



# THE ROLE OF RELIGIOUS ACTORS IN CONTEMPORARY SOMALI POLITICS

KEY DYNAMICS AND OPPORTUNITIES  
FOR ENGAGEMENT

Stig Jarle Hansen, Mahad Wasuge,  
Abdimalik Abdullahi & Abdullahi Adan



**Rift Valley Institute**

MAKING LOCAL KNOWLEDGE WORK



**Somali Public Agenda**

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### **Credits**

**This report was written by Stig Jarle Hansen, Mahad Wasuge,** Abdimalik Abdullahi and Abdullahi Adan. Editing was by Ken Barlow and Magnus Taylor. Thanks to Partha Moman, Dr Abdurahman Abdullahi and Dr Christopher Anzalone for valuable comments on earlier drafts of the text. The report was produced as a partnership between the Rift Valley Institute and Somali Public Agenda. This report was written by Stig Jarle Hansen, Mahad Wasuge, Abdimalik Abdullahi and Abdullahi Adan. Editing was by Ken Barlow and Magnus Taylor. Thanks to Partha Moman, Dr Abdurahman Abdullahi and Dr Christopher Anzalone for valuable comments on earlier drafts of the text. The report was produced as a partnership between the Rift Valley Institute and Somali Public Agenda.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Religious organizations – and the leaders associated with them – have for a long time wielded considerable influence on, and been intermeshed with, Somalia’s political landscape. These groups are fluid and dynamic, sometimes acting in opposition to each other and often operating as loose networks rather than as clear organizational blocs.
- Since the collapse of the Somali state in 1991, religious organizations have demonstrated strong staying power when compared with the rapidly changing mosaic of non-faith-based actors. In so doing, they have acted as a source of institutional stability in Somalia.
- Although at times instrumentalized by other political actors, the actions of religious organizations are generally motivated by ideology, rather than narrower economic drivers. Despite this, they have often been poorly understood by external actors. This can be partly attributed to the framing of religious activism as inherently violent, which predominated during the era of the US-led War on Terror.
- There is also a widely-held, and somewhat cynical, belief amongst mainly Western actors that Somalis employ religion mainly as an instrument for personal gain. This is coupled with a broader scepticism regarding the interaction of religion and politics, which have become largely separated in secular Western societies, at times leading to ill-conceived policies.
- In Somalia, the role of religious actors in the political landscape is considerable. At one end of the spectrum, religious groups actively participate in armed combat or seek to gain power over, or exert influence on government. At the other end lies the broader societal influence wielded by religious leaders and groups, which, though not explicitly political, may have political consequences.
- Religious leaders and organizations also influence politics by acting as service providers within both the development and humanitarian sectors – supporting vital services that would be run as part of the public sector in many other countries. Religious actors have also often exerted a positive influence within Somalia’s fraught political landscape, including strong support for peace conferences and local reconciliation efforts.

- A number of Ikhwan-, Salafist- and Sufi-inspired organizations are prominent in Somalia today. This includes *al-Islax* (Ikhwan), *Dam Jadiid* (Ikhwan), *Aala Sheikh* (Ikhwan), *al-Ictisam* (Salafi), *Majmaca Culimada* and *Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama'a* (Sufi). These organizations exist in a context where loyalties and identities overlap, particularly in terms of clan and business networks. The religion–clan interaction is dynamic, with religious movements, despite the challenges they face, having greater success in transcending clan than other social movements in Somalia.
- For the business sector, religion in Somalia has instrumental value, creating consumer trust through the projection of a trustworthy image and allowing businesspeople to tap into religious networks. Another relevant factor is *xeer*, the traditional legal system that dominates rural Somalia, which differs from and, to a certain extent, challenges Shari'a.
- Given their extensive experience in peacemaking, religious leaders are likely to prove valuable allies for any actor seeking to engage in these issues. Moreover, religious actors are set to play a significant role in Somalia's emerging democratization process and the broader shaping of the country's political settlement in the years to come.
- Despite the perceived tension between some conservative religious actors and democratic norms such as gender equality, many have shown a degree of flexibility and pragmatism in shaping their agendas.
- To benefit from the crucial role that religious actors play in Somalia's politics and governance, federal and state governments need to continue their close collaboration with these groups. Likewise, Somalia's civil society sector should welcome religious actors as key members.
- There is a need to further explore the potentially positive role that religious actors can play in Somalia. International actors should avoid the reductive lens created by the narratives of the War on Terror and instead recognize the constructive role religious groups have played, and continue to play, in the Somali polity.

# 1. INTRODUCTION

Since the collapse of Siyad Barre's secular regime in 1991, religious leaders and organizations have come to wield considerable influence on Somalia's politics, and in some cases have assumed the role of major humanitarian actors.<sup>1</sup> From 2009 to 2012, a religious leader – Sharif Sheikh Ahmed – even assumed the presidency.

These trends have not always been well understood, for four main reasons. First, the so-called War on Terror affected how religious activism was framed. Despite enormous diversity in the organization and ideology of Islamic organizations, the spectre of al-Qaeda meant that, for the most part, such actors were erroneously perceived by outsiders as being inherently violent, thereby hindering cooperation.<sup>2</sup> In reality, the Somali religious scene is multifaceted, incorporating organizations that have little in common with al-Qaeda or its Somali affiliate, Harakat al-Shabaab.

Second, studies of Somali politics have often emphasized profit-seeking and warlordism, with Somali actors perceived as employing religion mainly as an instrument for personal gain.<sup>3</sup> Such an approach overlooks the surprising stability of many Somali religious organizations compared to the country's quasi-secular political parties and armed factions. Moreover, a purely instrumentalist approach fails to take account of the fact that, even if an individual or group is motivated by profit-seeking, they may be forced to follow specific social rules in order to appear religious.<sup>4</sup>

An instrumentalist view also tends to neglect the study of transnational religious networks, as well as variations in how Islam is interpreted across Somalia. Thus, to a certain extent, it removes the spiritual, or devotional aspect from Somali religious practices, as everything is interpreted through the lens of personal, or group financial gain. There are some advantages to an individual joining or supporting a religious organization. For example, religious networks sometimes lower transaction costs in business; religious organizations and leaders are often seen as more trustworthy; and religious groups may have an increased ability to overcome problems of collective action. However, an instrumentalist approach fails to explain the surprising stability of religious organizations compared to other political and civil society organizations in Somalia. This points towards mechanisms of loyalty that transcend individual interests, and a number of important facts within Somali history that may be overlooked by an analytical approach that focuses too much on 'following the money'.

Third, Western humanitarian and political actors have often been sceptical about the interaction of religion and politics, which has resulted in a belief that the two should be

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1. Christian Webersik, Stig Jarle Hansen and Adam Egal, 'Somalia: A Political Economy Analysis', report commissioned by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018.
  2. See, for example, Medhane Tadesse, *Al-Ittihad Political Islam and Black Economy in Somalia: Religion, Money, Clan and the Struggle for Supremacy Over Somalia*, Addis Ababa: Meag printing enterprise, 2002.
  3. See, for example, Alex de Waal, 'Somalia synthesis paper', London School of Economics and Political Science, 2017.
  4. Stig Jarle Hansen, Atle Mesøy and Tuncay Karadas, *The Borders of Islam*, London: Hurst, 2009.



kept separate in Somalia, as has generally been the case in their own political systems.<sup>5</sup> Yet, as will be illustrated, such a separation is almost impossible in the Somali setting.

Fourth, many of Somalia's religious actors have been careful to hide their organizational structures, ideology and the identity from outsiders. This is partly a legacy of the suppression, arrests and torture that took place during the Siad Barre regime (1969–1991), and partly due to scepticism of the West and associated fear of reprisals from Western actors. As a consequence, conspiracies and misleading rumours concerning religious actors have often run rampant.

Combined, these factors have contributed to a lack of knowledge regarding how religion and religious actors have interacted with political dynamics in Somalia and beyond, as well as how exactly religious organizations are structured and organized. This report seeks to fill this knowledge gap.<sup>6</sup> With this in mind, a key question arising from the current formalization of political authority in contemporary Somalia is what role is being played by religious groups and leaders within Somalia's political dynamics, and the extent to which religion defines the development, views and actions of political groups and individual politicians. Without an understanding of religion's role and influence in Somali politics, it becomes difficult to engage constructively with religious actors, or discern the motivations of Somali political actors linked to such groups. Thus, in attempting to provide this understanding, the ultimate aim of this report is to facilitate productive international engagement with Somalia's religious groups.

## Research methods

The report draws upon interviews with religious leaders, as well as politicians in Somalia and in the diaspora.<sup>7</sup> Included within this pool are several of the most important religious and political figures in Somalia today. The key religious leaders were determined through pre-study interviews with Somalis from the larger clans and socio-economic groups, in which they were asked to identify the key leaders in Somali religious life. In the process, we ensured that quietist leaders – religious leaders who have national influence but avoid commenting on politics and religion in the Somali media – were represented. Moreover, in an attempt to avoid urban bias, we also interviewed religious leaders prominent among Somalia's rural population.

