Under-Moderated, Unhinged and Ubiquitous: Al-Shabaab and the Islamic State Networks on Facebook

Why Al-Shabaab and Islamic State Pages and Profiles in East African Languages Continue to Plague Facebook

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Contents

Executive Summary

The ecosystem of support for Harakaat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen (al-Shabaab) and the Islamic State in Africa runs across the open web, encrypted messaging applications, niche platforms, and straight through Facebook, unbothered by moderation in languages that have long proved problematic for the platform (Image 1). While much of the research focus on terrorist attacks in Africa has been on the operational capabilities of al-Shabaab to strike in East Africa[1], and the Islamic State's rise across the African continent,[2] there remains a dearth of research into the al-Shabaab and Islamic State digital propaganda machinery and their Africa-focused narratives.

Researchers at the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) led a two-year investigation[3] into the online media ecosystem of al-Shabaab and the Islamic State, analyzing the role of "independent news" outlets and their intersections with hundreds-strong networks of amplifier profiles on Facebook linked to a number of central pages identifying themselves as "media outlets" or "media personalities" operating in Somali, Kiswahili and Arabic. Researchers found that the network of support for al-Shabaab and Islamic State extended across several platforms, including decentralized messaging applications such as Element and RocketChat, and encrypted messaging platforms such as Telegram, as well as Twitter, YouTube[4] and Facebook.

A qualitative cross-plaform analysis showed the most active, networked, and multilingual ecosystem of support for al-Shabaab and the Islamic State existed on Facebook, where profiles and pages classified as "media outlets" were sharing terrorist content openly, and eschewing private groups and profiles. The content that ISD researchers observed through the networks is often linked to "media" and "media personality" pages in Somali, Kiswahili and Arabic, and not only violates the platform's community guidelines, but also points to language moderation blind spots that have been previously documented by journalists as well as whistleblowers.

These language gaps continue to fluster Facebook moderation[5], despite the company's increased investment in moderation[6]. In October of last year, internal Facebook documents released to the public for the first time indicated the platform lagged behind in its ability to effectively moderate languages in "at-risk" countries such as Iraq, Ethiopia, India and Pakistan[7]. In Afghanistan for instance, Facebook researchers claimed finding accurate translations of Pashto and Dari undercut effective moderation. Arabic, and its regional variations and dialects, was of similar concern to Facebook. ISD research has previously shown just how Arabic conspiracies[8] and terror content[9] flummoxed moderators[10] and moderation efforts. Facebook has attempted to step moderation of Arabic, based on both the revelations and indications from the internal documents released to improve those efforts in a number of languages.

Yet, even with the increased scrutiny on the platform's moderation efforts in languages outside of English[11], what ISD research indicates is that language moderation gaps not only play into the hands of governments conducting human rights abuses[12] or spreading hate speech[13], but are similarly resulting in brazenly open displays of support for terror groups such as al-Shabaab and the Islamic State (Image 3). Emblematic of this issue, researchers found a Somali-language "media outlet" shared four official al-Shabaab videos through its public page during a three-week stretch of October 2021, collectively garnering 53,300 views, and 17,800 shares. These videos carried al-Shabaab's official media outlet branding and were in no shape or form disguised to get past moderators, and yet managed to stay on the platform for months. This report is an attempt to understand gaps in moderation and the tactics to evade moderation dynamic, and the networks of terror supporting profiles and pages that sit at the core of the issue.

Furthermore, ISD investigation revealed a highly-coordinated online propaganda machinery that relies on the surface web as much as it does on a network of Somali, Kiswahili and Arabic language Facebook profiles and pages to spread key narratives such as al-Shabaab and the Islamic State being an anti-imperial and anti-colonial force protecting the interests of Muslims in Somalia, Ethiopia, Uganda, and notably, Kenya. Central to these narratives is a foundational set of tropes that relies on calling out the illegitimacy of the governments currently in power across East Africa, while championing taking

up arms to fight their "democracy" and their "elections". It is also important to note that xenophobia toward Somali communities[14] in Kenya has long been rife,[15] leading to the demonization, securitization, and disenfranchisement of Somali refugees and Somali-Kenyan Muslims.

While some of the research[16] into Kenya and al-Shabaab and Islamic State support online has rightly focussed on Kiswahili and English-speaking networks, understanding the reach and key narratives of Somali, Kiswahili and Arabic language networks, creates a more complete picture of al-Shabaab and Islamic State propaganda and recruitment efforts to date. It is also important to note that xenophobia toward Somali communities[17] in Kenya has long been rife[18], leading to the demonization, securitization, and disenfranchisement of Somali refugees and Somali-Kenyan Muslims.

Well aware of these issues, ISD researchers note while Somali-language profiles and pages were the most visible bases of al-Shabaab support, Kiswahili and Arabic language accounts also played important roles as central promoters of both al-Shabaab and Islamic State narratives and content. Many of the high profile accounts supportive of the Islamic State in East Africa found during this investigation used Kiswahili to promote official narratives from the group. The largest public group of supporters of both al-Shabaab and the Islamic State in East Africa was a Swahili-language group dedicated to a noted extremist preacher from Mombasa, Kenya[19]. The group used a photo of Sheik Aboud Rogo, who helped al-Shabaab fund operations and recruit was killed in 2012, and functioned as a central locus point for sharing al-Shabaab and the Islamic State propaganda.

