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Lies on Wings – Al-Shabaab and the Exploitation of Modern Digital Technology for Propaganda and Disinformation

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Abstract

Terrorism, especially the kind perpetrated by religious extremists, has been a global phenomenon since the twilight years of the last century and was further buoyed by the September 11, 2001, attacks in the United States. Terrorists seek to influence an audience, and as such, information has always been integral to their success. Propaganda is a planned activity that aims to influence emotions, motives, objective reasoning, perceptions, attitudes, and ultimately the behaviours of target audiences. This approach includes disinformation, which is used to influence audiences and exploit existing biases, beliefs, and emotional vulnerabilities to make falsehoods seem plausible or even desirable to believe. Disinformation has become widespread with the proliferation of social media applications. Forged documents, fake maps, deep fakes, internet frauds, doctored photographs, fake websites, encrypted messaging apps, dark web forums, and manipulated Wikipedia entries are just some of the ways that information is being distorted to deliberately deceive. For terrorists, disinformation is another potent tool in their box. This article examines the nature of Al-Shabaab disinformation campaigns and the exploitation of modern technology to spread disinformation, achieve plausible believability and influence public opinion and eventually recruit more operatives to their cause. The methodology is qualitative research focusing on content analysis of terrorist disinformation and how technology is used to deploy such content. Through an interdisciplinary approach, this article sheds light on the intersection of terrorism, technology, and disinformation, providing insights into the evolving landscape of modern warfare in the information era.

Keywords: Disinformation, Technology, Terrorists, Narratives, Social Media

Introduction

On March 10, 2025, Al-Shabaab released a video of Abu Ubeyda (the leader, or *Amir*) calling for his followers to prepare for a new stage of war. This was during the Ramadhan offensive that they carried out in Mogadishu, culminating in an ambush against the President of Somalia on the 18th of March 2025. Abu Ubayda said that the enemy (referencing the government) was drawing its last breath and that it was time for the Mujahidin to rise and finish the enemy (The East African, 2025).

Al-Shabaab, like all terrorists, seeks to influence an audience; thus, communication is an important part of its operations. They aim to instill morbid fear that makes the audience feel helpless, and act in ways that promote the terrorists' cause. A large part of their communication is propaganda, a potent tool of psychological warfare (a war strategy that employs various communication methods and other means to convey selected information and indicators to the enemy to drain morale and win the war (Linebarger, 2022). Concealment of inconvenient facts and censorship are inseparable counterparts to propaganda (Taylor, 2003). Disinformation, which is part of propaganda, is the systematic and deliberate manipulation of an audience through communication of false information intended to mislead (Guess & Lyons, 2020).

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Social media and generative artificial intelligence have brought a boom of rapid information transfer in the information space. Today, anyone with a smartphone can be a journalist, but without the ethics of journalism, anyone can inform or disinform at will.

Since 2006, Al-Shabaab's media strategy has been evolving, and its ability to shape narratives has arguably contributed to its resilience (Grobelaar, 2023). New technological tools, which the terrorists exploit for communication, have buoyed this dynamic strategy. Al-Shabaab has perfected the art of communication and has, over time, invested in good communication infrastructure, including modern tools in sync with the technological innovations that are in vogue in the modern world. This technology is evolving and developing quickly, becoming more accessible (i.e., cheaper, easier to use, etc.) and widely applicable to many people. It has the potential to be disruptive and change norms at a pace that outruns laws or policies that are meant to regulate it. This research explores ways in which Al-Shabaab applies media strategies for its audiences and the appropriate counter-interventions that may be adopted by state actors.

Methodology

This qualitative research adopts a descriptive research design because the research seeks to systematically describe and interpret how Al-Shabaab exploits modern technology for propaganda and disinformation, rather than to test hypotheses or establish causal relationships. Creswell notes that descriptive studies aim to provide a detailed account of trends, attitudes, or practices without seeking to test hypotheses (Cresswell & Cresswell, 2018).

Within this framework, content analysis is employed to examine the group's communication outputs - including online videos, social media posts, press statements, and digital publications, to uncover the themes, narratives, and techniques used to influence audiences and advance extremist objectives. The descriptive design provides the structural basis for mapping the extent and nature of Al-Shabaab's technological use, while content analysis allows for a deeper exploration of the language, imagery, and framing strategies that characterise its digital propaganda.

Literature Review

Al-Shabaab has produced many propaganda videos, press statements and infographics to grow their brand. The term 'propaganda' refers to planned activities that aim to influence emotions, motives, objective reasoning, perceptions, attitudes, and ultimately the behavior of target audiences, with the aim of provoking action, to make the individual(s) cling irrationally to a process of action. It does not lead to a choice, but to a loosening of the reflexes - to an arousal of an active and mythical belief (Wanless & Berk, 2020). Propaganda uses communication to convey a message, an idea, or an ideology, which is designed primarily to serve the self-interests of the propagandist, invoking a common pattern of one-way, manipulative communication that solicits the action - or inaction - of the masses (Baines et al. 2020). Propaganda may or may not ask for belief; it usually does not employ a rational appeal and is almost exclusively defined by its emotive content and rejection of non-emotive forms of persuasion (Baines et al., 2020). The deliberate selectivity of information and manipulation of propaganda also distinguishes it from the educational process (Smith, 2019).