Using these interviews, in combination with written sources and interviews with Somali politicians and civil society members, we mapped Somalia's religious actors and their relationships to Somali politics. We also explored actors' views on how these relationships should ideally function. Throughout, primary sources (close to the events and organizations studied) were prioritized over secondary sources. Furthermore, source triangulation was emphasized, with, if possible, corroborating information sought from two or more sources. This was particularly important in light of the fact that religious groups have in the past attempted to hide their organizational structures.

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5. Jonathan Fox, *An Introduction to Religion and Politics: Theory and Practice*, London: Routledge, 2018.

6. Fox, *An Introduction*, 29.

7. Somali sheikhs resident outside Somalia have, in the past, played a significant role in the country's politics, religious debates and even humanitarian aid, and thus are relevant to the shaping of Somalia's future.



## 2. ISLAM IN SOMALIA: TRADITIONS AND IDEOLOGICAL TENETS

The landscape of Somali religious organizations can be traced over the history of Islam in the country, and more specifically the traditions that have taken root over both the distant and more recent past. Therefore, before proceeding with an overview of the most prominent Ikhwan-, Salafist- and Sufi-inspired organizations in Somalia today, it is necessary to sketch out the historical emergence and ideological tenants of these traditions.

### Shafi'i and Sufism

Islam reached Somalia quite early, with Arabic sources providing reports of many Islamic city states along the coast of Somalia in the ninth century.<sup>8</sup> The conversion of Somalis in more rural areas, however, first took place in the eleventh and twelfth centuries.<sup>9</sup> Somalis were in general converted to the Shafi'i law school (*Madhabka Shaafici*) of Sunni Islam, which remains important to this day. The Shafi'i law school stresses the primary role of the Qur'an and *hadith* (records of the words, actions and silent approvals of Islamic prophet Muhammad not referred to in the Qur'an) in reaching religious and political verdicts. Should these sources appear ambiguous, guidance can be sought from *ijma* (the consensus of Islamic scholars). Where no consensus exists, the school relies on *qiyās* (analogical reasoning).<sup>10</sup>

The Shafi'i law school is purist when it comes to applying *hadith*, with clear criteria regarding which records are to be accepted. However, the law school was, and is, more dynamic and flexible than the Hanbali law school, which later came to Somalia (in particular, the former is more open to the use of *ijma* and *qiyās*). It also, to a certain extent, tolerated and interacted with Somali traditional law (*xeer*).

This accommodation of *xeer* was also the case for Sufism, another important religious tradition in Somalia. Sufi traditions within Sunni Islam generally focus on love of God, and the possibilities of coming closer to virtue through ritualization, prayers and emotions. In doing so, Sufism emphasizes the inward search for God, and in theory shuns

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8. The Islamic city state of Zelac, along with several other Islamic city states in Somalia, is mentioned by one of the most prominent Arabic geographers of the tenth century, al-Maqdis (d. 990) in his Arabic book *Ahsan al-Ta'qasm fi Marifat al-Aqzaim*. Maqdis and other sources also mention other city states along the coast. See Mohamed Haji Mukhtar, 'Arabic Sources on Somalia', *History in Africa* 14 (1987): 141–172.

9. Hussein Mohammed Adam, 'Islam and Politics in Somalia', *Journal of Islamic Studies* 6/2 (1995): 189–221.

10. For further information, see Noel James Coulson, *A History of Islamic Law*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1964. It should be noted that Somalia was strongly influenced by Ash'ariyah theology – a middle ground between a focus on rationality and a more textual approach to Islam – as well, which was relatively common amongst classic Shafii scholars. See Abdurahman Abdullahi, *The Islamic Movement in Somalia: A Study of the Islah Movement*. London: Adonis & Abbey, 2016, 20.

materialism and rigid legalism. This focus on emotion and inward pursuit enabled Sufism to incorporate many pre-Islamic Somali rituals into its traditions. Today, the Sufis have extensive reach into the countryside and the rural nomadic population. In urban areas, Sufi organizations have been reformed over the last thirty years in response to competition from other Islamist organizations, especially the Salafists. This has led to the establishment of more modern Sufi institutions, such as the Ma'allin Nur Mohamed Siyad Sufi organization in Mogadishu, which established the Imam Shafi' University, a charity, many mosques and hundreds of Qur'anic schools.

Sufism is divided into *tariqas*: Sufi schools named after the religious leaders – often referred to as *murshid* (guides) – who founded them. The word '*tariqa*' means path, and in this context refers to the path of learning. Each *tariqa* can point to a lineage of sheikhs who have passed down knowledge to new members, specifically the methods needed to find *haqiqa* (the ultimate truth). Each *tariqa* is thus more of a conduit for religious ideas and methods than an organization. Moreover, they are largely non-exclusive in terms of their relationship to the various approaches to Islam. As mentioned above, each *tariqa* is usually named after its founder: for example, the Iranian born Abdul Qādir Gīlānī (1078—1166) is regarded as being the founder of the Qadiriyya *tariqa*, which is very popular in Somalia. Gīlānī based his teachings on two different law schools, Shafi'i and Hanbali, which illustrates the inclusiveness of Sufism.<sup>11</sup> The Qadiriyya, Ahmadiyya and Salihyya *tariqas* have been the most popular schools in Somalia,<sup>12</sup> with the former also notable for producing arguably Somalia's most famous female Islamic scholar, Dada Masiti (1810s–1919). Somali Sufis still do pilgrimage to her tomb in Barawe.

Sufism is highly popular amongst both the middle and lower classes in Somalia. Their lack of English skills, however, has led to their exclusion in the study of modern political Islam in Somalia. The Sufi tradition of praying to deceased *tariqa* leaders in order to reach Allah has proven divisive amongst newer stands of Islam in Somalia, particularly Salafist, who often regard the practice as a form of idol worshipping. For similar reasons, the Sufi practice of visitation to the tombs of Sufi sheikhs is also controversial. As a result of these tensions between Sufis and Salafis, the former were heavily persecuted by al-Shabaab, which in turn led Sufis to organize self-defence organizations, such as *Alhu Sunna Wal Jama'a*.

### The latecomers: Salafism and Ikhwanism

Over the past century, two Islamic traditions with a shorter presence in Somalia have gained popularity among the country's elites. Both traditions spread through links with the Somali diaspora, assisted by sponsorship from Saudi Arabia. The first, Salafism, draws on the strand of Islam that dominates religious life in Saudi Arabia (often called Wahabism), although it is increasingly detached from the Saudi state. Despite the fact that the ideologies of both al-Shabaab and Islamic State draw upon Salafist scholars, Salafism should not be equated with these two organizations, nor perceived as purely violent.

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11. See Siddiq Osman Noor Muhammad, *Ghawth al A'zam Muhyiddin Shaykh 'Abdul Qadir Jilani, Rady Allahu Anhu*, Toronto: Iqra Publications: undated.

12. The smaller Rifa'iyya *tariqa* also has members in Somalia. It should be noted that while the Salihyya *tariqa* is sometimes claimed to be a part of the Qadiriyya *tariqa*, in the past there have been conflicts between the two, with the former having taken a much more revivalist stand, symbolized by the history of Sayid Mohamed Abdullah Hassan, who led an active insurgency against the British, Ethiopians and Italians from 1899 to 1921. Hassan, though drawing upon the Salihyaa organization, broke with the Salihyaa outside Somalia during his rebellion. See Bradford G. Martin, *Muslim Brotherhoods in Nineteenth-Century Africa*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Salafism bases itself on the Hanbali law school of Sunni Islam, a law school that largely neglects tradition to espouse literalist interpretations of the Qur'an and *hadith*. Even so, Salafists are relatively liberal in their acceptance of the latter, accepting *hadith* that are not regarded as authentic by Shafi'i scholars. Salafists thus display a more flexible approach to *hadith* than many other approaches to Islam. They are, however, more conservative regarding the use of *ijma* and *qiyās*, generally believing that present day *ijma* should not be emphasized at all, and that a literalist reading of the Qur'an and *hadith* are required.<sup>13</sup> This, though, can vary from sheikh to sheikh, and at least one Salafi respondent claiming that *ijma* should be important. This perhaps demonstrates a pragmatic streak among some of Somalia's Salafist sheikhs.<sup>14</sup>

Despite the Salafi claim that their tradition goes back to the roots of Islam, Salafism in Somalia has in the past been plagued by clannism. *Al-Ittihad al-Islamiyah*, the major Somali Salafi organization in the 1990s, was pushed to the verge of collapse on a number of occasions due to clan tensions.

Salafism also interacted and competed with the other, more elitist, Islamic tradition that has more recently emerged in Somalia: Ikwhanism, the Muslim Brotherhood-based religious philosophy. The Somali Ikhwans model their ideology on the works of Hassan al-Banna (14 October 1906—12 February 1949), and his emphasis on Islam and mankind as rational entities, which in turn leads to a belief that a fully rational human being will comprehend Islam and accept it as true. A key tenant of Ikwhanism is that education can promote rationality, and thus Islam. Partly because of this, education has always been important for the Ikhwans, and this remains the case today in Somalia.

