undermines its claim to Islamic values. Reports indicate that some married women are executed because their

husbands opposed the group, and that these women are subsequently forced to marry Al-Shabaab militants. In areas under the group's control, families are sometimes compelled at gunpoint to marry off their daughters to fighters, with fathers or brothers threatened with execution if they refuse. An internal regime of impunity toward sexual-violence victims contributes to the prevalence of such crimes. Some women, after being accused of *zina*, are subjected to gang rape by Al-Shabaab members, who then face no punishment.

Meanwhile, the Loox system functioned not only as education but also as a spiritual and socio-cultural institution and thus became part of Al-Shabaab's broader war on Sufi traditions. The group branded dhikr gatherings, mawlid and collective supplications, congregational *ṣalawat* and khatim recitations and declarations of loyalty to Sufi shaykhs as outright shirk and bid'a, banned them, and prevented such practices in mosques. Mosques were transformed into militarized propaganda venues controlled by imams appointed by Al-Shabaab, where sermons promoted the group's jihadist ideology. Even Friday sermons were reshaped by the group's propaganda idiom, presenting concepts such as "democracy, constitution, secularism, human rights and women's rights" as parts of a heretical, false order. These actions damaged not only physical spaces and the educational structures within them but also the spiritual fabric of Somali society. Traditional structures, spiritual fellowship, and a sense of community were dismantled and replaced by a religion of fear, obedience, and dogmatism.

With Al-Shabaab's rise, the Sufi tradition became a primary target of radical attacks. The group labels Sufi orders as "people of innovation" (ahl al-bid'a) and delegitimizes their teachings by portraying them as outside Islam (Al Jazeera, 2016; Al Jazeera English, 2019; *Somalia's New Religious War - Somalia* | ReliefWeb, 2009). This ideological assault has not remained at the level of discourse. Numerous Sufi centers have been attacked, and Sufi shaykhs killed or threatened (*Somalia's Divided Islamists* | International Crisis Group, 2010). The growing institutionalization of Salafi thought in Somalia has marginalized local Islamic interpretations, especially the Sufi tradition. By presenting their own reading as absolute truth, Al-Shabaab and similar radical groups place the Sufi understanding long internalized by Somali society under both physical and intellectual threat. The Sufi tradition constitutes a religious, cultural and social keystone in Somalia.

## **Somalia's Religious-Actor Ecology and the Dynamics of Takfiri Diffusion**

Somalia's religious landscape has historically been shaped by Sufi orders. In the nineteenth century, the Qadiriyya, Salihyya, and Ahmadiyya orders molded the

society's religious life. These orders functioned as loci of ritual practice, social solidarity, education and resistance (Scott S. Reese, n.d., p. 170). The Qadiriyya tended to be more influential among urban and mercantile populations, while the Salahiyya resonated more strongly in rural and militant constituencies. This architecture nurtured a religious relationship of mutual trust between the laity and the clergy (*Somalia's Divided Islamists* | *International Crisis Group*, 2010).

From the 1990s onward, however, Somalia's religious field underwent a significant transformation. The Salafi-Wahhabi influence emanating especially from Gulf countries exerted mounting pressure on traditional Sufi structures. Through scholarships, funding for madrasas and clerical training abroad, this influence became institutionalized and progressively marginalized local Islamic formations (Stig Jarle Hansen, Mahad Waasuge, & Cabdimaalik Abdullahi, iyo Cabdullaahi Aadan, 2022). Al-Shabaab has operated within this plural field with a singular, radical and exclusionary posture, casting all religious groups outside its orbit as deviant or infidel.

These critiques, however, do not translate into clear distinctions in the public eye. Preachers aligned with Al-Shabaab's line are often not differentiated from more moderate Salafis, reinforcing a perception that the Salafi spectrum inclines toward radicalism. Consequently, Salafi currents in Somalia are criticized for failing, especially in the field of religious education, to distinguish themselves from Al-Shabaab. Today the Salafi stream largely bifurcates into a Salafi-da'wa current (Ictisaam) and a Salafi-jihadist current (Al-Shabaab). Both reject traditional Somali Islam but differ in method and rhetoric.

Although Ictisaam later fragmented into sub-currents such as the Salafi-Jadid (Jadiidiyo), known for rejecting armed jihad and organizational militancy against governments in this era, it has generally operated with a softer tone, whereas Al-Shabaab, grounded in Salafi-jihadism, embraces violence as a religious instrument. Even so, the educational materials, preaching idioms and religious literature used by groups like Ictisaam have fed into Al-Shabaab's ideological formation (Warsom, 2012).

By contrast, al-Islah, which represents the Muslim Brotherhood (Ikhwan) line in Somalia, focuses more on education and social services. Al-Shabaab casts al-Islah as a "reformist deviation" and targets such formations. It accuses the Brotherhood tradition of internalizing Western democratic systems and frames these groups as part of a "deviant order." Accordingly, members of al-Islah fall within Al-Shabaab's ideological crosshairs and have at times faced assassination or threats.

Ikhwan-aligned organizations like al-Islah (Öztürk, 2021) argue that Somalia's problems should be resolved through a politically and Islamically grounded democratic

pathway and are known for supporting the state. Yet, as noted, Al-Shabaab brands these actors “people of innovation” (ahl al-bid‘a) and ostracizes them. It also declares non-Muslims and Muslims holding different Islamic interpretations to be apostates (murtadd). Consequently, Muslim NGOs from other countries that seek to conduct relief work in Somalia are also targeted as “apostate,” facing suicide bombings and assassinations (Gökhan Kavak, Hodan Mohamed Abdullahi, 2024).