Propaganda uses mythology, symbols and rhetoric. Mythology represents the core of any piece of propaganda. A myth is a story (a narrative rather than an ideology), which clearly identifies the heroes and villains, and good and bad behaviour patterns. The stories are not told in sophisticated language;

on the contrary, they use easy-to-recognise and easy-to-identify symbols. Myths can often be accompanied by fiction, representing alternative narratives, which embody the sought-after ideal situation (O'Shaughnessy, 2020).

Symbols are crucial connections to emotions. Successful mass communication has an inherently emotive nature, and as such, it exploits symbols for impact. Anything can become politically symbolic if the right context is found (O'Shaughnessy, 2016). On the other hand, rhetoric (use of language) is built on explicit or implicit framing which provides the recipients with simplistic clues and a clear path to understanding the matter correctly (O'Shaughnessy 2016). Understanding the motives and mechanisms of the group mind and using the right language are key factors in controlling and managing the crowds. A big task of the propagandist is to gain trust, create credibility, and persuade the audience to trust the source. Propagandists use manipulative techniques such as appeal to fear, blaming, demonisation (dehumanise the opponent), fabrication, labelling or name-calling (use of negative words to disparage an adversary), relativisation (criticise of the opponent or trivialise the problem), and use of manipulative pictures or videos. Propaganda may be partly true, misleading or outrightly false (Gregor & Mlejnková, 2021).

When propaganda is outrightly false, it falls into the realm of disinformation. According to the European Commission (2024), disinformation is false or misleading content that is spread with an intention to deceive or secure economic or political gain, and which may cause public harm. This is distinguishable from misinformation, which is defined as false or misleading content shared without harmful intent though the effects can be still harmful. Due to its lack of the intent to deceive, misinformation can be spread organically by unwitting purveyors, but disinformation involves a deliberate strategy to influence with aforethought outcomes and outputs, usually involving multiple channels and sources to reinforce its rhetoric to believability by the intended audience. These efforts can be highly sophisticated, involving the use of multiple channels and platforms to reach a wide audience and create a sense of credibility or legitimacy around the false information (Pamment, 2022). The core emphasis for disinformation lies in the intentionality and malicious purpose behind its creation and propagation (European Commission, 2024).

Disinformation includes a broad scale of false, fake, inaccurate, or misleading information or messages, which are generated, presented, and disseminated with the aim of confusing the recipient of the information or causing public damage. In disinformation, lying is a strategy, thus all disinformation is propaganda, but not all propaganda is disinformation (Kragh & Åsberg, 2017).

Barela & Duberry (2021) posit that disinformation is aimed at the following:

- Force an audience to acquiesce, to create, sustain, and amplify divisions within a rival's internal mechanisms.
- Sow confusion: perplex the audience so that they do not know what to believe anymore, which is the precondition for political paralysis. The object is not to create belief but to spread confusion.
- Raise doubt: The spread of doubt is a very effective genre of disinformation since credible phenomena can seldom be proven absolutely. There is always the possibility of doubt.

Any disinformation campaign will have essential components including the following: original sources/creators of disinformation, primary communication channels of disinformation, secondary

intentional channels of disinformation, and the targeted audience (Gregor & Mlejnková, 2021).

Before the onset of the internet, disinformation was carried out through pamphlets, radios, TV broadcasts and through physical speeches. The Internet opened up economies, changed the way people communicate, destroyed barriers, and defied time. Today, the internet has become a necessity, and with its convenience, it shapes perceptions and conceptions of right and wrong and overloads people with biased opinions, fake news and propaganda in an almost overwhelming way. The overall effect is that the line between informing and disinforming keeps getting obscured, with serious implications including influencing the cognitive space by manipulating negative emotions such as fear, anger, and desire, negating critical thinking (Hameleers, 2023). Disinformation also impacts free speech and dialogue by disrupting the chain of fair exchange. The element of lies in disinformation creates uncertainty, and as people start doubting, it generates scepticism towards the source or the victim of the disinformation campaign (Pollicino, 2023). Disinformation fuels divisions and polarisation, eventually leading sections of society into self-imposed echo chambers where people only hear and believe what they want to hear and believe and become very intolerant of other views. Ultimately, it causes erosion of trust in institutions, including the media, the government, and the scientific community (Abiri, 2024).

Sinkó & Besenyő (2024) note that social media is a key tool for propaganda and disinformation for terrorist organisations in Africa including Al-Shabaab. A major concern pointed out by various researchers is the possibility of the use of Artificial Intelligence and Generative Models as very convenient tools for disinformation, including deep-fake videos, tailored propaganda, and automated interactions that could radicalise individuals. These tools could also enable the group to generate more idiomatic translations, further aiding global recruitment and evasion of detection (GNET, 2024). Demirtaş and Warsame (2025) predict that Al-Shabaab might use AI-driven tools to enhance its disinformation campaigns, particularly by exploiting grievances of women and young people. The United Nations University (2024) and the Soufan Center (2024) highlight that generative AI can lower the barriers to entry for creating highly realistic and convincing disinformation.