The Ikhwans believe that rationalism can also be employed to better understand Islam and Shari'a, as well as a tool to dismiss archaic but supposedly Islamic traditions, replacing them (to a certain extent) with more modern interpretations of the Qur'an and *hadith*.<sup>15</sup> The Ikhwans thus based their traditions on a more flexible and dynamic understanding of Shari'a than the Salafis. Notably, however, a strand of Ikhwans thought in the 1960s, based on the works of Sayyid Qutb, strayed close to a Salafi tendency of condemning other Muslims. Although this approach was contested, if not refuted, by Ikhwans leaders, the Qutbist tradition has persisted in Somalia, and to a degree is evident within the major Ikhwans-inspired Somali organizations, particularly *Aala Sheikh*.<sup>16</sup>

The Salafi and Ikhwans currents in Somalia have intermingled extensively. Both were at an early stage supported by Saudi Arabia, with students and workers returning to Somalia from Saudi Arabia (and to a lesser extent Sudan) important for both movements. Common resistance against the Somali family laws in 1975, leading to the arrests of a number of leaders, also led to ties between the two traditions. Over time, Salafi and Ikhwans sheikhs discussed potential unions, for example between *al-Ittihad al-Islamiyah* (Salafist) and *al-Islax* (Ikhwans). There have also been religious leaders – perhaps the most well-known being the late Sheikh Nur Barud Gurhan – who ideologically were between the two strands. Despite these overlaps, the Salafist and Ikhwans traditions have remained separate, laying the foundations for, respectively, *al-Ictisam* and *al-Islax* – two of Somalia's longest lasting religious organizations.

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13. Christopher Melchert, *Ahmad Ibn Hanbal*, London: Bloomsbury, 2006.

14. Interview with Salafist Sheikh X1, date withheld.

15. Stig Jarle Hansen, Mohamed Gaas and Ida Bary, 'The Muslim Brotherhood in the Arab winter', Harvard Kennedy School of Governance discussion paper, September 2017, 13.

16. Hassan al-Hudeybi, the Spiritual Guide of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (1951–1973), wrote a book titled 'We Are Preachers Not Judges' in response to the ideology heralded by Qutb. See Barbara Zollner, *The Muslim Brotherhood: Hasan al-Hudaybi and Ideology*, London and New York: Routledge, 2009.

### 3. KEY RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS AND FIGURES

A number of Ikhwan-, Salafist- and Sufi-inspired organizations are prominent in today's Somalia. There have been cleavages within most of these organizations, which have at times developed into open conflict, splits and even new organizations. However, as actors within Somali society, they have generally shown themselves to be stabler than more secular political parties, or armed factions. By way of illustration, none of the factions that dominated the Somali civil war in the 1990s, nor any of the political parties of this period, remain operational, while the majority of Somalia's most important religious organizations have roots that date back to this period or even earlier. Below, the report provides an overview of the major religious organizations active in contemporary Somalia.

#### ***Al-Islax (Ikhwan)***

The Muslim Brotherhood was active even before Somalia gained independence. At the time, it was part of a larger nationalistic mobilization for an independent Somalia, but these currents failed to crystalize into any significant organizations. The Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated *al-Islax* was officially founded on 11 July 1978 in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, by five religious activists who had been driven into the diaspora partly due to the disagreement between Siad Barre and religious leaders over the 1975 Somali family laws, and partly due a decision to migrate to Saudi Arabia in order to find work. Most of the founding members had also been involved in other Muslim Brotherhoods organizations in Sudan and Saudi Arabia.<sup>17</sup>

While spreading Islam and Ikhwan thought was important for them, the new organization also wanted to influence politics and provoke change inside Somalia. *Al-Islax* was highly critical of the Siad Barre regime, especially following implementation of the 1975 family laws and the removal of Islam as a source of law in the 1979 constitution. As a result, the Siad Barre regime made active attempts to suppress it. In order to survive, *al-Islax* established clandestine networks and, while it is today perhaps the most transparent of Somalia's Islamist organizations, secrecy remains important. The organization established a decentralized charity structure whereby, rather than having outright control *al-Islax* charities, it would ensure it had a majority on the boards of nominally non-*al-Islax* charities, with some non-*al-Islax* members also included. The humanitarian efforts of *al-Islax* have been considerable, as have been its endeavours within reconciliation, with the *al-Islax*'s Somali Reconciliation Council (SRC) active until 2006.<sup>18</sup>

Initially, *al-Islax* actively recruited amongst the elite, regarding itself not as a mass organization but a vanguard group of pioneers attempting to transform wider Somali society.

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17. Abdullahi, *The Islamic Movement in Somalia*; Stig Jarle Hansen and Atle Mesøy, 'The Muslim Brotherhood in the wider horn of Africa', NIBR Report, 2009, 33.

18. Hansen and Mesøy, 'The Muslim Brotherhood in the wider horn of Africa'.

Although it had many sympathizers, *Al-Islax*'s refusal to join Hassan al-Turabi's<sup>19</sup> attempt at creating an African pan-Islamic organization increased its popularity amongst the Egyptian Brothers, and likely contributed to the organization being formally accepted into the Brotherhood's international structure in 1987. Moreover, *al-Islax* was granted a seat in the international *shura* council.<sup>20</sup> Though the body only had a somewhat weak advisory and coordination function, it meant that *al-Islax* gained prestige and access to international networks. Not only was their representative, Ali Sheikh, well-known amongst other Brotherhood associations, *al-Islax* was the only sub-Saharan African member in the council.<sup>21</sup> They also, at times, accessed funds from other Brotherhood-affiliated organizations and charities.

*Al-Islax* established a tradition of democratically electing its leadership, and moreover, through a decision made at the international Brotherhood *shura*, committed itself to democracy.

As the Somali state collapsed, a number of *al-Islax* members came to regard Salafis – especially *al-Ittihad al-Islamiyah* – as potential allies. Attempts at working together, however, ultimately provoked rivalry between the organizations. When *al-Islax* tried to cooperate with *al-Ittihad al-Islamiyah* in 1989, personal conflicts and ideological differences swiftly brought these efforts to the end. A final attempt to form an Islamic unity platform before the collapse of the Somali state, led by *Majmaca Culima* (see below), which was then headed by Sheikh Mohamed Moallim, also failed. Turabi again attempted to bring the two together in 1992, but *al-Islax* protested against *al-Ittihad al-Islamiyah*'s use of armed militias. *Al-Islax*'s critique of *al-Ittihad al-Islamiyah*'s militancy remained important up until the latter's eventual collapse in the late 1990s.<sup>22</sup>

*Al-Islax*'s decentralized structures, as well as its foreign and diaspora-based funding, contributed to a robustness that enabled the organization to survive during the civil war period of the 1990s. At the start of the 1990s, *al-Islax* reoriented itself to focus on reconciliation between warring parties and the intensification of Islamic missionary work, while maintaining its relief operation and education work. The organization also developed its so-called 'dealing with reality' programme, which allowed its members to engage in clan-based political movements. Moreover, in the early 1990s, it sent out mobile 'peace caravan' missions in an attempt to negotiate local peace deals in rural locations. The organization also founded the previously mentioned SRC (*Golaha Musaalexada*) in 1994, which was operational until 2006. During the four months of fighting that took

19. Hassan al-Turabi (1932–2016), the powerful leader of the Sudanese National Islamic Front (NIF), was an important ideologue and activist who attempted to create unity amongst Islamists at a global level.

20. The international *shura* council was established in 1982 to coordinate ideological debates, and had a general *shura*, al-Murshid (leader), and guidance council. Turabi initially opposed this new organization. Later, the council faced opposition from several important member organisations, with the Kuwaiti Brotherhood, for example, revolting against it after the First Gulf War, in which the council favored Iraq. The Iraqi Brotherhood also rejected the council's guidance when the former decided to participate in the Iraqi political process following the 2003 US invasion. Though international coordination among Brotherhood organizations remained loose and haphazard, they were able to make some joint decisions – such as making democracy a common goal in 1998. See Hansen, Gaas and Bary, 'The Muslim Brotherhood in the Arab winter', 15.

21. Hansen, Gaas and Bary, 'The Muslim Brotherhood in the Arab winter', 15.

22. In 1989, *al-Ittihad al-Islamiyah* was closer to Turabi than *al-Islax*. *Al-Islax* was skeptical of Turabism and more friendly with the Egyptian Muslim brotherhood. *Al-Ittihad al-Islamiyah*, meanwhile, had a strong Wahhabi-Salafist element. Several former members of *al-Islax* had previously left the organization to join *al-Ittihad al-Islamiyah*, including *al-Ittihad al-Islamiyah* leader Sheikh Ali Warsame, which further fostered hostility. Also significant were their organizational differences: *al-Ittihad al-Islamiyah* was already by this point more fragmented, and so had problems speaking with one voice. See: Hansen, Gaas and Bary 'The Muslim Brotherhood in the Arab winter', 15; Abdurahman Abdullahi, *Al Islax Movement in Somalia*, Mogadishu: Hiraan, 2008.



place between Ali Mahdi and Mohamed Farrah Hassan Aidid in Mogadishu in 1992, the SRC actively attempted to reconcile the two warring factions. Furthermore, according to an *al-Islax* sheikh, the SRC also had a role in the civil society initiative of clearing 70 illegal checkpoints in Mogadishu.<sup>23</sup> Thus, in a sense, *al-Islax* became depoliticized by the civil war, and instead increased its engagement with peace and reconciliation efforts, as well as charitable work. As part of this, the SRC became a member of INXA (Peace and Human Rights Network), the first Somali civil society network, established in 1997.

