

Empty wind: Al-Shabaab's narratives of humanitarian aid

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About the Centre

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Our research is solution-oriented, grounded in rigorous evidence, and designed to inform policy and practice. By understanding how armed actors govern, negotiate, and interact with others, we aim to support nuanced, effective responses to conflict.

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About Hiraal Institute

Hiraal Institute is Somalia's first independent security think tank dedicated to addressing the security challenges of the Horn of Africa.

Cover photo: a Somali refugee woman in Dadaab refugee camp after fleeing drought, near the Kenyan border with Somalia on 20 August 2011 (credit: Lynsey Addario/Getty Images Reportage)

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Key Arabic and Somali terms

Al-wala' wal-bara'	Loyalty and disavowal
Hakimiyyah	Divine governance, or the principle that sovereignty belongs to God alone and that any legal or political system not explicitly grounded in Islamic law is a usurpation of divine prerogative
Fard	A religious duty incumbent on all Muslims
Guddiga Abaaraha	Drought Relief Committee
Guddiga Gurmada Fatahaadaha/Guddiga Maaraynta Fatahaadaha	Flood relief or floods management committees
Ihya'	Revival or restoration
Kafir/Kuffar	Unbeliever/unbelievers
Maktabka Siyaasadda iyo Wilaayaatka	Office of Politics and Wilayats, the Al-Shabaab administrative bureau that oversees provincial governors and houses the drought relief committees
Tawalli	Impermissible allegiance or loyalty to non-Muslims
Tawbah	Repentance, or the doctrinal provision allowing those who have worked for apostate institutions to return to the fold by abandoning their posts and pledging renewed allegiance
Urur-gaaleedka	Al-Shabaab's internal designation for organisations such as the UN: the disbeliever-organisation or kuffar-grouping
Wilayat/Wilayaat	Province/provinces; Al-Shabaab's administrative territorial units, each governed by a provincial governor (wali)
Zakat	The obligatory alms tax, one of the five pillars of Islam. A fixed proportion of wealth distributed to specified categories of recipients.

Abbreviations

AMISOM	African Union Mission in Somalia. The AU peacekeeping mission against which Al-Shabaab has fought since 2007, now succeeded by AUSSOM.	ICU	Islamic Courts Union. The Islamist governance coalition that briefly controlled much of south-central Somalia in 2006 before being ousted by Ethiopian-backed forces.
Al-Shabaab	Harakat Al-Shabaab Al-Mujahideen	IDP	Internally displaced person or people
AU	African Union	IHL	International humanitarian law
AUSSOM	African Union Support and Stabilisation Mission in Somalia. Successor to AMISOM.	NGO	Non-governmental organisation
FGS	Federal Government of Somalia	TFG	Transitional Federal Government. The predecessor to the FGS, in place from 2004 to 2012.
		WAMY	World Assembly of Muslim Youth
		WFP	World Food Programme

Summary

Al-Shabaab has developed a coherent, highly detailed and relatively consistent position on aid. This narrative frames the formal aid system as an instrument of foreign domination and a threat to Islamic sovereignty. It is grounded in Islamic theology and Somali history, expressed through a sophisticated media apparatus. This paper examines that position, drawing on a database of over 50,000 primary Al-Shabaab media sources produced between 2016 and 2026. Across that material, external aid is repeatedly framed as “empty wind”: full of promises, but hollow in delivery.

Al-Shabaab treats relief provision as the exclusive responsibility of an Islamic state and has built a parallel relief system. While Al-Shabaab tolerates outside provision in specific circumstances, it is doing so to manage the gap between its own capacity and the needs of populations it governs. Such tolerance is explicitly framed as transitional and conditional.

The theological foundation

Al-Shabaab does not oppose relief. It opposes relief from its perceived enemies. The theological justification is grounded in the Salafi-jihadist doctrine of *al-wala’ wal-bara’* (loyalty to Muslims, disavowal of non-Muslims). Under this doctrine, it defines external humanitarian actors as hostile regardless of their conduct. Yet there is operational flexibility. Al-Shabaab’s interpretation of *tawbah* (repentance) holds that those who have worked for apostate institutions can return to the fold by abandoning their posts and pledging renewed allegiance.

The empirical indictment and strategic theory

Al-Shabaab advances a detailed critique of the humanitarian system, drawing on widely shared Somali grievances. Many of these are also documented in the humanitarian system’s own evaluations: diversion and corruption, aid concentrated in accessible urban areas at the expense of rural communities and the exclusion of minority groups through dominant-clan gatekeeping. Al-Shabaab

systematically amplifies these critiques, placing these concerns within a broader political and theological narrative that assigns responsibility to western governments, international organisations and the Somali state institutions they back.

Al-Shabaab argues that the formal humanitarian system is an extension of a long-running foreign project that has undermined Somali sovereignty and dignity. This argument predates Al-Shabaab and resonates across much of Somali society, regardless of ideological affiliation. Al-Shabaab reinforces this position through a disciplined information strategy. Its media amplifies statements from international officials, analysts, and humanitarians that — taken out of context — appear to confirm that Al-Shabaab governs more legitimately or effectively than the Somali government. When the humanitarian system publicly acknowledges its own shortcomings, Al-Shabaab repurposes these admissions as evidence that the “crusader” project is collapsing.

Humanitarian engagement

The gap between Al-Shabaab’s categorical rejection of external aid and its selective tolerance in practice reflects pragmatic considerations. This tolerance is inherently unstable and can contract rapidly with shifts in military dynamics, clan relations, or Al-Shabaab’s own capacity. As Al-Shabaab’s governance project matures, and its relief capacity expands, the incentives for tolerating external assistance may diminish.

Engagement framed in Al-Shabaab’s own normative and governance language may resonate more than appeals based solely on humanitarian principles or legal frameworks it rejects. Documented access arrangements often acknowledge Al-Shabaab’s role as an authority responsible for the population under its control.² Its Islamic relief framework may then provide an engagement entry point on access and protection.

While relief activities are often dismissed as performative or propagandistic, Al-Shabaab presents them as integral to governance. Its framing of relief as a religious obligation also creates an important overlap with the ideals of international humanitarian law (IHL). That, at least, provides a basis for engagement.

Introduction

Humanitarian aid, in Al-Shabaab’s worldview, is neither a neutral public good nor a discrete policy question. It is situated within an international system that, in Al-Shabaab’s telling, has declared war on the movement and expressed hostility to Islamic governance in Somalia more broadly. Al-Shabaab has spent two decades defining itself against that system: against its legal vocabulary, its institutional architecture, its claim to adjudicate legitimate authority, and its physical presence in Somali territory in the form of peacekeepers, diplomats, and aid agencies. That opposition is central to the movement’s identity. In part, Al-Shabaab defines itself by naming what it rejects.

Aid organisations are one of the things Al-Shabaab rejects, but the rejection is not about aid itself. It is about who delivers it, under whose authority, and what their presence implies about sovereignty in territory that Al-Shabaab claims. Understanding the movement’s posture toward humanitarian actors therefore requires attention to the broader framework within which those actors are classified.

This paper examines that broader framework through Al-Shabaab’s public discourse on aid, in which *its wider political, theological, and historical claims are often most clearly expressed*. It does this by analysing an archive of 50,000 written, audio and video materials from Al-Shabaab’s media output between 2016 and early 2026. These materials are treated as texts to better understand Al-Shabaab’s public position, what it tells its supporters, and how it justifies its actions.

Al-Shabaab’s discourse on humanitarian aid reveals three core strands of this broader framework. The first is theological: it is grounded in doctrines of loyalty and disavowal, divine sovereignty, and the religious obligations of an Islamic state. The second is an empirical account of harm, grounded in Al-Shabaab’s portrayal of three decades of dependency, diversion, marginalisation, and displacement under the international humanitarian system. The third is a strategic theory of the humanitarian system

as an instrument of a broader colonial project of domination. The final chapter draws out implications of this analysis for humanitarian actors seeking to reach populations in areas under Al-Shabaab control.

The aim throughout is descriptive rather than prescriptive. Al-Shabaab’s account of itself, and of the foreign organisations operating in Somalia, is neither endorsed nor dismissed. It is reconstructed on its own terms because the movement is consequential enough that the international community’s continued misreading carries real operational and human costs. Reading Al-Shabaab carefully is not the same as agreeing with it. It is, however, a precondition for any serious engagement with the populations it controls.

Approach

The paper draws on the authors’ ongoing research on Al-Shabaab and on a database assembled by the authors of more than 50,000 public audio, visual, and written media products from Al-Andalus Radio, Shahada News Agency, Al-Kata’ib Media, and other verified Al-Shabaab outlets. Audio materials were transcribed using an automated Somali-language tool and then spot-checked by Somali translators for accuracy; the same process was followed for written Somali texts. A further note on sources and methods is included as Annex A.