Demirtaş and Warsame (2025) have mapped the journey of the Al-Shabaab media strategy, starting with the pre-2014 period when the means of communication were traditional and analogue, using Digital Versatile Discs (DVDs), physical sermons, memory cards and local Frequency Modulation (FM) radios. The advent of the internet brought sophistication to Al-Shabaab communication; they use social media apps to enable real-time updates and direct engagement with audiences. The group has a dedicated media team that produces and distributes high quality videos, an indication that they have invested in good production technology. They have eventually moved to the encrypted spaces of Telegram, Element, RocketChat and other niche platforms, executing highly coordinated online propaganda machinery and evading moderation tools. They take advantage of moderation gaps such as the language moderation blind spots on major platforms by distributing content in Somali and Kiswahili languages; the sheer volume of it overwhelming the language moderation tools (ISD Global, 2022). This allows them to disseminate disinformation in real time, even during and immediately after attacks. The Africa Defense Forum (2024) points out the Shahada News Agency as a prominent online messenger known for spreading propaganda and disinformation.

Mohamed et al. (2025) emphasize that social media platforms in Somalia, while vital for information,

also serve as breeding grounds for disinformation. They call for digital surveillance, proactive communication, social media literacy, and international cooperation to counter extremist narratives.

The Somali government has undertaken efforts to educate the public on the Al-Shabaab narratives and generate counter narratives. In 2023, the Somali government established the TUBSAN National Centre for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism; part of its mandate is to support religious leaders to produce and disseminate counter and alternative narratives (Tubsan, 2023). However, Al Shabaab is still on the offensive in this war of hearts and minds.

Findings and Discussion

The Al-Shabaab

Al-Shabaab al Harakat al Mujahidin, a youth movement that emerged in 2006 in Somalia, is one of the most resilient terrorist groups in the world. The fall of the Siad Barre regime in 1991 saw Somalia degenerate into lawlessness and warlords demarcated their spaces based on clannism (Venugopalan, 2017). The lack of order led to attempts by clan elders to reorganise and administer Islamic law in personal matters such as marriage and property disputes in their areas of residence (Maruf & Joseph, 2018). The fall of the government coincided with a sprouting movement that opposed the presence of Western powers and especially Americans in the Arab world. One of the young Arabs who led this movement was the infamous Osama Bin Laden, who considered Somalia an ideal space to set up his resistance infrastructure. He would later learn, as aptly stated by Abu Hafs al-Masri, one of the most trusted and talented members of Osama's inner circle, that Somalis valued clan loyalty above ideology, and that clan was supreme in Somalia, as every foreign actor that wades into Somalia eventually learns. It proved hard for him to establish his ideal ideological movement in Somalia (Janos, 2021).

However, his interest in this part of Africa bequeathed Somalia a malignant flame of ideological violence that flares to date. The first franchise of Al Qaida, known as Al Qaida East Africa, led by Harun Fazul found a base in Somalia after the 1998 US embassy attacks. Previously, some Somalis had found their way into Al Qaida training fields of Afghanistan, under the tutelage of Abdalla Azzam, referred to as the father of global jihad. They included Ibrahim Jama Mead aka Ibrahim Afghani, Aden Hashi Ayrow and other ideologues who returned to Somalia amidst the chaos and sought to spread the Al Qaida ideology. At the same time, a re-awakening movement, the Al Itihad Al Islamiya (AIAI translated to Striving in the way of Islam) sprouted in Somalia as a ray of hope for the desolate situation under warlordism. AIAI hoped to unite Somalis on religious lines and water down the strong clan loyalty and warlordism that was causing the instability. The militants that returned from Afghanistan took over AIAI and set up the first training camp in Kismayu in 1992 and attracted youthful recruits who embraced their hardline doctrine (Maruf & Joseph, 2018).

The clan elders who had started administrative efforts eventually, in collaboration with moderate Muslims, businessmen and hardliners formed the Union of Islamic Courts and extended the courts' mandate to provide security in their areas. Eventually, they returned some semblance of order. The involvement of Afghanistan returnees within the courts concerned the international community, especially the United States who backed a coalition of warlords (Alliance for the Restoration of Peace and Counter Terrorism) in early 2006 to drive the extreme ideologues out of the courts, and together with the Ethiopian troops they temporarily overthrew the ideologues. The ideologues and their youthful

recruits regrouped and officially formed the youthful wing of the resistance, Al Harakat Al-Shabaab Al Mujahideen, loosely translated, the movement of youthful warriors (Harper, 2019).

Al-Shabaab has claimed that it has two major motivations: to expel all foreign forces out of Somalia and to establish political governance in Somalia (with ambitions to extend out of Somalia) under the *Sharia* system (Marchal & Salem, 2018). It is organised into five major departments (*Maktabas*): *Jabhat*, which is the equivalent of the infantry, the *Hisba* (the police), the *Amniyaat* (the intelligence), the Media and the *Da'awa* (religious instructions). At the top of Al-Shabaab hierarchy is the *Amir*, currently Ahmed Diriye aka Ahmed Umar aka Abu Ubaida. He leads with the assistance of the *Shura* (advisory) and the *Tanfiid* (executive) councils. He is well briefed on security, media and high-level operations (Kheyre, 2022).