*Al-Islax*'s peace and reconciliation efforts subsequently offered the organization the opportunity to re-enter the political fray through its involvement in the 1999–2000 Arta peace process. *Al-Islax* played a key role in organizing negotiations, with Abdurahman Baadiyow – the deputy chairman, and later the organization's press spokesman – participating in the Technical Consultative Somali Peace Process symposium and advising on the technical side of the process. Many other *al-Islax* members were also actively involved.<sup>24</sup> *Al-Islax* went on to claim that 10 per cent of the ensuing parliament's members belonged to the organization, with prominent *al-Islax* member Ibrahim Dusuq, for example, appointed leader of the foreign relations committee.<sup>25</sup> The Arta peace process was criticized by Ethiopia, which regarded Djibouti as a rival to its own Somali peace efforts, and by 'warlords' who were not allowed seats. Amid this context, *al-Islax*'s efforts at the conference raised its prominence, prompting many to erroneously regard the organization as being behind the resulting government. Even so, *al-Islax* can arguably be seen to have had considerable influence, with the constitution produced following the Arta conference among the most Islamized in Somalia's history.<sup>26</sup>

*Al-Islax* was also hit hard by the War on Terror discourse, which was used instrumentally by Ethiopia to target the organization, partly in response to its role in the Arta conference. *Al-Islax* was often confused with other Islamist organizations by outsiders, who failed to recognize the nuances of *al-Islax*'s ideology. This led to the organization placing greater focus on maintaining secrecy, and may have contributed to *al-Islax*'s weakened influence at subsequent peace conferences.

*Al-Islax* faced its first large-scale split in 2006–2007 when a small group (about 300 members) left to found the *Dam Jadiid* (New Blood) network (see below). *Al-Islax* later faced a second split when Sheikh Mohamed Yousuf and Sheikh Mohamed Garyare – both founding members of *al-Islah* – left the group to join *Dam Jadiid*, though they subsequently also left that group. Today, though there is at least one political party founded by a prominent *al-Islax* member – the National Unity Party (*Xisbiga Midnimo-Qaran*) – the movement does not field its own political party. While prominent group members were close to former prime minister Hassan Ali Khaire, and had influence over the appointments he made, *al-Islax* does not acknowledge any formal political ties.

The organization is heavily involved in Somalia's educational sector, and has been relatively successful at enrolling girls in schools. It has also been highly successful in attracting funds for its charities, due in part to its members' high levels of education and the fact that many have been educated in the West. *Al-Islax* has close ties to a number of other Brotherhood-affiliated organizations, particularly Yemen's *al-Islah* and the Kuwaiti Brotherhood, the latter of which have secured funding for humanitarian projects in Somalia. In addition, the organization has over the past decade been strongly influenced by the liberal ideological thinking of Tunisian scholar Rashid Ganushi. It is also

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23. Interview with *al-Islax* Sheikh x3, date withheld.

24. Hansen and Mesøy, 'The Muslim Brotherhood in the wider horn'.

25. Interview with *al-Islax* Sheikh x4, date withheld.

26. Hansen and Mesøy, 'The Muslim Brotherhood in the wider horn'.

important to note that *al-Islax* is a regional organization with reach amongst Somalis in Djibouti, Ethiopia and Kenya, as well as the broader diaspora. It is organized according to a decentralized structure whereby each sub-chapter, including those outside Somalia, follows general guidance on the organization's educational curriculum, but then adapts it to the context of the state in which the particular sub-chapter operates.

### ***Dam Jadiid* (Ikhwan)**

As mentioned above, *Dam Jadiid* is a loose splinter group that arose partly as a result of disagreements within *al-Islax*. According to an eyewitness, these disagreements emerged when *al-Islax* was first democratized in 1995.<sup>27</sup> While those who formed *Dam Jadiid* wanted to directly engage with the Shari'a court movement and endorsed the use of violence against the Ethiopian intervention, the majority of *al-Islax* members opposed such views. These disagreements were exacerbated by tensions between Western-based and Gulf-based members, as well as a move towards a more conservative approach to Islam by those who later left to form *Dam Jadiid*. Tensions came to a head in 2003, when members of this splinter group failed to win election to be represented in the *al-Islax shura*, and so decided to announce their own separate organization. Moreover, the new movement included religious leaders who had previously left *al-Islax*, such as Sheikh Nur Barud Gurhan, who initially had been less committed to Ikhwanism and instead leant closer to Salafist ideology. The split became permanent in 2006–2007.

The members of the splinter group proceeded to alienate the international Brotherhood by publishing an article on the Egyptian Brotherhood's homepage claiming to be *al-Islax*'s new leadership. In response, then Supreme Counsellor Akef of the Egyptian Brotherhood declared the appointment void, stating that the old *al-Islax* leadership remained in power and that *Dam Jadiid* was non-Brotherhood.<sup>28</sup>

While *Dam Jadiid* has always been secretive about its organizational structure, the high-water mark of its influence appears to have been under Hassan Sheikh Mohamud's 2012–2017 presidency, particularly in terms of appointments. It has often been claimed that Mohamud's minister of justice Farah Abdulkadir and minister of interior Abdikarim Hussein Guled were members, although they have explicitly denied this. *Dam Jadiid*'s influence seems to have collapsed, however, when Hassan Sheikh Mohamud lost the presidency in 2017, with several leaders, including the late Sheikh Nur Barud Gurhan, choosing to become allies of the new president, Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed 'Farmaajo'. Mohamed Hussein Roble, who became prime minister in 2020, has also often been regarded as part of the *Dam Jadiid* network, though this is denied by several of this report's sources.

Looking back, opportunism, a good relationship to Qatar, and a will to strive for political power appear to be consistent threads in the organization's history, particularly over the past decade. The network's clandestine nature and fluidity makes it difficult to assess *Dam Jadiid*'s present organizational status, and indeed to work out who does or does not belong to it – though it does have members in the current Somali national parliament. The organization's current leader is Omar Dahir, while its major spiritual leaders are Sheikh Osman Ibrahim and Dr Mahamed Haji (another spiritual leader, Sheikh Nur Barud Gurhan, died in 2021). According to a prominent sheikh in Mogadishu, the organization now uses the name *Mu'tamar Al-Tanmiya*.<sup>29</sup> In terms of external sources of inspiration, *Dam Jadiid* members mirror *al-Islax* in remaining focused on

27. Interview with *al-Islax* Sheikh X4, date withheld.

28. Hansen and Mesøy, 'The Muslim Brotherhood in the wider horn', 56.

29. Interview with prominent sheikh X4, date withheld.



Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated religious thinkers, although it appears to have distanced itself somewhat from the Muslim Brotherhood in the wake of the setbacks faced by the latter following the Arab Spring. As is the case for *al-Islax*, the ideological thinking of Tunisian scholar Rashid Ghanouchi – who is relatively liberal on the role of women in politics and has a clear commitment to democracy – is particularly important, though his views on gender are not fully accepted (members deny, for example, that Somalia can have a female president).

### ***Aala Sheikh (Ikhwan)***

*Aala Sheikh* was founded by Sheikh Mohamed Moalim, famous for his sermons at Mogadishu's Abdulqadir Mosque in the 1970s, and a prisoner of the Siad Barre regime for nine years from 1976.<sup>30</sup> During his prison years, Moalim attempted to reconcile Ikwhan sympathizers with Salafists, with one *Aala Sheikh* member interviewed for this report claiming that the organization is partly a result of these efforts.<sup>31</sup> The organization is grounded in Ikhwan ideology, with perhaps a stronger emphasis on Sayyid Qutb's works, and is a more local and clan-based Brotherhood. Despite the fact that Moalim graduated from the Al-Azhar University in Egypt, the organization has weak international ties. Some *Aala Sheikh* members also joined the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) in 2006.