Where we rely on secondary analyses or translations of Al-Shabaab media rather than our own direct work with primary material, we do so specifically with material from before our archive begins in 2016 (for example, in reference to the 2011 famine) to tell a more complete story of Al-Shabaab’s evolution on aid issues. Because such sources carry their own interpretive risks – through editorial framing, translation choices, and analytic assumptions – we have limited their use where possible.

Ethics and positioning

Working primarily with armed group-authored material raises methodological and ethical challenges. Because the paper relies on Al-Shabaab media as a primary source, it analyses what the group says and how it says it, rather than evaluating its claims for truth. Al-Shabaab outlets are, by design, promotional, so they provide evidence of what the group says it does, not always of what it actually does. A related point is that while Al-Shabaab is neither unitary nor uniform in implementing its policies, the media it produces is fairly uniform and consistent. It reflects very little internal difference or variation.³ This is the material the paper primarily examines.

Nevertheless, Al-Shabaab’s media apparatus exists to recruit, legitimise political violence, and project its governance vision. Providing URLs for this material, even in an academic or policy context, risks directing readers to propaganda that governments and online platforms often seek to restrict, and could inadvertently amplify its reach. For this reason, we do not reproduce URLs for any primary Al-Shabaab sources cited in this paper. Instead, sources are identified by outlet, date, and title – sufficient for verification by researchers operating within appropriate legal and ethical parameters.

The same logic underpins our cautious approach to quotation. Extended reproduction of Al-Shabaab propaganda risks amplifying it. Limited direct quotation, however, can serve a legitimate analytical purpose. It allows readers to assess whether our interpretations are grounded in what the sources actually say and, in some cases, preserves specific formulations that carry analytical weight. The central claim of this paper is that Al-Shabaab articulates a coherent counter-international-system doctrine in its own language. Replacing that language with our summary would obscure both that coherence and the rhetorical work it performs. Quotes are therefore used selectively, contextualised within an analytical frame, and read against external triangulation rather than presented as standalone reportage. This approach follows standard practice in the terrorism studies literature for analysing armed group communications.⁴

This analysis proceeds on the premise that understanding Al-Shabaab’s narrative on

humanitarian aid is a precondition for the kind of strategic engagement required to reach populations in need. Such understanding cannot be derived from secondary accounts alone, and there is almost no public-facing work that examines these narratives at this level of granularity.

Context

We treat the doctrine and narratives described here as products of Al-Shabaab’s more consolidated phase, following the movement’s period of disarray and reorganisation following 2013.

Three key events shaped that consolidation and the narratives that emerged from it. First, the loss of Mogadishu in August 2011, when Al-Shabaab withdrew from the capital under sustained pressure from the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM). This ended any near-term prospect of victory through territorial conquest and forced a shift toward governing the periphery and projecting its ideology in areas under its control. Second, the rejection of the UN famine declaration in July 2011 (along with the closures, expulsions and bans imposed on international agencies that followed) marked a forceful challenge to the international system’s authority to define conditions on the ground. Third, the consolidation of power by then-amir Ahmed Abdi Godane, completed by 2013 through the sidelining of rivals and extensive purges within the organisation.

Together, these events and the organisational changes that followed produced a tighter, more centrally controlled media apparatus capable of articulating, in a unified voice, Al-Shabaab’s rejection of foreign intervention, external authority, and international claims to legitimacy in Somali territory. The doctrine of ‘empty wind’, as we describe it in this paper, is one of the clearest expressions of that position: external aid presented as hollow in delivery and as part of a wider project of foreign domination. We do not argue that Al-Shabaab has always articulated the positions set out in this paper. Rather, we focus on those expressed after 2016.

The ideological framework: aid as a theological problem

The theological logic behind this stance is developed most clearly through *al-wala' wal-bara'* (loyalty and disloyalty), which classifies external humanitarian actors according to allegiance and authority rather than conduct alone. This sets clear limits on what operational reform or humanitarian change can achieve, because better conduct or greater sensitivity does not alter an organisation's underlying classification.

Al-wala' wal-bara'

The principle of *al-wala' wal-bara'* structures Al-Shabaab's conceptualisation of political and social obligation. In Al-Shabaab's interpretation, loyalty is owed both to the Muslim community as defined by the movement and to those who support its project. Disavowal is owed towards non-Muslims, "apostate" regimes and Muslims whom the group deems to have betrayed Islam through collaboration with either. In Al-Shabaab parlance, the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) is apostate, the Somali army and security forces are militias, and any backers of the FGS are agents or proxies of foreign powers. Within this framework, Western humanitarian actors are classified as unbelievers regardless of intent or conduct:

*Organisations give things out – they say they feed people, they say they give money, some of them indeed give money to people. But these organisations are not Muslim; they are unbelievers (kuffar). Their origin is disbelief. And regarding the unbeliever (kafir), Allah tells us that they are our enemies. They are enemies of Allah, and they are our enemies.*⁵

Al-Shabaab opposes external organisations because their identity places them outside the bounds of legitimate authority.

Al-Shabaab's terminology for the UN is *urur-gaaleedka Qaramada Midoobay* (the disbeliever organisation United Nations, or the kuffar grouping of the UN). A variant is *urur-gaalleedka* (the disbeliever-organisation). When referring to individual UN officials, such as Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, Al-Shabaab uses the term *gaalka lagu magacaabo* (the kafir who is called). NGOs and aid agencies are referred to as *hay'adaha shisheeye* (foreign agencies), *hay'adaha gaalada* (kafir agencies), or simply *shisheeyuhu* (the foreigners). These naming practices foreclose the possibility of institutional neutrality before any specific conduct is even addressed. (Although Al-Shabaab does have an empirical critique of aid, which will be developed in the next chapter.)

In an interview broadcast on 22 May 2016, Suldaan Maxamed Garyare, whom Al-Shabaab describes as an Islamic scholar, distilled this position bluntly, telling Radio Al-Furqaan that the UN was *urur gumeysi* (a colonialist organisation) that tolerated no rival in world affairs. Al-Shabaab's public justification for expelling the World Food Programme (WFP) rests on the same logic. In a Radio Al-Furqaan field report from 16 June 2016, residents of Al-Shabaab-administered districts described WFP as an arm of *waxa loogu yeero* (what is called) the United Nations, an institution that had been banned on accusations of sabotaging local production six years earlier.⁶

Any Muslim community that accepts aid from a Western NGO has, in Al-Shabaab's framing, entered into a relationship of dependency with an enemy of Allah. This is a form of *tawalli* (impermissible allegiance), that compromises the community's religious integrity. Receiving food from a *kuffar* (non-Muslim) organisation places the community under an obligation to its enemy. That obligation implicates it in the broader project of foreign domination that Al-Shabaab identifies as a foundational threat to Somali Muslim life.

Tawbah (repentance)

In theory, the Al-Shabaab doctrine of *tawbah* contains an important point of flexibility. It holds that those who have worked for apostate institutions can return to the fold by abandoning their posts and pledging renewed allegiance.⁷ However, Al-Shabaab enforces this doctrine through coercion. While the group presents the acceptance of *tawbah* as an act of benevolence or mercy, the reality is closer to surrender or death. The verb *towbadkeen* (to make tawbah, or repent) appears repeatedly over the years as a public ultimatum. Tawbah is, in practice, submission to Al-Shabaab, and the alternative is violence. This manifests in a decade-long record of Al-Shabaab calls for FGS officials or members of the armed forces to repent, publicised killings of those who do not, and documentation of parades of those who do.⁸ Repeatedly demonstrated in its own media, Al-Shabaab exercises the right to demand submission, the right to grant clemency to those who do, and the right to kill those who do not.

The Al-Shabaab alternative

In 2011, Somalia experienced the worst famine in two generations. During this crisis, Al-Shabaab expelled 13 Western humanitarian organisations from southern Somalia and sought to replace them with its own relief mechanisms. Al-Shabaab spokesman Sheikh Ali Dheere publicly dismissed the UN famine declaration as propaganda. The movement went on to ban several international agencies from operating in territory under its control and disbanded its own internal famine committee within a fortnight.⁹ This was a refusal of the international system's descriptive authority. It was also an attempt to refute Al-Shabaab's inability to cope with the disaster the famine created, while denying the disaster was happening at all.