The *Jabhat* is the most malleable of the departments, consisting of several *Jaysh* or brigades that are formed according to operational necessity. The Abu Zubeyr brigade, for instance, was formed in honour of the former amir Mohamed Godane aka Abu Zubeyr, who was killed in an airstrike in September 2014. The Saleh Nabhan brigade was mainly made up of Kenyans and was formed in memory of Saleh Nabhan, the Kenyan who was behind the 2002 Kikambala attack in Mombasa and who was killed in an airstrike in 2009 in Somalia (Kheyre, 2022).

The *Da'awa* division oversees religious indoctrination and issuing of *fatwas* (religious edicts). The Media department oversees broadcast and propaganda and is charged with relaying audio-visual messages of attacks, claims of responsibility and justification. The *Hisbah* maintain law and order, while the *Amniyaat* are responsible for intelligence and counterintelligence functions (Kheyre, 2022).

The Amniyats work as an intelligence network, an operational body and a paramilitary force. They operate a pervasive, multi-layered system, deeply embedded in societal structures, undertaking aggressive intelligence gathering against its enemies, and strategic exploitation of vulnerabilities within the Somali society and government. Al Shabaab's capacity to hold ground in Somalia and export attacks in the region has largely been attributed to a well organised, well trained, well-renumerated and compartmentalised Amniyat department. The Amir has the sole control over the amniyats and allows them to operate independently with its own leadership structures. Their functions include intelligence gathering, planning complex attacks and preventing enemy penetration. To fulfill this mandate, they recruit sources and operatives within the communities and within government structures. Kheyre (2022) aptly asserts that amniyats help Al Shabaab to detect vulnerabilities, seize opportunities and identify potential targets for attacks; they collect, verify and analyse intelligence which is then forwarded to the amir. They also protect top leadership.

People get recruited into Al-Shabaab for a myriad of reasons. Within Somalia, some join for money, others as a way of belonging to a group that has structures thus having a sense of purpose, others for protection against the big clans, while others join because they believe in the mission that Al Shabaab claims to execute (Badurdeen, 2021). Those that join because they believe in the cause get very easily disillusioned when they discover that religion is just a tool that Al-Shabaab uses for mobilisation and disinformation. This later group often defects or resigns to their fate and carry out martyrdom operations to justify their purpose. Those that attempt to escape are arrested and jailed, while some are executed on allegations of spying for the government of Somalia and its partners. Such fate has befallen many of the foreign fighters who joined because they wanted to fight a 'holy' war. Yet others have

successfully escaped, while others are voluntarily let go by the group, usually following clan negotiations and after the group certifies that they do not pose a threat to its operations (Harper, 2019).

Al-Shabaab has had its ebb and flow but has managed to maintain not just relevance but also territory and an operational capacity. It suffered near-military defeats in 2008, 2010, 2012 and most recently in 2022-2023 (Muibu, 2024). It has been consistent, efficient and predictable in providing security to Somali residents within the areas they control. The tax system ensures integrity; the judicial system ensures localised justice based on *Sharia* law and community negotiations. All these efforts are tampered with ruthlessness when the need arises. Indeed, Al-Shabaab are the masters of the ‘carrot and stick’ strategy, pacifying dissenting populations with violence and positively enticing measures interchangeably (Joseph & Maruf, 2018). It would be wise to handle every offensive against Al-Shabaab with cautious optimism, because they have an uncanny ability to rise from the embers.

The Media Department

Al-Shabaab has developed a formidable media department over time, evolving from a rudimentary plan to a well-executed strategy. The strategy comprises four components:

The first is the Al-Kataib Media Foundation, which is charged with the production of Al-Shabaab’s official audiovisual content, including photo and video releases. They accompany the *Jabhat* operatives in every attack and take first-hand videos of the offensive, then they reproduce them and distribute to Al-Shabaab-affiliated online news sites and social media accounts (Anzalone, 2016). Imperatively, the quality of the output from this department has remarkably improved over time; they have drone capability, which takes good quality videos and photos like the one shown in Figure 1 below, released after the 2020 attack on an airbase in Lamu, Kenya.



Figure 1: An image of burning planes in Manda Airstrip (Zelin Jihadology, 2020).

Additionally, they generate strategic documentaries explaining the origin of the conflict in Somalia and how they believe they are winning against the Somali government and their partners (Grobelaar, 2023).

The second strategy is the radio stations, especially al-Furqan and Radio Andalus, which target Somali-based audiences in rural areas where there is no internet. Al-Shabaab firmly controls the narratives here and has been known to arrest people with smart gadgets claiming that they are spying on behalf of their

enemies (Harper, 2019).

The third strategy is the online news outlets, which mimic legitimate digital news yet they produce Al-Shabaab content and issues affecting the broader community in Somalia and in the diaspora. While sometimes they distribute what looks like genuine news, they come in handy in propaganda pieces that would pass for fair broadcast (Gilroy, 2024). Shahada News Agency is a prominent messenger that purports to be an organization “interested in East Africa and Somalia news.” Shahada News Agency typically posts on Chirpwire, a platform with no content-moderation policies. But it also uses accounts on mainstream platforms Facebook and X to replicate and further disseminate its content (Awuor, 2023).