Today, *Aala Sheikh* is a mainly a Hawiye clan-based organization. The Daljir Political Party, originally created by *Aala Sheikh*, currently forms part of the Union for Peace and Development Party (UPD), which also includes members of *Dam Jadiid* and belongs to the opposition Forum for National Parties. *Aala Sheikh* members have been involved in running the City University of Mogadishu and the Goobjoog Media Group, and the organization was also involved in influencing the formational processes of Galmudug federal state. In addition, *Aala Sheikh* members were seen as being close to former president Sharif Sheikh Ahmed (2009–2012). Members of the group supposedly continue to have ties to Sharif Ahmed's party, *Himlo Qaran*.<sup>32</sup>

### ***Al-Ictisam (Salafi)***

*Al-Ictisam (al-Ictisam Bil Kitabi Wa Sunna)* has its roots in the more well-known *al-Ittihad al-Islamiyah*, which was created in 1983 as a union between a number of smaller religious organizations. *Al-Ittihad al-Islamiyah*'s somewhat confused ideological platform, while dominated by Salafism, was also influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood and Hassan Turabi. Though *al-Ittihad al-Islamiyah* was highly popular amongst students in Mogadishu in the late 1980s, the early period of the civil war exposed major cleavages in the organization. These followed clan lines, as well as reflecting divisions on how to deal with the civil war, with some in the organization wishing to abstain from warfare and other, more extreme elements, wanting to go as far as inviting al-Qaeda into Somalia to act as instructors. *Al-Ittihad al-Islamiyah* also suffered a series of major military reversals in Puntland in 1991–1993, then in Gedo in 1996 and 1998–1999. Ultimately, these internal strains and battlefield defeats led to organizational collapse in 1998–1999.

One of the factions that emerged from the collapse was *al-Ictisam*, initially led by Sheikh Mohamud Isse. According to respondents close to the organization, *al-Ictisam* was a Salafist organization that rejected violence. However, members – or at least alleged members – such as Sheikh Mohamed Abdi Umal endorsed violence as a response to Ethio-

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30. Interview with prominent sheikh X5, date withheld.

31. Interview with prominent sheikh X6, date withheld.

32. Heritage Institute, 'Response to Monitoring Group Allegations', July 2013. (<https://www.heritageinstitute.org/response-to-monitoring-group>)

pia's 2006–2009 intervention in Somalia, and supported Mogadishu's Shari'a courts (though Mohamed Abdi Umal later distanced himself strongly from al-Shabaab).<sup>33</sup> In the words of one of the organization's sheikhs:

The organization is primarily organized around mosques and religious institutions [*madarasas*, universities, educational trusts]. The organization focuses on propagating the true teachings of Islam through educating its congregation, by building educational institutions and through periodic Islamic summits and conferences.<sup>34</sup>

Today, the organization is led by Sheikh Bashir Ahmed Salad, who was educated in Pakistan.

*Al-Ictisam* is an elite organization: members are usually educated, and have good foreign connections, often through their studies abroad. Some members have been influenced by the work of Saudi sheikhs such as Abdul Aziz Ibn Abdullah Ibn Baz (1910–1999), the former grand mufti of Saudi Arabia, and Muhammad Ibn al-Uthaymin (1925–2001). Several active sheikhs also have close relationships with their former teachers abroad. In relation to issues of gender, including allowing women to drive, the sheikhs remain very conservative. Some affiliated sheikhs, such as Sheikh Mohamed Abdi Umal, are highly active in the media, including engaging in quite hostile exchanges with Sufi sheikhs. This has led to conflicts, resulting in, for example, one of Umal's public preaching sessions in Mogadishu in November 2019 being cancelled due to Sufi pressure. Though *al-Ictisam* has a wide reach in the diaspora, inside Somalia itself the organization lacks the large numbers of followers – particularly within the middle and lower classes – that Sufi organizations have.

### ***Majmaca Culimada***

According to International Crisis Group, the origins of *Majmaca Culima* go back to a small group of 30 Sunni sheikhs who organized themselves for self-defence following the collapse of the Somali state. The resulting self-defence militia was called *Horseed*, with an Islamic council created alongside it. Although *Horseed* was soon disbanded, these entities created the foundation for *Majmaca Culimada*.<sup>35</sup> The Siad Barre regime's collapse made it less challenging and dangerous to create a religious organization, which perhaps offered encouragement to those setting up the group.<sup>36</sup> Officially, the organization was formed in 1991 by its first leader Sheikh Mohamed Moalim Hassan, just after the ousting of Siad Barre.

*Majmaca Culimada* continued to exist in a weakened state and, according to one of its current leaders, now consists of a limited structure incorporating a handful of religious leaders and scholars from different smaller associations. The group has one department – *Maktabul Istisharatul Fiqi* – that operates a court system handling minor issues such as disputes and inheritance, based on Islamic principles, as well as a second department – *Maktabul Ta'lim* – which covers educational and (local and international) scholarship issues. – which is led by Sheikh Ali Moalim and oversees educational and (local and international) scholarship issues. Sheikh Mohamed Moalim Hassan functions as the organization's social affairs coordinator – which is led by Sheikh Ali Moalim and oversees

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33. United Nations Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea, 'Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea pursuant to Security Council resolution 2182 (2014)', 13.

34. Interview with prominent sheikh X6, date withheld.

35. See, for example, International Crisis Group, 'Somalia's Islamists', *Africa Report* 100 (2006): 16–17.

36. Interview with prominent sheikh X6, date withheld.

educational and (local and international) scholarship issues. Sheikh Mohamed Moalim Hassan functions as the organization's social affairs coordinator

The organization has engaged in mediation between the Haber Gedir and Biyamal (in early 2012), as well as in conflicts between the Dir and Hawaadle. It is today close to *Aala Sheikh*, with a number of individuals members of both organizations.

### ***Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama'a (Sufi)***

According to International Crisis Group, a subgroup of *Majmaca Culima* led by Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Muhiyadin broke off in response to Mohammed Farah Aidid's request for religious backing of his armed faction of the United Somali Congress. This is, however, contested by other Sufi activists, who claim that those in the subgroup had only weak ties to *Majmaca Culima*.<sup>37</sup> The group was led Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Muhiyadin and was relatively clan based (around the Haber Gedir), and initially incorporated sheikhs from both the Sufi *tariqas* and the general Shafi'i traditions.<sup>38</sup>

At first, *Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama'a* kept a low profile, and had limited political and military influence during the 1990s, in the process becoming an increasingly pure Sufi organization. During these years, the organization established, or participated in, Shari'a courts in central Somalia.<sup>39</sup> A central leadership structure consolidated around chairman Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Muhiyadin, of the Qadiriyya *tariqa* (the largest *tariqa* in Somalia), while both the vice-chairman and the secretary were to be drawn from the Ahmadiya *tariqa* (Salhiya was regarded as a sub-section of Ahmadiya, and so included as a part of the Ahmadiya *tariqa's* quota). Clan issues also influenced appointments.<sup>40</sup>

In the early 2000s, *Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama'a* actively tried to block Salafi influence in the Somali peace conference hosted by Kenya, with the result that the organization became increasingly politicized. The rise of al-Shabaab further strengthened this trend, with several groups organizing themselves under *Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama'a's* banner and, from 2008, taking up arms against al-Shabaab. Not all these groups appear to have been in contact with the organization's leadership, being rather independent groups under the *Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama'a's* banner.

Moreover, many of these new members – being more Shafi'i than specifically Sufi – viewed the organization in pragmatic, rather than ideological, terms. These local militias were relatively successful in fighting al-Shabaab. In order to at least maintain an illusion of unity, *Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama'a's* leadership approached several of the more independent groups employing their name and attempted to impose some form of central coordination. Even so, the group remained extremely fragmented. Some local militias also created local administrations: the strongest of these was in Galmudug, and was headed by Sheikh Ibrahim Sheikh Hassan (Guureeye), and Sheikh Hassan Farah. The Galmudug *Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama'a* administration did not, however, create Shari'a courts, but rather based itself on customary clan law, gaining a good reputation for maintaining security. Moreover, it did not tax the local population.<sup>41</sup>

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37. See, for example, International Crisis Group, 'Somalia's Islamists'; Interview with the son of a prominent Sufi sheikh X3, 21 January 2021.

38. Interview with the son of a prominent Sufi sheikh X3, 21 January 2021.

39. Mark Bradbury and Sally Healy, 'Whose peace is it anyway? Connecting Somali and international peacemaking', *Accord, an international review of peace initiatives* 21 (2010).

40. Interview with the son of a prominent Sufi sheikh X3, 21 January 2021.

41. Interview with local source X2, 21 January 2021.

By 2011, *Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama'a* had secured direct influence over Somalia's government, with the close relationship the group enjoyed with President Sharif Sheikh Ahmed (2009–2012) perhaps due to the latter coming from a prominent Sufi family. Sharif Ahmed had frequent meetings with then *Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama'a* chairman Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Muhiyadin, and five of his ministers were Ahlu Sunna members.<sup>42</sup> Also during this period, several Sufi sheikhs affiliated with the organization – such as the spokesman for the group's core unit, Sheikh Abdulkadir Somow – gained considerable popularity amongst the general Somali public.

At the same time, the Galmudug sub-chapter of the organization found itself engaged in local power struggles without the approval of the central leadership. Moreover, it appears that the local Galmudug leaders were neglected or snubbed by the organization's central leadership, with, for example, the former not invited to coordination meetings with the Somali government. Central leadership chairman Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Muhiyadin abstained, however, from criticizing the Galmudug group in public. In 2014, the Galmudug group became heavily embroiled in power struggles around the creation of Galmudug regional state, and was involved in fighting other political factions in the region for power. The high-water mark in terms of local influence was perhaps the Galmudug peace agreement signed between the Galmudug administration leadership and *Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama'a* in December 2017, where the group was included in a power sharing agreement. Today, *Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama'a*'s influence in Galmudug has collapsed along with the peace agreement, with the group defeated by forces from the Somali government and its local allies.