The 2011 famine resulted in an estimated 258,000 deaths, and Al-Shabaab's hardline stance on external aid directly contributed to this toll.¹⁰ The group's perceived indifference to such large-scale suffering severely damaged any legitimacy or support it might have enjoyed, and contributed to internal strife in the years immediately after.

The experience of the 2011 famine may help explain Al-Shabaab's later efforts to develop its own relief

structures and demonstrate that it could provide for the population independently. In practice, neither Al-Shabaab nor the FGS has the capacity to do so. The key point, however, is that Al-Shabaab seeks to claim that role.

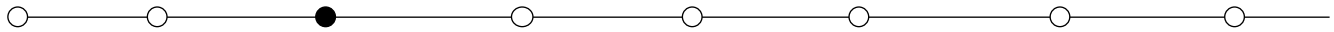
By 2016-2017, its narrative position had shifted and remained broadly consistent thereafter. Rather than denying that humanitarian needs exist, Al-Shabaab increasingly portrayed itself as the only legitimate provider of crisis response within the territory it claims to govern. Al-Shabaab deemed the international system's declarations, agencies and terminology as illegitimate, and sought to substitute its own. Put differently, the movement has become less rhetorically combative as its doctrine grew more institutionally ambitious.

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The 2011 famine has left other marks on the movement's rhetoric. Al-Shabaab does not acknowledge famine in Somalia. The only materials in the public record surveyed for this research that use the term *macluul* (famine) pertain to other countries, such as Sudan, Ethiopia or Gaza. Somalia experiences only *abaar* (drought). Famine implies systemic failure of the governing authority or the use of hunger as a weapon. Al-Shabaab frames famine deaths in Sudan and Gaza as enemy crimes, while denying the category exists in territory under its control.¹¹

The group has built a parallel system that it presents as the only legitimate form of relief. Parts of the relief infrastructure were publicly documented in 2011 during the famine. It continued through the 2013-15 period, marked by Al-Shabaab's military decline and internal strife. It surfaces more prominently with the 2017 drought, through the 2022-23 famine crisis, and into the food security emergency and famine warning conditions in parts of Somalia in early 2026.

This system is framed as the fulfilment of a religious obligation: *fard* (obligation) within Islamic



governance. The title of its earliest documented media series, *Qutuf al-Shari'a: Ihya' Faridat al-Zakat* (Fruits of Islamic Law: Reviving the Obligation of Zakat), encodes this claim in its title. *Ihya'* (revival) frames its governance as restoration. Put differently, Al-Shabaab is recovering something Islam has always required, but Somali Muslims have been denied.¹² The same framing recurs in Al-Shabaab's spokesperson statements. In a 7 March 2017 interview with Radio Al-Furqaan, Sheikh Ali Dheere announced that the movement had redoubled its drought-relief efforts and dismissed the aid promises of foreign organisations.¹³

Yet we know that Al-Shabaab still allows some degree of external assistance into at least some areas under its control. Al-Shabaab media does not address this. What we can assume from this disconnect is that when Al-Shabaab permits localised access to outside aid actors, it is managing the gap between its own capacity and the humanitarian needs of the populations it governs. It cannot currently meet those needs, but still claims responsibility for ensuring that they are met and needs to be pragmatic about how it meets them. Extrapolating from its narratives, Al-Shabaab likely views this as temporary. Outside assistance will only be tolerated for as long as the movement lacks the capacity to provide it themselves.

At present, Al-Shabaab's relief infrastructure has three principal branches: the Zakat Office, which manages zakat redistribution through Al-Shabaab's administrative system; the drought and flood relief committees, which coordinate emergency response across the wilayats; and the Al-Ihsan Foundation, which provides a more flexible charitable front that can appear either quasi-civilian or state-linked depending on context.

Maktabka Diiwaanka Zakada (The Zakat Office)

Maktabka Diiwaanka Zakada (The Zakat Office) is Al-Shabaab's registry, collection, and redistribution mechanism for zakat, the obligatory Islamic alms. While framed as the fulfilment of a religious duty, in practice it functions as one of the movement's core systems of wealth extraction and redistribution. Zakat is one of the five pillars of Islam, requiring those with sufficient wealth to contribute 2.5% of their accumulated annual wealth to the poor.

Al-Shabaab adopts this language of religious obligation but operationalises it through a system that closely resembles state taxation.

The Zakat Office serves both practical and political functions. Al-Shabaab media highlights its presence in areas where Al-Shabaab has consolidated control as well as in contested and government areas.¹⁴ Al-Shabaab media highlights that it redistributes livestock, cash, and other resources to civilian populations, but it also provides visible proof of Al-Shabaab's claim to govern. The earliest prominent documentation of zakat redistribution appears during the 2011 famine,¹⁵ when the movement expelled international aid agencies and sought to replace them with its own relief mechanisms.

From that point onward, Al-Shabaab media regularly documented zakat distributions across multiple wilayaats, in both rural and urban areas, including Mogadishu. Annual stocktakes and field reports documented livestock transfers, cash distributions, and beneficiary testimonies as evidence that the movement could mobilise and redistribute resources at scale.¹⁶ By 2023-2024, these operations were presented in detail and even numbered phases, much like a government programme or formal aid project.¹⁷

The purpose was not only to deliver relief, but to make governance visible. Through repeated media coverage of the Zakat Office, this was presented as proof that Al-Shabaab could tax, record, and redistribute wealth independently of the Somali state or international aid system.

Guddiga Abaaraha (Drought relief committees)

The drought committees are an extension of Al-Shabaab's regional administrations. In practice, they form part of a standing humanitarian apparatus that activates in response to whichever hazard is hitting south-central Somalia at the time. These bodies first appear in Al-Shabaab media in December 2010, at the start of the drought. They typically comprise representatives from the regional administration, business community, transport sector, clan elders and other members of society.

The same structure is activated during floods. Under names such as *Guddiga Gurmada Fatahaadaha*

(Flood Relief Committee) or *Guddiga Maaraynta Fatahaadaha* (Flood Management Committee), it performs the same coordinating role. In November 2023, Al-Shabaab spokesman Sheikh Ali Dheere announced on Radio Al-Furqaan that the movement had formally constituted a committee to manage the flood response, describing the heavy seasonal rains as a divine blessing after years of drought.¹⁸

These committees sit within Al-Shabaab’s *Maktabka Siyaasadda iyo Wilaayaatka* (Office of Politics and Wilayats), the body that also oversees the group’s provincial governors. The structure is directed from the senior levels of the organisation,¹⁹ and led by a former provincial governor. The committees have been given the authority to operate across multiple wilayats simultaneously, with other parts of the Al-Shabaab administration expected to support its work.

Its mandate is recognisably technocratic: continuous assessment of local conditions and needs; coordination of relief in its different forms, including food, water, and medicine; verification that assistance reaches its intended destination; and reporting on operations and emerging needs. These activities are widely documented and publicised through Al-Shabaab media in a deliberately state-like manner.

Operationally, the committees work through Al-Shabaab’s local administrations and, increasingly, through the Al-Ihsan Foundation (see below, and not to be confused with the Al Ihsan Charity Association, based in the United Arab Emirates). There is also a private-sector dimension: Somali traders and influential figures within Al-Shabaab territory are publicly asked by name to contribute. The committees operate across Al-Shabaab-controlled territory, including Hiiraan, Galgaduud, Mudug, Middle and Lower Shabelle, Bay, Bakool, Gedo, and the Juba regions. Their operations have expanded over time, beginning with bulk in-kind food distributions, incorporating water trucking during the 2022 drought, and more recently boat evacuation, cash transfers, medical screening, and resettlement of displaced people. As elsewhere, Al-Shabaab media documents and broadcasts the aid recipients expressing gratitude.²⁰

The Al-Ihsan Foundation

Al-Ihsan is a civil-society-style body operating in at least five Al-Shabaab-administered provinces across south-central Somalia.²¹ It is difficult to determine what exactly Al-Ihsan is in organisational terms. The language shifts over time from Jamciyadda Al-Ixsaan Al-Kheyriyah (Al-Ihsan Charitable Association) from 2017 through 2022, which makes it sound akin to an NGO, to Hay’adda Khayriga ah ee Al-Ixsaan / Hay’adda Al-Ixsaan Al-Khayriya (Al-Ihsan Charitable Agency) which sounds more like a governmental body.