The fourth strategy is the social media networks and messaging apps that organically spring up even after deplatforming by the service providers. Popular apps include Telegram and Facebook, Tiktok, X, YouTube and others that beat surveillance such as the Russian social network known as OK.ru (Gilroy, 2024).

Al-Shabaab Disinformation

Al-Shabaab is not the first terrorist organisation to carry out propaganda and disinformation campaigns. Al Qaida and Daesh have been active propagandists (Piwko, 2021). Daesh has perfected the art of infographics to relay complex information in simple graphics and translate it into various languages to reach wider audiences. In 2015, the former spokesman, Mohamed Al Adnani, who was killed in Syria in 2016, issued a fiery speech calling upon his adherents to kill the ‘infidels’ by whatever means possible wherever they could be found, and that was curated into an infographic (see Figure 2 below), which was widely circulated online. This rallying call, consequently led to an increase in lone wolf attacks worldwide.



Figure 2: Infographic on Al Adnani Speech (Zelin Jihadology, 2019).

To consolidate activities by the so-called affiliates in various regions and create the perception of a global organisation, Daesh produces periodic infographics, such as the one shown in Figure 3 below and posts them in online spaces where they know their networks will amplify them.



Figure 3: Infographic on alleged Daesh attacks globally (Jihadology, 2023)

Core Messages

The dream of the greater Somalia and reclaiming of Muslim land

Al-Shabaab's diehard ideologues believed in purist ideals of establishing a caliphate (a form of Islamic governance of a region under a political and religious successor to the Prophet Muhammad); some thought it should be restricted to the current international borders, others thought it should be extended beyond borders to territories occupied by Somali ethnic speakers, including Kenya, Ethiopia and Djibouti, while some thought it should extend beyond Eastern Africa (Edgar, 2015). This idea is still rife and is reflected in a lot of rhetoric both in physical preaching sessions that take place in villages along the Kenya-Somalia border and in online spaces (Behr, 2020). A hashtag of NFD (Northern Frontier District), a colonial demarcation of the land in Northeastern Kenya, has trended for approximately five years now. This deliberate online campaign pushes the message that claims part of Kenya as Somalia territory. *Al Kataib* has repeatedly called for the removal of non-Somalis from that part of Kenya (Shivji, 2020).

Invasion of Somalia by foreign forces

The narrative of foreign occupation of Somalia has been repeated since the 1993 American military intervention in Somalia, and the 2006 incursion by Ethiopian troops supported by the US that drove the former Islamic Courts Union out of power. This has been inundated with images of the downing of American helicopters by militias of former warlord Mohamed Farah Aideed and statements alleging that Ethiopia's invasion of Somalia has been a long well-thought-out strategy (Lofland, 2002).

The attack on individuals, such as teachers in 2014 in Mandera and quarry workers living in the Northeastern region of Kenya who were non-indigenous to the Somali community was broadcast as part of the campaign to rid Muslim lands of infidels (Fassrainer, 2020). African Union mission's troop contributing countries have also been accused of invasion, including Kenya, Uganda and Burundi. The 2013 Westgate attack was preceded by a tweet a year before from the then leader (amir) Mohamed

Abdi Godane, warning Kenyan ‘invaders’ that they would pay the price. As the Westgate attack was underway, another tweet (see Figure 4 below) was released citing it as a lesson to Kenyan ‘invaders’ to keep off Somalia.



Figure 4: Al Shabaab Tweet after Westgate attack (Fassrainer, 2020).

Incidentally, by 2013, the @HSMPress account boasted over 15,000 followers, which made it a good forum for disinformation. Soon after the Westgate attacks (between September 21 and September 24, 2013), at least eight different al-Shabab-affiliated Twitter accounts were active and tweeted at least 556 times (Fassrainer, 2020).

Attack on Islam

Attack on Islam has been a major metanarrative in almost all the videos produced by the *Al Kataib* Foundation, which has gone to great lengths to create documentaries explaining the historical injustices against Islam and how Somalia's invasion is just an extension of Islamophobia by the Western powers and their proxies (Shivji, 2020). Most recently, Al-Shabaab has perfected this narrative by citing the Palestinian conflict, starting with the movement of the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem during the first presidential term of President Donald Trump (US DoD, 2021). Indeed, the attacks on the Riverside Hotel in Nairobi and the Camp Simba airstrip Manda Bay in Lamu in 2019 and 2020, respectively, were attributed to the Palestinian cause with a rallying call that Jerusalem will never be Judaised (Bacon, 2022, see also figure 5 below)). By attributing the attacks to the cause of Jerusalem,

Al-Shabaab pulled a strategic move, portraying themselves as global defenders of the holy sites and placing themselves above local (Somalia) politics.



Figure 5:

Statement of responsibility after the 2019 Riverside attack (Zelin Jihadology, 2020)

The group also castigates the Somalia government as working with foreign disbelievers who actively target Muslims in Somalia. Reports of airstrikes in Jilib depict exaggerated figures of non-combatants killed, especially women and children, as part of the narrative of war against Islam (Maruf, 2024). To show that the populations rally around them, Al-Shabaab also frequently releases videos showing clans allegedly supporting them with donations of animals and finances and demonstrating against the government after air strikes incidents. Most recently, it has portrayed the population as opposed to the conflict in Gaza, in support of Palestinians. This notion has been a recurring theme since the Hamas attack in October 2023 and the response by Israel (Gilroy, 2023).