Meanwhile, in Mogadishu, *Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama'a*'s central leadership lost influence over the government following the changeover of power in 2012. Under current president Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed 'Farmaajo', *Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama'a* has increasingly engaged in campaigns aimed at reducing the influence of *al-Ictisam* members. In particular, public debates between *Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama'a*'s Sheikh Somow and *al-Ictisam*'s Sheikh Umal having become relatively famous in Somalia.

Today, the group is very loosely organized, with extensive local control and fluid, even non-existent, line of command lines. Even so, *Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama'a* has a solid core in Mogadishu, dominated by Sufi sheikhs. The organization lacks transparency, perhaps in order to hide its internal divisions. It remains largely dominated by the Hawiye clan family, though some subgroups affiliated with the group are dominated by other clans. Despite its fragmented nature, *Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama'a* reaches further into the countryside than other religious organizations, and is perhaps the only non-elite mass movement described in this report.

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42. Associated Press, 'Militants join Somali government', 16 March 2010. Accessed 16 March 2021, ([http://archive.boston.com/news/world/africa/articles/2010/03/16/militants\\_join\\_somali\\_government/](http://archive.boston.com/news/world/africa/articles/2010/03/16/militants_join_somali_government/)).

## 4. INTERACTIONS BETWEEN CLAN, RELIGION AND PROFIT-SEEKING

Somalia's sheikhs and religious organizations exist in a context where loyalties and identities overlap. Clan identity has always influenced Somali politics, as have economic interests and patrimonialism. In the words of a prominent Salafist sheikh:

Religious organizations are constituted by people who in turn trace their lineages to tribes and clans. This means that religious organizations have both formal and informal relations with the tribes. In Islam, lineage and identity are often held with high esteem. It safeguards and promotes the positive use of the clan. Of course, sometimes there is undesirable use of the clan factor by some of the religious organizations but that is not something provided for in Islam.<sup>43</sup>

As this suggests, religious groupings and clan identity have frequently intersected in Somalia. *Al-Islax* has been accused of recruiting extensively from one clan, the Sheikhal, while it has been alleged that *Majmaca Culimada* is dominated by the Hawiye.<sup>44</sup> *Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama'a*, the largest Sufi-inspired organization, was and still is to a certain extent dominated by the Haber Gedir. Moreover, cleavages within organizations often follow clan lines, as happened in the case of *al-Ittihad al-Islamiyah* during the 1990s.<sup>45</sup> Another relevant factor is *xeer*, the traditional legal system that dominates rural Somalia. *Xeer* differs from and, to a certain extent, challenges Shari'a. Areas of differences include the issue of female inheritance, Shari'a's focus on immediate family rather than larger kinship groups, and the influence that the balance of power between clans has on settlements within *xeer*.<sup>46</sup> Yet, as expressed by Mohamed Hussen Gaas in perhaps the best article written on how fluidity and stability combine in the Somali clan system, it is important to nuance the concept of clan: 'Clan is better captured not as a primordial

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43. Interview with Salafist Sheikh X1, date withheld.

44. See, for example, Hansen and Mesøy 'The Muslim Brotherhood in the wider horn', 41.

45. See, for example, International Crisis Group, 'Somalia's Islamists', 6–7, especially after the end of the Las Qoray period of the group post 1992. It should be noted that on some occasions – as during the battle for Arrale in 1991, when Hassan Dahir Aweys (later leader of the *al-Ittihad al-Islamiyah*) defected to the group – *al-Ittihad al-Islamiyah* has managed to transcend clan lines. Also see Roland Marchal and Zakaria M. Sheikh, 'Somalia's Salafists', *Islamic Africa* 6/1–2 (2015): 149.

46. See, for example, Lidwien Kapteijns, 'Gender Relations and the Transformation of the Northern Somali', *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 28/2 (1995): 255; Andre Le Sage, 'Stateless Justice in Somalia: Formal and Informal Rule of Law Initiatives', Center for Human Dialogue Report, 2005. Shari'a, for example, stipulates female inheritance as being up to 50 per cent, while in rural parts of southern Somalia, when a man dies, his widow and daughters have no rights to his land, which is inherited by his sons. See also United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), 'Customary norms, religious beliefs and social practices that influence gender-differentiated land rights', UN Gender and Land Rights Database (GLRD), 2010. Accessed 11 January 2021, ([www.fao.org/gender-landrights-database/country-profiles/countries-list/customary-law/en/?country\\_iso3=SOM](http://www.fao.org/gender-landrights-database/country-profiles/countries-list/customary-law/en/?country_iso3=SOM)).

structure and identity but instead as one that combines aspects of what perceptually seems primordial but is dynamic.<sup>47</sup>

Clan identity can change, can be employed instrumentally, and can have different meanings under different circumstances. Even so, it contains a degree of stability that is important to understand when it comes to unravelling Somali politics, and which must be taken into account when studying Somali religious life. In the pre-1969 Somali republic, clan was a mobilizing tool for political parties, while under Somali's current 4.5 electoral system, each major clan is assigned a quota (with the '.5' covering the smaller clans/groupings). There is no essential contradiction between clan identity and religious identity. Similar to, for example, how a US citizen may identify as both a Christian and an American, so a Somali may combine an Islamic identity with their clan identity. Depending on circumstances, one of the two identities may at times be more important than the other. Moreover, the two identities may interact and even redefine each other.

Clan identity also determines networks and is often, due to general insecurity, used for social mobilization and security provision. In effect, *al-Islax* acknowledged the importance of clan when it adopted its 'dealing with reality' policy in 1995, which allowed its members to participate in local councils based on clan.<sup>48</sup> This is not to say that religion lacks importance. Religion–clan interaction is dynamic, with religious networks at times transcending clan loyalties, a situation perhaps illustrated by the relative stability of religious groups compared to groupings that are more clan-based. Moreover, religious movements, despite the challenges they face, have had greater success in transcending clan than other social movements in Somalia.

In the past, religion in Somalia has also been tied up with business and profit-seeking. Religious titles have instrumental value in the business sector, creating consumer trust in businesspeople through projection of a trustworthy image. Examples here include the owner of Hormuud (one of Somalia's largest telecommunications companies), Ahmed Nur Jimaale; entrepreneur Abukar Umar Cadaani; and former Dalsan International (a financial company that collapsed in 2006) spokesperson, Mohamed Sheikh Osman.<sup>49</sup> In addition, businesspeople can utilize their religious identity to tap into religious networks for business purposes. Religious leaders have, moreover, been key to organizing security mechanisms aimed at protecting both ordinary citizens and the business community (for instance, the Shari'a courts in Mogadishu prior to 2007).<sup>50</sup> We should be careful, however, to avoid the perception that religious groups are merely vessels instrumentalized by profiteers for personal gain – ideology matters, as evidenced by the long-running public debate between Sufis and Salafis. Furthermore, while certain individuals may be motivated by personal interest to join more elite-based Salafi, Ikhwan or even Sufi-related networks, this does little to explain the policies and extensive charitable efforts of the organizations explored in this report.

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47. Mohamed Hussein Gaas, 'Primordialism vs. instrumentalism in Somali society: is an alternative needed?', *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 36/4 (2018).

48. 'How to deal with the new realities' was first discussed in Toronto, Canada, after the fall of the regime in January 1991, with the policy of 'dealing with reality' officially adopted in 1995. Hansen, Gaas and Bary 'The Muslim Brotherhood in the Arab winter', 13; Hansen and Mesøy, 'The Muslim Brotherhood in the wider horn', 49.

49. Stig Jarle Hansen, 'Civil War economies, the hunt for profit and the incentives for peace', AE Working paper 1, 2007, 71.

50. Hansen, 'Civil War economies'.



## 5. THE ROLE OF RELIGIOUS GROUPS IN CURRENT POLITICAL DYNAMICS

Religious groups play a diverse range of roles in Somali politics. At one end of the spectrum, religious groups actively participate in armed combat or seek to gain power over/exert influence on government. At the other end of the spectrum lies the broader societal influence wielded by religious leaders and groups, which, though not explicitly political, may have political effects. While many self-proclaimed religious actors – such as *al-Itti-had al-Islamiyah* and al-Shabaab – have militarized in the past, these are not the focus of this report. They do, though, serve as an example of how religion can act as a mobilizing force in Somalia, and that to try and isolate religion from politics is a fruitless task. In Somalia, religion will be a part of the political landscape for the foreseeable future.