Either way, in Al-Shabaab’s own media, its charitable work is framed as a Al-Shabaab’s humanitarian branding vehicle and extension of the movement’s broader religious and governance project. It participates aid distributions and public events where Al-Shabaab officials give speeches and works “in cooperation” with entities like the Zakat Office.²² One interpretation is that Al-Shabaab maintains deliberate institutional ambiguity around Al-Ihsan because it serves different functions in different contexts. Al-Ihsan can be presented as a civil society body when that framing serves Al-Shabaab’s legitimacy interests, and as a state institution when it serves its sovereignty claims.²³

Taken together, these three mechanisms serve different but complementary functions: the Zakat Office embeds redistribution within everyday governance; the drought and flood committees manage episodic crises; and Al-Ihsan provides a more flexible charitable face that can be presented as either civil society or state authority depending on the political context.

Al-Shabaab publicises its relief operations strategically, using them to draw a direct contrast with external aid, which it characterises as “empty wind,”²⁴ and the FGS²⁵, which it accuses of stealing and diverting funds.

It also uses them to demonstrate that the movement is willing to absorb the costs and complexities of running a multi-region, multi-modal disaster-response system, and to publicise that effort as a core feature of governance in the territories it controls.

Relief coverage also appears designed to offset Al-Shabaab's image of brutality. A 15-part series on the 2022 relief campaign was launched within days of the group's August 2022 attack on the Hayat Hotel in Mogadishu, one of its deadliest operations in recent years.²⁶ In Al-Shabaab's public narrative, the capacity to punish enemies and to care for civilians are exercised simultaneously as part of the movement's claim to rule.

Hakimiyyah and aid sovereignty

This logic is reinforced by *hakimiyyah*, the principle that sovereignty belongs to God, and that all domains of life, including welfare provision, fall under divine authority. In Al-Shabaab's interpretation, that sovereignty must be exercised through Islamic governance. Humanitarian access is therefore not just a humanitarian question, but a question of who has the right to govern. External agencies do not enter as neutral service providers, but as foreign entities seeking to operate within territory that Al-Shabaab claims should be governed according to Islamic law.

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Al-Shabaab's aid agency registration and vetting systems are administrative expressions of sovereignty.²⁷ NGOs are not, in Al-Shabaab's view, negotiating access with a non-state armed group; they are seeking permission from an authority that claims the right to decide who can provide what within its territory. This helps explain an apparent contradiction in Al-Shabaab's practice. It may publicly ban the UN and external aid actors while quietly allowing some of them to operate through local arrangements. The public ban asserts sovereignty and rejects outside authority. The quieter administrative arrangements reflect a more practical reality: at times, Al-Shabaab still depends on outside actors to meet needs it cannot yet meet alone.

Thirty years of harm: Al-Shabaab's evidence-based critique

Al-Shabaab also advances a detailed evidence-based critique of the humanitarian system. Many of the grievances it raises are also recognized in the wider research and independent research and humanitarian evaluations, even if the group exaggerates or misrepresents the intent behind them. Understanding this strand of the narrative is important for two reasons. First, it helps explain why Al-Shabaab's position on aid can resonate beyond its core ideological base. Second, it reveals how the movement organises diffuse frustration – about corruption, displacement, dependency, ineffectiveness, and marginalisation – into a coherent indictment of the international system and its local allies.

The political economy of aid

Al-Shabaab's first empirical claim is that aid corruption in Somalia is systemic and harmful. This argument overlaps uncomfortably with more than a decade of independent scholarship and donor-funded research showing that diversion, elite capture, and abuse are deeply embedded in the aid economy. Analysis of the 2011 famine, for example, documents how the political economy of aid actively worsened outcomes for the most vulnerable populations.²⁸ One of the clearest examples is the gatekeeping system around displaced populations.²⁹ Networks of informal settlement managers (operating through clan hierarchies, political patronage and contracting relationships with international agencies) control access to displaced populations and the resources meant for them. This contributes to the systematic exclusion of certain displaced communities, especially from the Digil and Mirifle clans and minority groups. Entire ghost NGOs exist alongside other forms of fraud, including mother-and-child health centres that employ fewer staff and provide fewer services than promised to donors, and cases of staff at international agencies colluding in the contracting of local implementing partners in return for kickbacks.³⁰ The harshest accusations are reserved for the government. Al-Shabaab

routinely depicts the FGS as a criminal intermediary that “covers up its negligence, incompetence and inaction,” diverting or blocking aid while performing concern for populations.³¹ This allows it to sustain two parallel lines of attack without contradiction: foreign actors are illegitimate occupiers whose aid is performative; the FGS is the venal local agent that steals whatever real assistance exists.

The core point is that, in Al-Shabaab's telling, abuse of aid is not an isolated failure but a defining feature of the humanitarian system and the wider Somali political economy. The humanitarian enterprise has generated enough failure, diversion, and exclusion to make a broader critique of the aid system plausible to the communities it was meant to serve. Al-Shabaab did not invent these grievances; but it amplifies and weaponises them.

Displacement as a humanitarian product

The second strand of Al-Shabaab's empirical argument concerns aid-driven displacement. The movement claims that the humanitarian system has structurally incentivised movement into accessible urban and government-controlled areas, eroding pastoral livelihoods in rural south-central Somalia.

Here again, the narrative draws on concerns long present in humanitarian and development analysis. Studies predating Al-Shabaab show how assistance clustered in towns and camps can pull populations away from their areas of origin, concentrating them in sites with poor prospects for self-reliance.³² More recently, the 2022-2023 drought response reproduced this pattern at scale, as the way aid agencies identified recipients and concentrated assistance in certain locations with sometimes encouraged people to move toward areas where aid was being delivered, undermining more durable solutions and contributing to the erosion of community resilience.³³

A central part of Al-Shabaab's critique is sedentarisation – the concentration of nomadic communities in fixed settlements or camps. The movement argues that humanitarian organisations have deliberately pushed pastoralist communities into dependency, stripping them of mobility and self-sufficiency. Where Al-Shabaab sees deliberate intent, most critical scholarship identifies structural incentives as driving such unintended effects.³⁴

For communities along the Juba-Shabelle corridor and in the Bay-Bakool region, the experience of being repeatedly drawn into precarious urban sites may make Al-Shabaab's narrative resonate, regardless of whether those outcomes were deliberately engineered or structurally produced.

Corruption, marginalisation and the Somali minority question

A third component of the empirical indictment focuses on exclusion from aid. Minority clans, Somali Bantu communities, and rural households living along the Juba and Shabelle rivers often have the weakest access to the networks and patronage systems that shape who receives assistance in dominant-clan-controlled urban centres.³⁵ The gap between what the system claims to deliver, and to whom, and what the most marginalised communities actually receive long predates Al-Shabaab and persists in government-controlled areas.³⁶ Al-Shabaab's media takes these findings and reframes them as evidence of deliberate demographic engineering. In its narrative, exclusion from assistance forms part of a conscious strategy to favour certain groups while displacing or weakening others.³⁷

These claims about demographic manipulation are not reflected in the mainstream literature. Their power is rhetorical: Al-Shabaab takes the everyday experience of exclusion from assistance and reframes it as evidence of foreign domination and local betrayal. The humanitarian system becomes, in this telling, both ineffective and actively hostile to those at the margins.

From documented failure to perceived hostile

What makes Al-Shabaab's empirical case particularly powerful is how it connects real and documented failures to a broader ideological critique. The movement selects grievances that are widely recognised and reframes them in theological and political terms to justify categorical opposition to the humanitarian system and the wider international order.

Three features of this synthesis deserve particular attention from practitioners. First, it is cumulative. Each drought cycle, diversion scandal, and critical evaluation acknowledging the system's failure to reach the most vulnerable adds to the archive of evidence Al-Shabaab can draw on. Over time, this allows the group to present its position as a conclusion confirmed repeatedly by external admissions.

Second, it speaks to multiple audiences at once: the ideological core through theology, clan elders through familiar anecdotes and references, and the educated Somali public through arguments that echo critical scholarship and donor-funded reviews.

Third, it is resistant to conventional humanitarian communications strategies. Standard responses to diversion scandals or evaluation findings (denial, technical fixes, new monitoring mechanisms) address specific failings but not the structural critique Al-Shabaab is making. The movement argues that, by its nature and design, the system is an instrument of the same foreign project that has undermined Somali sovereignty and dignity.

Recent aid cuts have further reinforced the argument. When a UN report noted that the UN's USD1.4 billion dollar humanitarian appeal for Somalia in 2025 was only 27% funded, forcing agencies to scale back services, Al-Shabaab media reproduced the analysis as evidence that "the crusader invasion of Somalia is on the verge of failure and collapse."³⁸ Strain on the humanitarian system is then presented as more evidence that Al-Shabaab's parallel system is the more legitimate and sustainable alternative.