Marginalisation

Al-Shabaab has addressed Muslim audiences outside of Somalia trying, to convince them that they are marginalised and will remain so as long as they are being ruled by non-Muslims, who they often call infidels or disbelievers. This narrative of marginalisation is not just local; it has been launched with a global character. Al-Shabaab has produced documentaries showing exploitation of the Muslim world by the economic policies of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF, (see figure 6 below)), in addition to many others on the historical injustices meted out on the Somali population.



Figure 6: A video excerpt of an Al Shabaab documentary on IMF and the World Bank (Zelin Jihadology, 2025).

Rallying calls to fight for a holy cause and obtain the ultimate heaven

Al-Shabaab has perfected the practice of having their suicide fighters write final messages to their loved ones before attacks, in which they exhort them to understand why they joined the ‘holy’ war and why they had to leave them to go die on the front lines. They remind their relatives of the duty of every Muslim to fight for religion (Zelin, 2024). For instance, in 2020, after the attack on the Manda airstrip, *Al Kataib* produced a video of the man leading the attackers, Maulana Faruk Maulana, shown in figure 7 below. In the video, Maulana narrated his story calmly - where he came from, why he joined Al-Shabaab and how proud he was to die for the liberation of Palestine from Americans and Jews, and in so doing, obtain heaven for his closest family members.



Figure 7: An Al-Shabaab video excerpt (exported as an image) of Maulana Faruk Maulana (Zelin Jihadology, 2020)

Exaggeration of number and impact of attacks:

Al-Shabaab consistently exaggerate their operational impact and overstates their influence or control (Bacon, 2022). Immediately after attacks, even when they have been thoroughly defeated, they produce content for dissemination and inflate the fatalities and casualties on the side of the government. They produce videos of them taking hostages, especially after an attack on military bases, and humiliating injured combatants, and dragging photos of the dead on the ground, and stepping and spitting on them as the ultimate acts of humiliation (Torbjörnsson, 2016).

East-Africanisation of the fighting force

Al-Shabaab treats the foreign fighters (*Muhajirin*) from East Africa as part of the greater army of god. This is done through a strategy of producing videos in Kiswahili, which is the common language in East Africa, and calling for recruits from the region. The recruits urge their compatriots to go and fight for a worthy cause in the land of war (Peace, 2018).

In 2017, while Kenya was preparing for elections, Al-Shabaab sought to dissuade Muslim populations in Kenya from voting, claiming that democracy was illegal in Islam and that electing representatives to rule through the constitution was negating God's authority, which was exercised only according to the Quran. In so doing, they rallied several youths alleged to be from Kenya to urge their communities in their mother tongues to desist from voting in an infidel regime (Jihadology, 2019).

Pressure on Governments of Hostages

Al-Shabaab releases videos of hostages pleading with their governments to have them released. The hostages lament neglect by their governments and how they have been left to suffer emotionally by an indifferent government and citizenry. On the anniversary of the El Adde attacks on 15th January 2025, Al-Shabaab released a video of an alleged Kenyan hostage, a KDF soldier who pleaded with the Kenyan government to work towards his release, saying he felt neglected and forgotten (Citizen Kenya news, 2025). In March 2025, Al-Shabaab released another video of an alleged German nurse who was kidnapped in Somalia while working for the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in 2018 (see figure 8 below). The message was to the German government to have her released, castigating the government for neglecting her plight (AP News, 2025). These videos are however aimed at pricking the collective conscience of the citizenry, so as to put pressure their governments to bring the hostages home. Al-Shabaab hopes that the targeted governments would negotiate and pay a hefty sum for ransom in exchange for the release, ultimately making Al-Shabaab look benevolent for keeping the hostages alive and the governments malevolent for ignoring their plight.



Figure 8: A video excerpt of an alleged hostage (German nurse) pleading with her government for release (AP, 2025)

Channels of communication of the disinformation

Al-Shabaab has a disciplined online strategy for distribution of its content, especially curated by *Al Kataib* media. They use the onion approach to effect this strategy, with the inside of the bulb comprising of small group of inner communicators, called 'opinion setters,' developing content and distributing it across online platforms like Facebook and Telegram. They act as the first source of information on

major attacks, relaying the first videos within minutes of the beginning of an attack (Gilroy, 2023). The most important role of these opinion setters is to control the messaging and ensure that Al-Shabaab is consistent and uniform in its messaging, thus shutting out insider dissenting opinions. Messaging from the opinion setters is picked up by a big group of amplifiers who do not have permission to generate their content but distribute the already curated content to wider audiences who are already sympathetic to Al-Shabaab (Gilroy, 2024).

According to Gilroy (2024), Al-Shabaab circumvents moderation by having the opinion setter and amplifier accounts use very similar displays, like similar handle names, profile pictures, and content signatures, to mark their accounts so that followers within the network can easily find and follow them. They ask followers to join them on multiple platforms, to ensure that parallel networks exist across Facebook, Telegram, TikTok, and X. This approach means that if an account is banned from Facebook, a new account can be created and shared by a parallel Al-Shabaab network on Telegram, thereby rebuilding the account's network within hours, rather than days or weeks.