The influence of religion on politics in Somalia has many nuances, and may involve indirect participation by religious leaders who, from their perspective, are merely commenting upon everyday practices and morals. Here, topics addressed in Friday sermons – for example commenting on public morals or criticizing corrupt practices amongst the business community – may have impacts far beyond the social realm. Such impacts are magnified by the fact that many high-profile sheikhs – for example, Sheikh Umal and Sheikh Somow – have their speeches redistributed to a wider online audience via online platforms such as YouTube. In doing so, they are helping form public opinion on political issues without being directly engaged in political processes. This indirect yet potent way of engaging with politics is hard to measure and often easy to ignore, as it does not create headlines. Moreover, many religious leaders regard themselves as guardians of public morality rather than politicians.

Religious leaders and organizations also influence politics by acting as service providers within both the development and humanitarian sectors, facilitating what would be considered public services in many other countries. Service provision has the impact of altering the policy priorities of Somalia's government and federal states, as well as humanitarian actors. It also strengthens loyalty towards religious leaders. We also see single-person channels of influence; whereby religious leaders gain positions within the Somali government or cultivate personal relationships with politicians. Somalia's Salafist and Ikhwan denominations are relatively elite based, meaning it is common for such actors to hold positions of power. This can, however, be problematic, as it may mean other denominations – such as the Sufis – lack similar access to political power. Family connections to a top politician, such as *Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama'a* enjoyed during the presidency Sharif Sheikh Ahmed (2009–2012), inevitably bestows influence. Single-person or network-based channels of influence are difficult to explore empirically and may easily be overestimated, or reflect an imaginary link created by conspiracy theories. It is also hard to evaluate what kind of influence is taking place – that is, whether an individual is attempting to promote their own position or that of a religious agenda. In this regard, opinions among politicians interviewed for this report varied, with some regarding religious ministers as no more than opportunists.



Influence can also be exerted through religious political parties. In Somalia, though individual religious activists have on occasion attempted to launch their own political parties, very few Islamist organizations have ever chosen to do so. On the other hand, these organizations have at times actively striven for regime change, as can be seen with *al-Ittihad al-Islamiyah* and *al-Islax* in the 1980s. In many ways, this resembles oppositional civil society organizations more commonly seen in other countries.

To summarize, six forms of religious influence on Somali politics can be observed, on a spectrum that can be divided up as follows: 1) armed insurgency; 2) religious actors striving for regime change; 3) religious political parties; 4) single-person/networked channels of influence; 5) influence through service provision and 6) indirect political influence. These forms are explored in greater depth below.

### Armed insurgency

Recent examples of armed insurgency include *Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama'a*'s role in Galmudug, though it should be noted that most religious actors today view the organization's involvement in an unfavourable light. Moreover, *Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama'a*'s somewhat fragmented nature meant the central leadership felt it had only limited control over the subgroups that came into existence as part of the military mobilization against al-Shabaab. Several respondents highlighted that *al-Ittihad al-Islamiyah*'s resort to arms prompted the founding of *al-Ictisam*, with the latter group wishing to distance itself from former (although individual members later chose to again support violence).

Similarly, *al-Islax* faced internal turmoil over the use of violence, with the splinter group *Dam Jadiid* formed in 2006 by members willing to endorse armed struggle as a tool of resistance (although there is no evidence the group actively participated in the civil war after 2009).

### Religious actors striving for regime change

The fortunes of *al-Ictisam*, *al-Islax*, *Dam Jadiid* and *Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama'a* have fluctuated over time when it comes to influencing senior politicians at the national level, as well as regional states. Over the past ten years in particular, it does not appear as if any of Somalia's religious groups have made active attempts to change the cabinet or president, whether at a national or regional state level (with the exception of Galmudug). Organized opposition such as that conducted by *al-Ittihad al-Islamiyah* and *al-Islax* against the Barre regime from the late 1970s to the early 1990s now seems to be a thing of the past. While religious organizations may organize single-issue campaigns, they do not as a rule explicitly promote regime change. As one of the sheikhs interviewed for this report observed:

Mainstream religious groups at the moment have good relations and work closely with the different levels of the government – FGS and FMS [Federal Member States]. They also work with the parliament in their day-to-day legislation activities in a bid to harmonize the regulations and bills with the teachings of Islam. They also have close and good relations with the media, who often give enough coverage to the activities of the religious groups and organizations.<sup>51</sup>

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51. Interview with Salafist Sheikh X2, date withheld.

### Religious political parties

Religious political parties are also a rarity in Somalia. Though several political parties have been founded by religious leaders – for example, Abdurahman Abdullahi Badiyow's National Unity Party (*Xisbiga Midnimo-Qaran*) – their leaders tend to maintain that the parties are independent of their religious organizations. Moreover, while political parties such as *Himilo-Qaran* may have members who also belong to religious organizations, the parties themselves were not initiated by key religious organization figures. It should also be noted that political parties in Somalia are in general highly unstable, not institutionalized and based around a single individual. As a result, they tend to disappear quickly. Moreover, followers of Ikwhanism have long debated whether and to what extent to participate in political systems, which impacts the thinking of organizations with an Ikhwani background, such as *al-Islax*, *Dam Jadiid* and *Aala Sheikh*.

Some members of the Sudanese and Egyptian Brotherhoods expressed concern that Brotherhood-affiliated political parties would split followers of Islam and create discord. Though the view that creating a political party should in general (but not always) be left open as a possibility eventually prevailed, in some cases (such as *Ennahda* in Tunisia) the party was kept separate from religious activities. In other cases, a particular Brotherhood has maintained there is no connection with a political party, even though it is clear said political party is in fact a Brotherhood front (such as the Freedom and Justice Party in Egypt). Moreover, religiously based parties are limited by the Somali constitution. Finally, it should be noted that among our respondents, only Sufis from *Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama'a* argued for political parties based on religious movements.

It does not follow from the above, however, that Somalia's religious organizations and sheikhs are necessarily opposed to democracy as an institution. Most respondents highlighted support for free elections when it comes to appointing the country's leadership. Even so, some civil rights enjoyed within Western democracies were contested:

Democracy has two types; one is based on ideology while the other is based on the right of the peoples to elect their leaders. Islam doesn't bother about the second but promotes it. The former one, ideology, gives the people to do what pleases them and that contravenes the Islamic principles. Muslims are bound to the allowed and disallowed according to the Sharia.

Thus, the commitment to democracy is in general – as stipulated in the Somali constitution – based on Shari'a. In other words, democracy must be based on a foundation of Islamic law.

### Single-person/networked channels of influence

For Somali religious organizations, single-person or networked channels of influence can be seen to be more important than political parties. This is especially so given the enduring importance of clan in Somali politics, with religious parties keen to avoid clan allegiance – particularly in public – in order to be respected as a religious actor. Several of the religious organizations mentioned previously have had members gain important political positions, and/or had members invited to give their opinion or advice to Somali cabinets. In particular, it seems *Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama'a* and *Aala Sheikh* enjoyed privileged positions during Sharif Sheikh Ahmed's presidency (2009–2012), while *Dam Jadiid* enjoyed similar advantages during Hassan Sheikh Mohamud's subsequent presidency (2012–2016).

In the latter case, however, where alleged *Dam Jadiid* members held government positions, it is unclear how much influence this bestowed. This is because, first, in many

cases, the exact link between an individual in the cabinet and a religious organization is hard to establish; and, second, many maintain that the role of being a member of a religious organization and that of being a cabinet member can be separated out. Moreover, given that many members of *al-Islax*, *Dam Jadiid* and *al-Ictisam* are of a high educational level, it is natural that some of them will end up in senior political positions. Even so, these overlaps between positions of power and religious organizations, combined with the latter's loose and often clandestine organizational structures, have a tendency to feed conspiracy theories. An alternative to informal networks and overlaps of positions would be to create formal consultation institutions, which at present are non-existent in Somalia. Nevertheless, it is probable such overlaps will continue to exist, partly due to the high qualifications of Islamist organization members.

### **Influence through service provision**

Service provision can facilitate more informal linkages with government. Sheikh Mohamed Abdi Umal, for example, organized fund-raising sessions and aid efforts during several droughts from 2017 onwards, and as a result of becoming a major actor in relief efforts gained access to the Somali government. The service provision provided by religious actors means the international community must engage them for coordination purposes. The somewhat ad hoc nature of Salafi sheikhs' charitable efforts, combined with the fact that the humanitarian actors affiliated with *al-Islax* often operate within clandestine networks, means that such influences are hard to trace. That said, research thus far seems to indicate that *al-Islax*'s humanitarian practices are, in general, non-exclusionary. Moreover, *al-Islax*'s continued focus on peace negotiations at the local level should be noted and, if possible, its expertise in this area (along with that of *Ahlu Sunna Wah Jama'a*) taken advantage of.

Given the weakness of Somalia's public institutions, it is likely that religious organizations and individuals will – having gained considerable trust among locals – continue to be a major source of aid for the foreseeable future. It is also likely that such efforts will provide these religious actors with greater legitimacy, enhancing any other strategies they may be pursuing in order to influence politics. In addition, service provision provides an important platform for independent religious leaders to engage wider society, enhancing their influence beyond the messages conveyed in the media and in Friday sermons by showing that they are acting on their beliefs and creating legitimacy.