The strategic argument: aid as part of a wider colonial project

Al-Shabaab’s third narrative strand is that the humanitarian system is not merely flawed or politically compromised, but part of a deliberate project of external domination. In this telling, aid actors are embedded in the same wider architecture of political control, military intervention, and resource extraction that Al-Shabaab frames its jihad as resisting.³⁹ Versions of this argument appear across Salafi-jihadist media more broadly, and parts of it overlap with critiques in development studies.⁴⁰ Al-Shabaab, however, roots it specifically in Somali historical memory and applies it to the history of humanitarian response in south-central Somalia.

Humanitarian actors as the first wave of intervention

Al-Shabaab’s clearest articulation of what the humanitarian system is “really for” appears in a recent podcast featuring the senior commander Sheikh Mohamed Ibrahim Goore.⁴¹ Using a parable about power, dependency and predation, Goore presents humanitarian action as the opening phase of a broader project of foreign domination. In his telling, humanitarian organisations arrive first during moments of state collapse, establish local presence and relationships, and prepare the ground for the political, military and economic interests that follow, including the extraction of mineral resources.

This is not reflected in the mainstream literature, but it is internally coherent, which helps explain its rhetorical force. It absorbs observable features of the humanitarian system – alignment with the FGS, presence in military compounds, reliance on armed escorts, participation in stabilisation initiatives, and failure to reach the most marginalised – and recodes them as evidence of political intent. This makes the argument difficult to rebut, because the same practices humanitarian actors describe as operational necessities can be

recast by Al-Shabaab as proof of the wider project it claims they serve.

Similar arguments appear elsewhere. Interviews with figures linked to the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), Al-Shabaab’s effective parent organisation, describe the destruction of the ICU’s governance project and the expansion of international intervention as part of the same story. The UN and other international actors who met with the ICU while they were in power are portrayed as merely gathering intelligence and exerting unrealistic demands on their government, leading to the deaths of ICU figures in US airstrikes and sowing divisions that aided the ICU’s downfall.⁴² The relationship between humanitarian action and wider Western geopolitical interests in Somalia has also been explored in other literature,⁴³ but Al-Shabaab takes that association a step further, presenting humanitarian presence not as a consequence of intervention, but as part of the project itself.

Aid is no longer framed simply as flawed, biased, or ineffective, but as one of the vehicles through which foreign domination is reproduced.

One additional point is that Al-Shabaab, in its public narrative, does not appear to distinguish between the different functions of the UN – for example, political versus humanitarian roles. There also does not seem to be a clear distinction between the wider community of aid workers and the UN. All are *ridda* (apostates) and presented as part of an international occupation. Whether this rhetoric translates into the deliberate targeting of humanitarian personnel is beyond the scope of this study. Humanitarian practitioners, however, generally do not describe systematic targeting of aid workers at present.⁴⁴

The 600-year narrative of resistance

This strategic theory of humanitarian actors as the civilian advance of foreign intervention gains power because it is embedded in a much broader historical narrative. Al-Shabaab presents Somali history as a story of domination and resistance stretching across six centuries. It moves through familiar episodes: from sixteenth-century campaigns against Ethiopian and Portuguese forces to Sayyid Maxamed Cabdulle Xasan’s resistance to British colonial rule, to Al-Itihaad Al-Islami’s opposition to Ethiopian intervention, to the ICU, and finally to Al-Shabaab’s own insurgency. The history is selective, but it draws on memories that resonate far beyond Al-Shabaab’s ideological core,⁴⁵ allowing the movement to place contemporary aid institutions inside a story that many Somalis already recognise: repeated foreign intrusion and local resistance.

Radio Al-Furqaan’s programming makes this historical framing explicit, regularly linking contemporary events to earlier episodes of anti-colonial resistance in Somali history.⁴⁶

In this narrative, contemporary humanitarian actors become the latest institutional expression of that history. Aid is no longer framed simply as flawed, biased, or ineffective, but as one of the vehicles through which foreign domination is reproduced.

Amplifying supportive voices, filtering out criticism

Al-Shabaab reinforces this strategic theory through a disciplined information strategy. Criticism of the movement is absent from its own media. At the same time, statements by international officials, mainstream outlets, analysts, and humanitarian actors that appear to support its governance claims are selectively amplified. The result is a tightly controlled information environment in which outside voices are used to reinforce claims Al-Shabaab has already made.

One example is Al-Shabaab’s use of reporting on the former UN Special Representative Michael Keating. Remarks by Keating about public trust in Al-Shabaab courts were repackaged under

headlines suggesting that even the UN recognised the movement’s ability to deliver justice.⁴⁷ Criticism of corruption and political paralysis within the FGS was folded into Al-Shabaab’s broader narrative of state failure and insurgent legitimacy. Al-Shabaab does not amplify claims that its own relief efforts are effective, as little such external validation exists. What it amplifies instead are aid cuts, funding shortfalls, and public acknowledgements of humanitarian failure.⁴⁸ When the international system admits it cannot reach the most vulnerable, AlShabaab repurposes that admission as confirmation that the foreign project is collapsing and its own parallel system is the more credible alternative. Al-Shabaab does not need to prove every part of its historical or political theory. It needs only enough recognisable evidence from credible outside voices to make its account feel credible. This helps explain why its aid narrative can resonate even among those who do not share its theology or endorse its violence.

Implications and conclusions

Al-Shabaab’s narrative on humanitarian aid circulates through a sophisticated media apparatus, seeking to shape how many Somalis understand the humanitarian system, why it is present, and whose interests it serves. Humanitarian actors have largely either ignored this narrative or responded to the political, theological, and governance claims that underpin it. That misreading may have contributed to a generation of access strategies that have struggled to reach populations most in need.

Correcting this misreading will not dissolve the underlying tension between Al-Shabaab’s categorical rejection of external humanitarian actors and the humanitarian system’s imperative to reach populations under its control. It can, however, improve the prospects for more effective engagement. Understanding what Al-Shabaab says about aid, why it says it, and navigating the gap between doctrine and practice is the analytical foundation on which any serious engagement strategy must rest.

Understanding what Al-Shabaab says about aid, why it says it, and navigating the gap between doctrine and practice is the analytical foundation on which any serious engagement strategy must rest.

These findings have several implications for practitioners seeking to improve humanitarian access in Al-Shabaab-controlled territory. The first is that operational flexibility does not signal doctrinal change. Al-Shabaab’s willingness to tolerate access arrangements in specific circumstances does not mean it has moderated its theological objection to external humanitarian actors. That space for tolerance is real but unstable. It can contract quickly when military pressure intensifies, clan relationships shift, or Al-Shabaab’s own relief capacity grows to the point that it judges outside provision is no longer necessary.

Secondly, access is a sovereignty issue for Al-Shabaab. This does not require political recognition of Al-Shabaab’s authority, nor endorsement of its governance claims. It does require operational recognition that, in areas under its control, Al-Shabaab sees access not simply as a humanitarian matter, but as a question of who has the right to decide who can enter, operate, and provide assistance, and on what terms.

Third, Al-Shabaab presents the provision of humanitarian relief as a duty of Islamic governance. IHL also places obligations on de facto authorities to protect and provide for civilians under their control. The two frameworks are not the same, but both treat authority as carrying responsibilities towards civilian populations. This creates a genuine point of overlap that humanitarian engagement has largely failed to use.

This suggests that one of the most promising lines of argument in field negotiations is not that Al-Shabaab should accept outside aid because humanitarian actors are neutral, but that an Islamic authority responsible for a population must ensure adequate relief, including when its own capacity falls short. This does not mean such arguments will secure access, but it helps explain why neutrality-based messaging alone may miss the point. Further operational research is needed to test how these frames work in practice.

Al-Shabaab’s parallel relief system has expanded steadily over the past decade in geographic reach, institutional complexity, and operational diversity. As that system matures, the governance incentives that currently make outside provision of assistance tolerable are likely to weaken. Al-Shabaab may never become fully self-sufficient, but it is moving toward the model of governance its ideology envisions.

Notes

¹ The title references a 2017 statement by Al Shabaab spokesperson Sheikh Ali Dheere (Sheikh Ali Mohamad Rage), in which he described the promises made by “foreign agencies” about drought relief as a “dhalanteed aan wax kasoo qaad lahayn” (a mirage from which nothing can be drawn). We render this as “empty wind,” an interpretive translation chosen to capture his sense of a seductive but ultimately deceptive promise that dissipates on contact and to evoke the Qur’anic notion of *ghurūr* (Qur’an 33:12; cf. 24:39, 57:20), which a flat translation of “mirage” would lose. See “Sheekh Cali Dheere: ‘Mujaahidiintu waxay si mug leh u garab taagan yihiin gurmadka abaaraha’ (Waraysi),” Sheikh Ali Dheere: “The Mujahideen Are Strongly Supporting the Drought Relief” (Interview), Al Shahada (an Al Shabaab affiliated media outlet), March 7, 2017.