In 2023, the Somali government started a campaign to bring down all opinion setters' and amplifiers' accounts working with the social media companies. They banned TikTok, Telegram, and the online betting website 1XBet to limit the spread of indecent content and propaganda. Deputy Information Minister Abdirahman Yusuf al-Adala, in an interview with Voice of America in March 2024, opined that it was a difficult task when they started; it needed knowledge, skills and a lot of work. The government had to train people, set up special offices, provide equipment, and pass legislation. He assessed that, one year on, they had achieved great success (VOA, 2024).

Despite the minister's assertion, it has not been an easy task to regulate the online campaign because Al-Shabaab has a way of adapting and circumventing the regulation. After the government onslaught, Al-Shabaab created new social media accounts and tweaked the domain names to get back online. A day after the ban, Al-Shabaab opinion setters advised their amplifiers to access Telegram through virtual private networks and flooded Telegram with new accounts and content (Tech Against Terrorism, 2023). They alternatively operated the networks as public and private and frequently changed the handle names. They also resorted to using long multimedia content (video, audio) in Somali, which content moderation tools often struggled with due to limited training data in the Somali language. They also shifted to other platforms such as the Russian social network site *Odnoklassniki*, abbreviated as OK.ru, but the opinion setters still controlled the narrative. Al-Shabaab has also invested in teaching opinion setters' techniques for avoiding moderation and strengthening their networks (Maruuf, 2024).

Adam Hadley, who was the executive director of Tech Against Terrorism (a non-profit organisation based in London focusing on disrupting the use of the internet by terrorist groups), was reported by VOA (2024) as saying that Al-Shabaab was one of the most sophisticated actors in the way they used the internet and shared their content. In any given week, around 20 to 25% of the content that Tech Against Terrorism found on the internet had likely been created by Al-Shabaab, making it essentially the largest single producer of terrorist material on the internet (Tech Against Terrorism, 2024).

Tactics for Disinformation

Tech Against Terrorism (2024) identified some of the tactics used by Al Shabaab to spread disinformation, including creating fake accounts, multiple social media handles, or websites; using algorithms to amplify certain messages; media-spawning; production of synthetic propaganda;

translations into multi-lingual news items; or even targeting specific demographics with tailored content designed to resonate with their existing beliefs and biases.

Al-Shabaab also use chatbots and botnets for disinformation. Internet bots (automated programs that allow for the execution of a variety of tasks online) have given way to networks of bots that can be rented like cloud hosting for any conceivable use under the sun. As the propaganda models mature and become further decentralised across a broader geographic landscape, the speed and efficiency with which botnets can “vouch for” false narratives become crucial. An X post that starts as propaganda can be timed to be reposted and reshared by bot accounts that have thousands of followers and have been engaging in similar conversations for months before they are leveraged (Tech Against Terrorism, 2023).

To hide the source of the false information and spread disinformation, the Al-Shabaab online media manipulators use several means. Key amongst them is source hacking, which involves targeting journalists and other influential news breakers to pick up falsehoods and unwittingly amplify them to the public. Al-Shabaab maintains symbiotic contact with journalists (the former want publicity while the latter want news) (Harper, 2019). Donovan and Friedberg (2019) mention four main techniques of source hacking. These include viral sloganeering, which is done by repackaging reactionary talking points for social media and press amplification. Another technique is leak forgery, which involves prompting a media spectacle by sharing forged documents. A third technique is use of evidence collages, done by compiling information from multiple sources into a single, shareable document, usually as an image, a technique Al-Shabaab learnt from Daesh infographics. Yet another technique is keyword squatting, which is the strategic domination of keywords and sock puppet accounts to misrepresent groups or individuals. These techniques are combined so that it is hard to prove that they are coordinated strategies.

Another way of hiding false information is manipulation of metadata: this is done by modifying platform activity signals like usernames, profile handles, bio fields, postdates, and follower counts. They create parody accounts with similar names as genuine users to spread disinformation while hiding their identities (Acker, 2018). This is largely done by the opinion setters, especially after the original accounts are shut down. Metadata is also manipulated through Deep and Cheap Fakes. A “deepfake” is a video that has been altered through some form of machine learning to “hybridise or generate human bodies and faces,” whereas a “cheap fake” is manipulation created with cheaper, more accessible software (or none at all). Cheap fakes can be rendered through photoshop, look-alikes, recontextualised footage, speeding, or slowing. These can then be distributed at unprecedented speeds. In addition to disinformation, deepfakes and cheap fakes have challenged traditional rules of evidence and reshaped the whole concept of ‘truth’ (Tech Against Terrorism, 2023).

Online manipulators also use data voids to modify content by identifying search engine queries that turn up little to no results, especially when the query is rather obscure or not searched often. They fill in these voids with false information. Data voids are often difficult to detect (Mannino et al, 2024). Al Shabaab strategically fills the voids associated with its ideology, including conspiratorial and radicalisation content. Data voids are compounded by the fraught pathways of search-adjacent recommendation systems such as autoplay, autofill, and trending topics, each of which is vulnerable to manipulation. Data voids are not limited to search engines but can also be used in social media

platforms (Boyd & Golebiewski, 2018).