### **Indirect political influence**

Both independent sheikhs and the larger Islamic organizations can exert indirect political influence through the speeches and public statements they give, whether through Friday sermons in and outside Somalia or via multimedia channels such as YouTube. Diaspora religious leaders have, for example, been able to influence local attitudes via their Friday sermons, while in the 1980s, Friday sermons in Mogadishu provided a major platform for the anti-government rhetoric of *al-Islax* and *al-Ittihad al-Islamiyah*. The Somali government has also actively cooperated with the religious community in order to disseminate information, for instance in asking religious leaders to speak about the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020.<sup>52</sup> In addition, there are many examples of religious organizations endorsing or condemning specific behaviour, such as warning women against playing

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52. BBC News. 'Coronavirus: Fighting al-Shabab propaganda in Somalia', 2 April 2021, Accessed 17 March 2021, ([www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-52103799](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-52103799)).

basketball in 2016, or commenting on world politics, such as when the US accepted Jerusalem as the new Israeli capital in 2017.<sup>53</sup>

### Religious movements and Somali politics today

Over the past 50 years, religious organizations have become increasingly important in shaping Somali politics, whether directly or indirectly. Having been opposition actors during the Siad Barre years, many subsequently managed to gain the ears of politicians, and in some cases, members became politicians themselves. Today, it is impossible to separate out religion and politics in Somalia, meaning that religious movements are an integral part of the political landscape. It should also be noted that, despite factionalism and splits, there has been considerable continuity amongst Somalia's Islamist organizations: *Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama'a* and *Majmaca Culimada* have roots that stretch back to the start of the civil war, while those of *al-Islax* and *al-Ictisam* extend even further back, to the pre-war era. *Dam Jadiid* is perhaps the youngest actor, with some 14 years of history. Thus, these religious actors have proven themselves more stable than other political movements, and far more stable than political parties, which tend to be based around a high-profile individual and so prone to disintegration. Illustrative of this fact is that, *al-Islax* apart, none of the political parties or insurgency organizations that existed in pre-war Somalia remain active today. The role of these groups in Somali political life is therefore a key source of institutional and organizational stability.

While it is all-too-easy to focus on religiously inspired militancy – particularly the actions of al-Shabaab – it appears that in general Somalia's religious actors have largely grown out of violence: *al-Islax*, *Dam Jadiid* and *al-Ictisam* no longer field militias, while *Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama'a* is generally less involved in military operations, perhaps save in Gal-mudug. In fact, what has probably been under-estimated is the peace-making potential of religious actors. *Al-Islax*'s peace and reconciliation efforts in the early 1990s and its active involvement in the Arta peace process show a dedication to peace-making, with the organization viewing Islam as a glue that can unite Somalis and as a tool to avoid warfare.<sup>54</sup> Elsewhere, *Majmaca Culimada* engaged in peace-making within clans in the early 1990s. Religious engagement with peace-making has, however, also encountered obstacles, with rivalries between organizations that go beyond just theological differences. In the past, peace-making appears to have been most effective when religious leaders have made more generalized pledges to engage parties in dialogue, or when the focus is on local-level negotiations, preferably between factions sympathetic to the theological views of the religious organization involved.

What impacts have these various engagements had on Somali politics, and how do political actors view them? It appears that religious organizations have in the past influenced the appointment of politicians and civil servants, especially when there is a president in power with whom the organization has personal or network-based ties. Moreover, in the case of the Arta process, it seems that *al-Islax* managed to directly influence legislation. More generally, religion remains important for Somali politicians in terms of being – or at least appearing to be – a devoted Muslim. Given the stability of the religious actors described in this report, they are likely to remain important actors in Somali politics for the foreseeable future.

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53. Mohamed Olad, 'Somali Clerics Warn Women Against Playing Basketball', VOA, 22 December 2016. Accessed 20 March 2021, (<https://www.voanews.com/a/somali-clerics-warn-women-against-playing-basketball/3646679.html>).

54. Safi Mahsin, 'The attitude and reaction of the Islamic groups to US/UN intervention in Somalia 1991–1995', in *Africa in the Post-Cold War Era*, ed. Omar Ahmed Saeed, Khartoum: International University of Africa, 2006, 105.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

Religious organizations – and the leaders associated with them – have for a long time wielded considerable influence on, and been a part of Somalia's political landscape. However, they have often been viewed – particularly by the Somali government, its international partners and a donor-dependent civil society – as a separate and qualitatively different sector. This has created a false separation between government and religious organizations and has meant that the former has failed to get the most from their strong and often positive influence on governance in Somalia.

In reality, religious groups are fluid and dynamic – often operating as loose networks rather than clear organizational blocs – and have been evident both as pressure groups and as practical players in a variety of sectors and roles. In the political sphere, religious groups have been prominent in their attempts (often successful) to influence ruling regimes and have also been key players in the creation of new political parties. They exert indirect influence via sermons and other public channels, which are extremely effective at reaching the Somali population at large. While they have often played a positive role in moderating Somalia's combustible political dynamics – supporting peace conferences and local reconciliation efforts – they also engage in activities beyond the political realm, including service provision and humanitarian relief efforts.

Since the collapse of the state in 1991, religious groups have demonstrated impressive staying power when compared with the rapidly changing mosaic of non-faith-based actors – providing a rare source of stability in Somali public life. Although at times instrumentalized by other political actors, their actions have generally been motivated by their deeply felt religious beliefs, which tend towards altruism, rather than narrow self-interest. This does not, however, prevent religious organizations, or at times overlapping, with clan and business networks.

Given such extensive experience, religious leaders are likely to prove valuable allies for groups or individuals seeking to engage with any number of political or social issues in Somalia today. Moreover, religious actors are set to play a significant role in the country's emerging democratization process and the broader shaping of Somalia's political settlement in years to come. Despite some tendencies of thought that may be seen as contradictory to democratic norms, such as gender equality, many religious actors have shown a degree of flexibility and pragmatism in shaping their agendas.

### Policy considerations

In light of the above, closer collaboration between the Federal Government of Somalia (plus its international partners and Somali civil society) with the country's religious actors can be a positive development that will help the government enhance its credibility on certain issues, including reconciliation, civic education, social protection, humanitarian relief and security. To make this happen, the government and its international and

domestic partners should engage religious actors in regular, repeated and constructive dialogue. To give this the best chance of success, several things should be considered.

**Engagement with religious groups must be serious, sensitive and based on equality between different actors.** Dialogue between government and religious actors must be designed, and institutionalized, in a way that creates spaces for religious groups to positively influence the work of government in the long-term. Government should interact with religious actors on equal terms and not be seen as favouring any one particular group. Formal engagement must also acknowledge the competition that exists between different religious groups and their varied (and valid) agendas, taking care not to exacerbate any existing antagonisms between them.

**Engagement by the international community with religious groups should avoid the reductive lens created by the War on Terror.** The approach of the last two decades has been extremely detrimental to the way in which international actors have interacted with Somalia's religious groups. As well as being a fundamental misunderstanding of most religious groups in Somalia, the approach has not helped international actors succeed in achieving their (mainly security-focused) agenda in the country. To rectify these mistakes, international actors should recognize the constructive role religious groups have played in, and continue to play, in all areas of Somali society. Doing this will enable religious groups to operate with greater transparency and visibility, and make it easier for them to contribute positively in areas of mutual interest – including countering religious extremism and combatting humanitarian crises.

**Religious organizations are crucial stakeholders for Somalia's Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and should be recognized as such.** Religious organizations already form an important part of Somali civil society, but this could be further enhanced with more active attempts to draw them into the sector. Religious organizations have much to offer: They have extensive experience with the Somali public – often greater than their CSO partners or counterparts – and have gained great credibility from doing so. They also work on a range of issues – often practical – that are relevant to Somalia's extensive civil society sector. CSOs should take advantage of religious organizations' stronger connection to their constituencies by creating more fulfilling partnerships that take into account the particular skills and attributes of different actors.

**More research is needed into the role of religious actors in Somalia to help direct formal engagement processes.** Somalia's research institutions, think tanks and universities – supported by international funding – should carry out more research to better understand the role that religious actors play in the country's social and political landscape. Research can help a range of actors – both Somali and international – find ways to more effectively engage with religious groups that are localized and take into account the sensitivities that previous approaches have failed to understand, or simply ignored.



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# THE ROLE OF RELIGIOUS ACTORS IN CONTEMPORARY SOMALI POLITICS

## KEY DYNAMICS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR ENGAGEMENT

Religious actors play an important role in Somalia's political landscape. Since the collapse of the Somali state in 1991, they have also demonstrated strong staying power when many non-religious actors have come and departed all too quickly. For many Somalis, this has made them important institutions in Somali society. Despite this, the role of Somali religious actors is often poorly understood.

The role of religious actors in contemporary Somali politics – a new report from the Rift Valley Institute and Somali Public Agenda – examines the different religious actors active in Somali politics and their position and role in Somali society more generally. It offers a new perspective on how the Somali government can engage with religious actors, and provides suggestions on how external actors can avoid developing wholly negative views of actors that exert crucial and often positive influence across the varied landscape of Somali political, economic and social life.



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