² Jackson (2026).

³ The uniformity of the media is partially a product of pre-2013 internal contestation that ended in purges. Between 2011 and 2013 Ahmed Abdi Godane consolidated control of the group by force. After Godane was killed in a US strike in September 2014, Ahmed Diiriye (Abu Ubayda) became amir and inherited the consolidated apparatus, including a centrally produced media operation that has remained (with isolated exceptions) disciplined and unitary in voice ever since. The media we analyse, starting in 2016, is the output of that apparatus. While internal politics no doubt exist, the media product remains unitary.

⁴ For the methodological precedent, see Braddock and Horgan (2016); Hegghammer (2017); McCants (2015); Colas (2016); and the Sciences Po CERI Contextualizing Radicalization project, which frames militant media as a cultural form requiring contextualisation rather than dismissal: <https://www.sciencespo.fr/ceri/en/research/projects/archive/contextualizing-radicalization-the-politics-of-violent-extremism/>

⁵ “Maxaad Kala Socotaa Halista Hay’adaha Reer Galbeedka?,” Why Do You See the Dangers of Western Institutions?, Al-Andalus (an Al-Shabaab-affiliated media outlet), April 2, 2026.

⁶ “Dhagayso: Waxa loogu yeero qaramda midoobay ma ogol yihiin awood aan iyaga ahayn?,” Listen: Does the so-called United Nations allow powers other than their own?, Radio Al-Furqaan (an Al-Shabaab-affiliated media outlet), May 22, 2016; “Dhageysa: Shacabka Wilaayaadka oo Ka Hadlay Sida ay kaga Nabad Galeen Dhibaataada WFP,”

Listen: The People of the Regions Talk About How They Found Peace in the WFP Crisis, Radio Al-Furqaan (an Al-Shabaab-affiliated media outlet), June 16, 2016.

⁷ Hanbali doctrine requires that apostates be offered the opportunity to repent before execution is carried out. The classical Hanbali scholar Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani (d. 1166) specified that repentance must be demanded three times. Al-Shabaab that operationalises this doctrine directly.

⁸ For instance, “Mujaahidiinta Dhaalibaan Oo Soo Bandhigay Towbadkeenayaa Kun Askari Ah,” The Taliban Mujahideen Present a Thousand Repentant Soldiers, Al-Andalus (an Al-Shabaab-affiliated media outlet), August 30, 2018; “Daawo Sh Cali Dheere Oo Baaq Towbad Keen Ah U Diray Maleeshiyada Gurguurte,” Watch: Radio Al-Furqaan’s Documentary on the Work of the Al-Ihsan Foundation, Radio Al-Furqaan (an Al-Shabaab-affiliated media outlet), February 24, 2024; “Shabaabul Mujaahidiin Oo Dilay Nin Diiday Inuu Allaah U Towbadkeeno,” Al-Shabaab Mujahideen Killed a Man Who Refused to Repent to God, Al-Andalus (an Al-Shabaab-affiliated media outlet), November 19, 2019.

⁹ For analysis of the 2011 statement, see Zimmerman (2011). See also Jackson and Aynte (2013).

¹⁰ Checci and Robinson (2013).

¹¹ The claim rests on a complete corpus search for the Somali-language famine lexicon: *macluul* and *macaluul* (famine, in the strong IPC Phase 5 sense), and *gaajo* (hunger; starvation). Nine articles use this vocabulary substantively. Every single one is about a non-Somalia context (such as Sudan, Gaza or Ethiopia). A tenth article (26 May 2018) uses *gaajo* in a hypothetical construction concerning Muslim prisoners in the United States and is excluded from the substantive count as it does not describe an ongoing food emergency.

¹² See also Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahidin, Qutuf al-Shari’a: *Ihya’ Faridat al-Zakat* [Fruits of Islamic Law: Reviving the Obligation of Zakat], Al-Kata’ib Media Foundation, CTC West Point Militant Imagery Project, entry 0350, April 1, 2011. <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/militant-imagery-project/0350/>

¹³ “Sheekh Cali Dheere: ‘Si Xoog Leh Ayay Mujaahidiintu U Wadaan Gurmada Abaaraha’ (Waraysi),” Sheikh Ali Dheere: “The Mujahideen Are Strongly Supporting the

Drought Relief” (Interview), Radio Al-Furqaan (an Al-Shabaab-affiliated media outlet), March 7, 2017.

¹⁴ For instance, on September 12, 2019, the Banadir Wilayah, covering Mogadishu, distributed zakat funds in cash to “hundreds of poor families in Mogadishu” at a ceremony attended by the Banadir governor. “Wilaayada Banaadir Oo Lacago Zako Ah U Qeybisay Masaakiinta Muqdisho” Banaadir Wilayah Distributes Cash Zakat to the Poor of Mogadishu, Radio Al-Furqaan (an Al-Shabaab-affiliated media outlet), September 12, 2019.

¹⁵ Al-Shabaab documents two food distributions at the Al-Yasir refugee camp in Lower Shabelle that year. The second is notable because it was conducted in cooperation with the World Assembly of Muslim Youth (Wamy), an Islamic organisation based in Saudi Arabia. Al-Kata’ib Media, “The Tenth Army Provides Aid to Tens of Thousands of Affected Children in the Al-Yasir Refugee Camp,” statement from Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahidin, Jihadology.net, 6 September 2011; Al-Kata’ib Media, “Distribution of Aid to 4,000 Families in the Al-Yasir Refugee Camp in Cooperation with the World Assembly of Muslim Youth,” statement from Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahidin, Jihadology.net, 10 September 2011.

¹⁶ For instance, Al-Shabaab media also publishes annual aggregate figures: a 2 December 2018 stocktake stated that 22,451 head of livestock had been distributed as zakat to 6,269 needy families across eight wilayats (Lower Shabelle, Middle Shabelle, Bay, Bakool, Gedo, Hiiraan, Galgaduud, and Mudug) for the 1440 Hijri year. Radio Al-Furqaan, “Zako Qeybinta Oo Si Hab Sami Leh Uga Socota Shabeelaha Hoose (Sawirro)” The Zakat Distribution Proceeds Smoothly in Lower Shabelle (Photos). December 23, 2017; Radio Al-Furqaan, “Wilaayada Banaadir Oo Lacago Zako Ah U Qeybisay Masaakiinta Muqdisho” Banaadir Wilayah Distributes Cash Zakat to the Poor of Mogadishu. September 12, 2019; Radio Al-Furqaan, “Tirakoobka Zakada Xoolaha Nool Ee 1440-Ka Hijriyada Laga Qeybiyay Wilaayaadka Islaamiga” The 1440 Hijri Tally of Live-Animal Zakat Distributed Across the Islamic Wilayats. December 2, 2018.

¹⁷ The 2023-2024 zakat distribution cycle is documented in detail. On 24 August 2023, Al-Kataa’ib released documentation of the Office’s livestock-Zakat distribution programme in Buusaar, Gedo, “as part of the annual zakat program for the Islamic year 1444 Hijri.” By 3 October 2024, Al-Shabaab media stated that nearly 1,000 families in the Waajid district of Bakool and parts of Lower Juba had received livestock distributions from Al-Shabaab and “several beneficiaries spoke to the media, expressing their appreciation for the religious alms.” Much like a formal aid project or a government programme, each distribution was a numbered “phase” (wajiga) of an annual

project; an Al-Kataa’ib Al-Ikhbaariyyah video published on 10 December 2024 showed the fifteenth phase of the 1446 Hijri livestock-zakat project in El-Ali, Hiiraan; on 16 December 2024, it released the seventeenth phase in Bisiq-cadde, Bay; and on 31 December 2024, it released a further phase in Iidaale, also in Bay. Al-Andalus Media. “Daawo Sh Cali Dheere Oo Baaq Towbad Keen Ah U Diray Maleeshiyada Gurguurte” Watch: Sheikh Ali Dheere Issues a Repentance Call to the Gurguurte Militia. Calamada1, February 24, 2024; Radio Al-Furqaan, “Ku Dhawaad 1,000 Qoys oo ka Faa’iideystay Zako Qeybin Laga Sameeyay Jubada-hoose,” Nearly 1,000 Families Benefited from Zako Distribution in Lower Juba. October 3, 2024; Radio Al-Furqaan, “Ku Dhawaad 1,000 Qoys oo ka Faa’iideystay Zako Qeybin Laga Sameeyay Jubada-hoose,” Nearly 1,000 Families Benefited from Zako Distribution in Lower Juba. October 3, 2024; Radio Al-Furqaan, “Muuqaalka Zako Qeybin Laga Sameeyay Deegaan Katirsan Hiiraan oo la Baahiyay,” Radio Al-Furqaan, December 10, 2024, A video of a Zako distribution made in a remote area of Hiran has been released, December 10, 2024; Al-Furqaan, “Muuqaalka Zako Qeybin Laga Sameeyay Deegaan Katirsan Baay oo La Baahiyay,” A video of a distribution made in a remote area of Katirsan Bay has been released. Radio Al-Furqaan, December 16, 2024.