Al-Shabaab's attacks on Sufi communities prompted, for the first time, armed resistance by religious groups. The confrontation between ASWJ's traditional Sunni-Sufi orientation and Al-Shabaab's Wahhabi-rooted, takfiri interpretation has not only been doctrinal but also operational. ASWJ mobilized armed protection of Sufi shrines and community religious life, mounting effective resistance to Al-Shabaab especially in parts of Galmudug. The struggle between ASWJ and Al-Shabaab is thus seen not merely as a contest over territory or political power but as a conflict over Islamic interpretation. The traditional Islam championed by ASWJ and Al-Shabaab's Wahhabi-rooted, takfiri reading have created deep fault lines in Somalia's belief system (Hassan, 2009).

At the same time, popular religious figures, especially independent preachers, are widespread in Somalia. Figures such as Shaykh Caanood and Shaykh Hasan Hussein, as well as media outlets like Midaat TV and Waddani Abdullahi, are not directly affiliated with Al-Shabaab but at times employ language that overlaps with the group's discourse. This generates public confusion and contributes to the normalization of Al-Shabaab's narratives. While these preachers do not offer explicit support, their rhetorical proximity plays a consequential role in the group's strategy of accruing religious legitimacy.

Mosques controlled by Sufi groups have been burned, shrines demolished and labeled by Al-Shabaab as “deviant symbols,” posing a serious threat to the country's ancient religious heritage (*Shariah in Somalia*, 2020, p. 22). Despite such pressures, Sufi-based formations like ASWJ have sought to resist Al-Shabaab with both armed action and religious counter-discourse. ASWJ has maintained activity in parts of central and southern Somalia, striving to defend the Sufi tradition. Nonetheless, limited state support, internal fragmentation and Al-Shabaab's superior organization have constrained this resistance, compelling Sufi communities largely to withdraw (Hassan, 2009). As a result, populations have been left with more radical leadership options, and ideological hegemony has tilted toward Al-Shabaab and similar radical groups.

## Conclusion

This article explained Al-Shabaab's persistence in Somalia through a mechanism-based account of religious-field capture rather than a purely kinetic reading of insurgent capacity. It argued that legitimacy and compliance are produced through the synchronized operation of three institutional channels. These are the reconfiguration of moral pedagogy and religious education (including the displacement of Loox), the diffusion of boundary-making discourse through preaching and media ecosystems (including gray-zone materials), and a court-centered coercive order, the "Al-Shabaab model of sharia," that converts takfir into governance and delegitimizes constitutional law. By tracing how these channels reinforce one another under conditions of fragmented state authority and uneven educational oversight, the article showed how coercion is stabilized by institutional routines and discursive normalization. At the same time, it highlighted points of fragility in this arrangement, particularly where gendered coercion and moral contradictions undermine the movement's claims to religious superiority. In doing so, the study offered a transferable mechanism map that links theoretical debates on insurgent governance and legitimacy production to intervention prioritization.

The findings indicate that Al-Shabaab's durability is supported by an institutional architecture of compliance and legitimacy claims that operates alongside violence. The weakening of Loox-based moral pedagogy and Sufi-mediated authority structures has contributed to an authority vacuum within the religious field. Under conditions of fragmented governance and limited standardization of religious education, that vacuum becomes more permeable to takfiri entrepreneurs and gray-zone preaching. At the same time, the analysis highlights points of fragility in Al-Shabaab's legitimacy claims. While the organization frames its rule as religious superiority, legitimacy is undermined by moral contradictions and coercive social engineering, particularly in the gendered domain, where restrictions on women's public participation, forced marriage practices, and allegations of sexual violence conflict with the movement's moral narrative. In this sense, Al-Shabaab's legitimacy is neither uniform nor stable. It is reproduced through a combination of coercion, institutional presence, and discursive normalization, and it is simultaneously exposed to local resentment and delegitimation pressures.

These findings suggest that countering Al-Shabaab requires addressing the mechanisms through which legitimacy and compliance are generated, rather than treating the problem solely as a function of kinetic capability. Four implications follow. First, the education domain should be treated as a primary site of contestation. Strengthening curricular standardization, accreditation, and instructor certification

across both formal and religious education settings, while safeguarding religious pluralism, can reduce the permeability of pedagogical pipelines to takfiri boundary-making, and it can be pursued together with the supervised pedagogical reintegration of Loox as a locally legitimate moral-educational track. Second, interventions should reinforce community-based buffers of legitimacy by investing in Sufi institutions and mediation networks and by supporting local ownership through mosque committees and the family-school-‘ulama triangle. The objective is to rebuild resilience against takfiri discourse without criminalizing non-violent doctrinal diversity. Third, because preaching and online dissemination function as high-velocity channels of normalization, policy design should include transparency and accountability mechanisms for preaching platforms (especially around credentialing, funding visibility, and content governance standards), paired with credible counter-narrative production led by locally legitimate religious voices. The goal is not broad censorship but narrowing the gray zone that produces implicit legitimacy. Fourth, protective services for women and youth should be treated as a core component of counter-radicalization rather than a secondary humanitarian add-on. Preventing forced marriage, supporting survivors, and protecting youth in displacement and rural settings constrains Al-Shabaab’s social-control repertoire and directly targets one of the organization’s key compliance mechanisms.

This study relied substantially on open-source materials due to limited direct field access, which increases the importance of cautious inference and triangulation. Future research can strengthen the evidence base by expanding structured coding of gray-zone sermons and fatwas, conducting subnational comparisons of areas with differing densities of Sufi institutions and Loox continuity, and assessing how state-led regulation of religious education can be designed to avoid over-securitization and unintended legitimacy losses. A further research agenda concerns the political economy of religious education and preaching (funding streams, credentialing systems, and platform incentives) and how these dynamics shape the long-term contest over religious authority in Somalia.

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