Manipulators use data voids in five scenarios (Mannino et al., 2024). First, they fill the voids with misleading versions of the breaking news temporarily, though this is usually invalidated by legitimate news once the entire situation unveils. They also look for opportunities to create strategic news narratives and amplify them in the mainstream through their customised news media. Al-Shabaab are masters of this game; they juxtapose news items with their narratives, especially within Somalia. Manipulators also use data voids by searching for outdated terms; when terms go out of date, content creators stop producing content associated with these terms long before searchers stop seeking content. This creates an opening for manipulators to produce content that exploits search engines' dependence on freshness. Another scenario of usage of data voids is through fragmented concepts, whereby manipulators segment searches by creating distinct clusters of information after fragmenting wide content and sectorising it into different frames, making it look like corroborative information from many sources. The Al-Shabaab opinion setters cluster searchable content around activities such as attacks, provision of food and rations (part of their humanitarian strategy), preaching, etc. Finally, manipulators use data voids through problematic queries. Search results for disturbing or fraught terms that have historically returned problematic results continue to do so, unless high-quality content is introduced to contextualize or outrank such problematic content. Al Shabaab produces such content to outrank the problematic content (Tech Against Terrorism, 2024).

Manipulators also use the technique of media spawning to hide false content. From a single image or video, terrorists generate many manipulated variants capable of circumventing hash-matching and automated detection mechanisms (Mitchell, 2025). Al-Shabaab has used this technique to circumvent moderation. Another disinformation technique is automated multilingual translation – Al-Shabaab has translated videos with subtitles into many languages, Arabic, Somali, Kiswahili and other East African languages. The Da'awa department working with the media also have online libraries called “Culumada Lugeysa,” which translates to “walking religious scholars” or “mobile religious scholars,” where they post teachings of Islamic Sheikhs both within and without Somalia, including prominent sheikhs who advocated for war. This is meant to give them religious legitimacy and authority (Harrington & Thompson, 2021).

Yet another technique of falsification and disinformation is producing fully synthetic propaganda. Tech Against Terrorism (2024) has singled out Daesh for producing synthetic propaganda, a tactic that Al-Shabaab are likely to copy given investment in modern media strategies.

Al-Shabaab also disinform through variant recycling as a technique; they retrieve old propaganda items and repurpose them using the current technology, such as the 2008-2009 videos as a reminder to the audience of the enduring struggle. Figure 9 below shows an old video that was recycled in 2025. They have also specialised in distributing their own videos of their clerics criticising the Somali government, a strategy meant to stimulate grassroots opposition, sow suspicion, and indirectly garner support (Ahmed, 2023).

Another technique of disinformation that Al Shabaab has successfully used is personalised propaganda. They have in the past generated personalised propaganda targeting certain demographics, singling out populations within East Africa and purposely addressing them. With new sophisticated tools, this is likely to go a notch higher.



Figure 9: an old video showing Al Shabaab in training, recycled in 2025 (Zelin Jihadology, 2025)

In addition to subverting moderation, terrorists are also operating open websites for recruitment and disseminating information. This is a way of circumventing social media regulations since websites are easy to register, set-up and keep online and can quickly reappear elsewhere following disruption. Terrorist-Operated Websites are publicly available and are often indexed by search engines. Again, though the existence of such websites by Al-Shabaab has not been openly reported, it is a technique open to them (Tech Against Terrorism, 2024).

Conclusion and Recommendations

The Somali government has been waging a war against Al-Shabaab with the help of international partners for almost two decades now. Al-Shabaab disinformation campaigns have played a significant role in the organisation's resilience. However, the information war can be won with the implementation of effective multi-pronged strategies on technological innovation, public education, and international collaboration. Tech companies can collaborate to develop AI-powered tools to detect and flag Al-Shabaab's disinformation in real time and work together to enforce stricter policies on content moderation and account suspension. With a coherent cybersecurity framework, the Somali government, counting on the support of international partners, can prevent the hacking and manipulation of digital infrastructure.

Efforts by institutions such as TUBSAN can be doubled to equip the public with the critical thinking skills needed to identify and resist disinformation. With the input of civil society organisations, the government may launch comprehensive media literacy programs, teaching individuals how to verify sources, recognise propaganda techniques, and understand the motivations behind Al Shabaab's messaging. This will empower citizens to become more resilient to manipulation.

The importance of international cooperation between intelligence agencies cannot be gainsaid, given that the Al-Shabaab disinformation has been transnational, attracting recruits from Africa and beyond. It is noteworthy that there has been a positive engagement between governments and tech companies, enlightening each other on the trends of violent extremists and working together to deplatform the nefarious actors and remove offensive content. This was evident in Somalia when the government banned some applications for disseminating Al-Shabaab narratives. Companies such as Facebook actively joined the effort of content moderation. Such collaborations ought to be enhanced without blame games.

Despite the risks of adversarial exploitation, Generative AI offers an opportunity to radically augment well-developed content moderation systems. Governments should consider developing legal and regulatory frameworks for moderation, being careful not to limit freedom of speech but ensuring that platforms are not used as tools for radicalization and disinformation. The same platforms can also be used by opinion leaders and religious scholars to generate and spread counter and alternative narratives.

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