¹⁸ Radio Al-Furqaan, “Dhegeyso Xarakada Shabaabul Mujaahidiin Oo Guddi U Magacawday Fatahaadaha,” Listen to the Al-Shabaab militant group appoint a committee to investigate the floods, November 10, 2023.

¹⁹ A February 2025 leadership meeting that read out an eight-page joint communiqué included the group’s overall emir and the most senior figures of the shura. The January 2026 founding bayaan goes further. It identifies the committee’s general coordinator as Sheekh Maxamad Abu Usaama, the former Wāli (governor) of the Islamic Wilayah of Lower Shabelle, with three named members alongside him: Sheekh Maxamad Axmad Balli, Sheekh Maxamad Jamaal, and Sheekh Cabdi-Waaxid Isxaaq Muudey.

²⁰ Radio Al-Furqaan, “Dhegeyso Alshabaab oo lacag ka qaybisay Afar Degmo oo Shabeelaha dhexe ka tirsan,” Listen to Al-Shabaab distributing money to four districts in Middle Shabelle, November 29, 2023, accessed April 28, 2026.

²¹ Lower Shabelle, Bay, Bakool, Galgaduud, and Hiiraan.

²² Al-Shabaab media mentions begin with medical camps in Hiiraan and Middle Shabelle in 2017, expanding to Lower Shabelle flood relief in 2021, then becoming highly visible during the 2022 drought with food distributions, and then pivoting to cash plus medical screening for Jubba flood victims in late 2023. The operating model is consistent: modest in-kind packages or cash to a few hundred families per event, framed as charitable work in the wilaayadaha

Islaamiga (Islamic provinces), channelled entirely through Al-Shabaab's own media. There has been one explicit statement of joint operations with Al-Shabaab's drought-relief committee (Buq'aqable, March 2022) and one instance of the Hiiraan wali personally presiding over a distribution (Beledweyne, December 2022).

²³ Radio Al-Furqaan's archive corroborates both readings. The outlet has recorded Al-Ihsan since at least 6 March 2016, when it completed a 120-square-metre water reservoir in Bur-qod village (Bay region); on 30 January 2017 it reported 34 free eye surgeries performed by Al-Ihsan doctors in Gamboole, Middle Shabelle; and on 9 March 2017 it described a joint water-trucking and food-distribution campaign run by the Lower Shabelle Al-Shabaab administration "in collaboration" with Al-Ihsan. A November 2016 documentary produced by Radio Al-Furqaan — "Al-Ihsan Society and Social Care" — served as the outlet's extended showcase of these activities. Radio Al-Furqaan. "Sawirro: Hey'adda Al-Ixsaan Oo War Biyood Ka Qoday Bay," Photos: Al-Ihsaan Foundation Drills Water Well in Bay, March 6, 2016; Radio Al-Furqaan, "34 Ruux Oo Indhaha Loogu Fiiqay Shabeelaha Dhexe (Maqal)" 34 People Treated for Eye Surgery in Middle Shabelle (Audio). January 30, 2017; Radio Al-Furqaan, "Sawirro: Maamulka Islaamiga Ah Ee Sh/hoose Oo Biyo Dhaamin Ka Wada Dhulka Abaartu Ku Dhufatay," Photos: Islamic State in Lower Shabelle trucking water to drought-stricken areas, March 9, 2017; Radio Al-Furqaan, "Daawo: Idaacadda Al-Furqaan oo filim ka diyaarisay waxqabadka hay'adda Al-Ixsaan," Watch: Al-Furqaan Radio prepares a film about the activities of Al-Ihsaan organization November 17, 2016.

²⁴ Al Shahada, "Sheekh Cali Dheere: "Mujaahidiintu waxay si mug leh u garab taagan yihiin gurmada abaaraha". (Waraysi)," Sheikh Ali Dheere: "The Mujahideen Are Strongly Supporting the Drought Relief." (Interview), March 7, 2017.

²⁵ Calamada News, Maamullada Deni Iyo Madoobe Oo Villa Somalia Ku Eedeeyay Musuqmaasuqa Arrimaha Gargaarka (The Deni and Madoobe administrations accuse Villa Somalia of corruption in aid matters), January 20, 2025.

²⁶ Al-Kataa'ib released Part 1 of that drought-relief video series on 24 August 2022, framed as a record of "the relief work the movement has carried out this year"; Al-Furqaan's news wire had been covering the Hayat Hotel siege since the operation entered its fifth hour on 19 August 2022. Radio Al-Furqaan, Daawo Qeybtii 1aad Muuqaallo Lagu Soo Gudbinayo Gurmada Abaaraha ee Xarakadu Sameysay Sanadkan [Watch Part 1 of the video showing the drought relief efforts carried out by the movement this year.] August 24, 2022; Radio Al-Furqaan, Weerarka ka socda hotelka Xayaat oo galay saacadiisii 5-aad [The attack on the Hayat Hotel has entered its 5th hour.] August 19, 2022;

Radio Al-Furqaan, DEGDEG: Dagaalyahanno Ka Tirsan Al-Shabaab oo Ka Dagaalamaya Gudaha Hotel Xayaat Ee Muqdisho, [BREAKING: Al-Shabaab fighters fighting inside the Hayat Hotel in Mogadishu] August 19, 2022.

²⁷ For more on the de facto aid negotiation and registration process, see Jackson (2026).

²⁸ Maxwell and Majid (2016); UN Monitoring group on Somalia (2010); Majid and Harmer (2016); UN (2023).

²⁹ Norwegian Refugee Council (2025); for a broader take on this, see also Stoddard (2026).

³⁰ Majid and Harmer (2016); Jackson and Majid (2024); Humanitarian Outcomes (2023); Bryld (2023).

³¹ Calamada News, Al Shabaab oo beeniyay hadalkii Xasan Sheekh kuna eedeysay in uu dhaqaalaha dalka shisheeye ugacan gelinayo [BAYAAN] [Al Shabaab denies Hassan Sheikh's statement, accusing him of destabilizing the country's economy [STATEMENT]] July 8, 2022.

³² Jaspars et al. (2019) document how, from the mid-1990s onward, the concentration of food aid at fixed distribution points created pull factors that drew nomadic and agro-pastoral communities away from their land, their herds and their seasonal movement patterns, the foundations of Somali rural livelihood systems. The communities most affected were overwhelmingly those in Bay, Bakool and the Jubba and Shabelle river valleys: the same geographies that appear in Al-Shabaab empirical indictment, and the same communities that AS addresses in its governance and relief communications.

³³ Steets et al. (2025).

³⁴ For instance, Al-Shabaab media describes a deliberate strategy whereby humanitarian actors sedentarise mobile communities, concentrating them in camps and stripping them of mobility and self-sufficiency. One broadcast, for example, portrays organisations calling people to specific sites, where humans and livestock are crowded together, and livelihoods collapse as animals die, and water sources are abandoned Al-Andalus Radio / Al-Kata'ib media, "Maxaad Kala Socotaa Halista Hay'adaha Reer Galbeedka?," Why Do You See the Dangers of Western Institutions?, 2 April 2026.

³⁵ See Majid and Harmer (2016); Steets et al. (2025).

³⁶ For instance, Thomas and Majid (2023) have documented how networks linked to the Hawiye clan own and control IDP camps in Mogadishu, occupying key positions in local authority structures in ways that systematically exclude IDPs from the Digil and Mirifle clans and minority groups.

³⁷ Calamada News, “Dhageyso: Beelaha Jareerweyne Oo Ka Hadlay Maamulka Farmaajo” [Listen: The Jareerweyne Communities Speak on the Farmaajo Administration], 2 March 2017; Calamada News, Maleeshiyaat Ka Wada Tirsan Dowlada Federaalka Oo Muqdisho Ku Dagaalamay [Militias Both Belonging to the Federal Government Fought Each Other in Mogadishu], 9 January 2017; Calamada News, Askarta Dowlada Federaalka Oo Dil Iyo Dhac U Geystay Barakacayaal Shuban Biyood Soo Ritay [Federal Government Soldiers Killed and Looted Displaced People Who Had Contracted Cholera], 18 March 2017; Calamada News, Askarta Dowlada Oo Dad Barakacayaal Ah Rasaaseeya [Government Soldiers Shot Displaced People], 30 May 2017; Calamada News, Askarta Dowlada Oo Dhac Iyo Rasaas Isugu Daray Gaari Dad Shacab Ah Ay La Socdeen [Government Soldiers Combined Looting and Gunfire Against a Vehicle Carrying Civilians], 26 August 2018; Calamada News, Mareykanka Oo Duqeyn Ku Dilay Suldaankii Beesha Jareerweyne Ee Jubbooyinka” [America Killed by Airstrike the Sultan of the Jareerweyne Community of the Jubbas], 10 April 2020, Calamada News, Sawirro+ Warbixin: Caleemo Saarkii Suldaanka Beesha Jareerweyne ee Jubbooyinka [Photos and Report: The Coronation of the Sultan of the Jareerweyne Community of the Jubbas], 4 January 2021; Calamada News, Dhageyso Dardaranka Al-istish-haadi Max’med C/qaadir Max’med” [Listen to the Testament of the Martyrdom-Seeker Max’med C/qaadir Max’med], 1 August 2022; Calamada News, Sawirro+Warbixin: Dugsi Hoose Dhexe Oo Loogu Magac Daray Suldaankii Jareerwayne [Photos and Report: A Lower-Secondary School Named After the Sultan of the Jareerweyne], 1 October 2022.

³⁸ Calamada News/Howlgalka Urur-gaaleedka QM Ee Soomaaliya Oo Wajahaya Dhaqaale La’aan Baahsan [Warbixin].[UN Mission in Somalia Faces Severe Financial Shortage [Report].] January 28, 2026.

³⁹ Many Names, One Purpose. W/Q: Abwaan Nageeye Cali Khaliif. January 13, 2025

⁴⁰ The argument that development and humanitarian assistance functions as an extension of Western geopolitical interests has a substantial academic literature, from dependency theory through post-development scholarship to more recent critiques of the aid industry. See Escobar (1995); Easterly (2006). AS’s version is theologically framed and attributes deliberate colonial intent where this literature identifies structural incentive but the overlap in observable conclusions is analytically significant.

⁴¹ Goore’s identity could not be independently verified in open-source reporting beyond his introduction on the podcast.

⁴² For instance, in interviews with former ICU official, meetings with UN, Western and African diplomats during the ICU’s tenure is presented as a tool of intelligence

collection and pressure that hastened the ICU’s internal decomposition; the deaths of ICU officials such as Sheikh Maxudiin (Health office) and Macalin Adam (overall military commander) in US-coalition airstrikes. Al-Andalus Radio / Al-Kata’ib Media, Sheikh Cabdiraxiim Cali Muuday [former ICU Shura council member, Al-Shabaab official], Andalus Podcast, Qaab Dhismeedkii Maamul Ee Maxkamadihii Islaamiga Ahaa [The Administrative Structure of the Islamic Courts Union”] Calamada News [Al-Andalus Media], 27 November 2025.

⁴³ On the integration of humanitarian and counter-insurgency frameworks in Somalia, see Jackson (2026); Kluijver (2025); Menkhaus (2010); Tronc et al. (2018).

⁴⁴ See UNOCHA (2024); see also Jackson (2026).

⁴⁵ As evidence of this, a monument to the Sayyid sits prominently in Mogadishu. See Al Jazeera (2025); Mubarak and Jackson (forthcoming)

⁴⁶ Radio Al-Furqaan, “Dhagayso Dhulkii Awooweyaaasheena Yaa Soo Dhicin Doona?” Listen: Who Will Recover Our Ancestors’ Land?. March 27, 2020; Radio Al-Furqaan, “Dhagayso Barnaamijka Halgankii Daraawiishta” Listen: Programme on the Struggle of the Darwiish. March 27, 2020.

⁴⁷ Al-Andalus Media, “Dhageyso: Michael Keating oo sheegay in shacabka Soomaalida ay cadaalad uraadsadaan maxkamadaha Al-Shabaab, [Listen: Michael Keating says Somali people seek justice in Al Shabaab courts], September 2018. The Keating attribution appears to be paraphrased by AS media in Somali, not a verbatim quotation.

⁴⁸ Coverage of the drought relief efforts in 2022 for instance contrasts Al-Shabaab’s efforts with the Somali Federal Government’s efforts, and explicitly weaponises the FGS/ UN candour that election-cycle funds were diverted away from aid response. Daawo Qeybti 1aad Muuqaallo Lagu Soo Gudbinayo Gurmadkii Abaaraha ee Xarakadu Sameysay Sanadkan (Watch Part 1 of the video presenting the drought relief efforts carried out by the movement this year), August 24, 2022, Al- Kata’ib.

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Annex A. Sources and method

This paper draws on a Somali-language media archive assembled by the authors during this project. The aim was not to assemble an exhaustive collection but to map the discursive architecture through which Al-Shabaab addresses Somali audiences and the international system. Four methodological points are worth noting.

Sources

We worked from several Al-Shabaab outlets. The first is the Somali-language news platforms, which we indexed in full from January 2017 to April 2026. In addition, we indexed Radio Andalus and Radio Al-Furqaan, as well as Mu'asasada Al-Kataa'ib, Shahada, whose magazine Gaidi Mataani and visual production we drew on for formal ideological and doctrinal content, rather than day-to-day reporting. We also drew selectively on pre-2017 material when it is cited or reproduced in post-2016 Al-Shabaab reporting, as well as on reports by the UN Panel of Experts and the Somalia and Eritrea Monitoring Group.

Search strategy

We searched the material using Somali keywords and short phrases grouped around key themes: aid language (such as gargaar, aid/relief/assistance; hay'adaha caalamiga, international organisations/agencies; qaramada midoobay, united nations; abaaraha, droughts); religious and ideological language (such as mujaahidiin, holy warriors/fighters; wilaayaat, the Al-Shabaab administrative term for its provinces; xukunka islaamiga, Islamic governance/Islamic rule; towbad, repentance); historical references (Sayid Maxmed Cabdulle, daraawiish); and named figures (such as Cali Dheere, Mukhtaar Roobow, Ahmed Diiriye, and so on). Relevant results were reviewed in Somali first. Passages selected for analysis were translated by the authors and checked against the original. Where transliteration varies in the source material, we preserve each variant on first mention.

Limitations

The first limitation is technical. We report on whether and where a frame appears, not on absolute frequency counts. The analysis here is preliminary, as we are still building the database and seeking resources to do so. The database can currently return specific queries, but the absolute count is indicative rather than absolute in the current format.

A second limitation is that the archive is currently weighted toward written material. We have not yet systematically coded the full audio or video output of Al-Andalus or Al-Kataa'ib. However, we have transcribed and analysed selected audio and visual material where it bears directly on a specific claim. This project is entirely independently financed by the co-authors, which places practical limits on the scale and speed of data collection and coding.

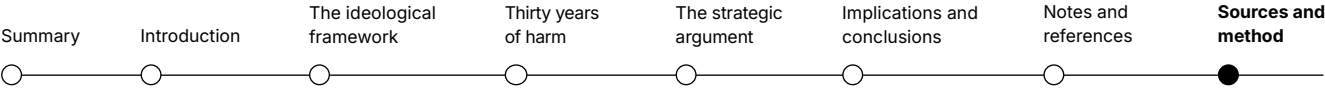
Triangulation

Where an analytical claim depends on more than Al-Shabaab's public record, we triangulate against three additional sources. First, we draw on our own field interviews with current and former Al-Shabaab members, aid workers, and community elders, conducted between 2012 and 2025 across multiple projects and locations. Collectively, this amounts to several thousand interviews over time.

Second, we draw on reports by the UN Panel of Experts on Somalia (2023, 2024) and its predecessor, the UN Somalia and Eritrea Monitoring Group (including S/2017/924, S/2018/1002, S/2020/949, S/2022/754), which document Al-Shabaab's aid-related conduct from an institutionally adversarial perspective.

Three, we draw on third party sources, as cited, that document incidents involving humanitarian personnel or other relevant data.

Al-Shabaab media tells us what the doctrine claims; these additional sources help us understand



how those claims are experienced, interpreted or contested in practice. This paper focuses primarily on media and narrative rather than operational behaviour on the ground, but triangulation provides essential analytical and ethical context.

Readers who wish to discuss specific sourcing decisions, request further information about the primary source archive, or raise methodological questions about this paper are invited to contact the authors directly (info@armedgroupscentre.org).

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