The findings from the investigation point to key gaps in understanding al-Shabaab and Islamic State networks on Facebook and clear moderation gaps on the platform. These gaps play directly into the hands of al-Shabaab and Islamic State supporters and outlets. The most clear example of this was following the attack on the DusitD2 Complex in Nairobi in January 2019, which resulted in 22 people and 5 attackers being killed. A Kenyan government investigation into its planning revealed it was coordinated on Facebook through an account that was "undetected for six months until after the attack."[20] This investigation has also highlighted the need for

Kenyan authorities, both at the national and local levels, as well as civil society, to revisit their understanding of the narratives used to promote, and potentially radicalize, Kenyans into the ranks of al-Shabaab and the Islamic State. Ultimately, al-Shabaab and Islamic State supporters are capitalizing on ineffective moderation in East African languages to build out stronger and more resilient networks to polarize audiences and pollute the information landscape with extremist disinformation.

The findings presented are meant to provide a more holistic understanding of the al-Shabaab and Islamic State presence on the open web and popular social media platforms such as Facebook. The report highlights the existence of a continually-evolving ecosystem of al-Shabaab and Islamic State supporters promoting multilingual narratives focused on the African continent as well as its governments and civil society. These ecosystems seek to sow distrust in democracy and democratic practices by honing in on government-linked rights abuses, presenting both al-Shabaab and the Islamic State as popular alternatives to the status quo.

As another contentious election season looms in Kenya, and a history of widespread election violence hangs over the upcoming poll. The most active al-Shabaab and Islamic State supportive profiles analyzed for this report were found to be sowing discord ahead of the election by calling for violence and the establishment of an East African caliphate (Image 4).

These dual, and dueling, ecosystems of extremism are alive and well, adapting to an online environment where there seems to be less effective moderation than in other contexts, and ultimately, exploiting the open web and Facebook for its ability to spread old and new content to regional audiences. While extremists are taking advantage of this fractured and polarized landscape, 'gaming' the system to increase the chances of radicalization and recruitment online, they are also unencumbered by the lack of effective moderation in the languages of the region.

Image 1: A still image from one of 30 Facebook pages linked to al-Shabaab and Islamic State news in Somali, Kiswahili, and Arabic. The page carried a still of an al-Shabaab news website, making it clear it was linked to the al-Shabaab news purveyor. The image was used as the cover page photograph for the page.
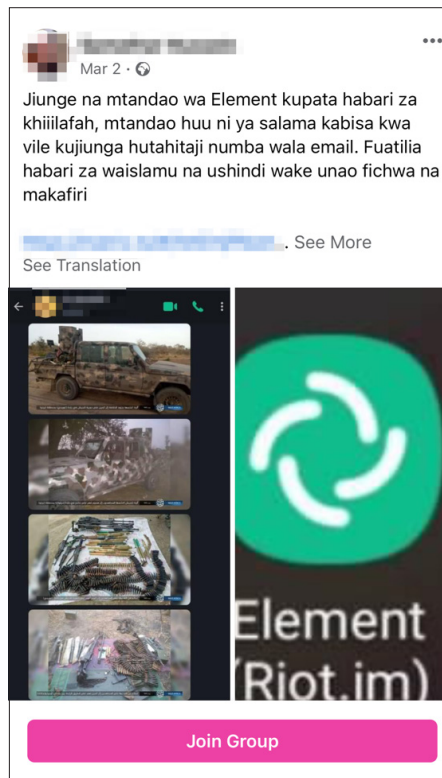

Image 2: A Kiswahili-language Islamic State supporter shares a link to a channel on Element, the decentralized messaging platform in a Facebook group.
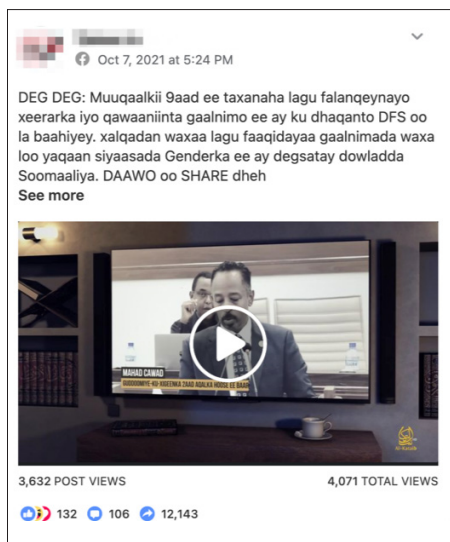

Image 3: A video by the offiial media outlet for al-Shabaab is shared by a TV page that posted four al-Shabaab videos with no alterations during a three-week period in October. The video generated more than 12,000 shares across Facebook.
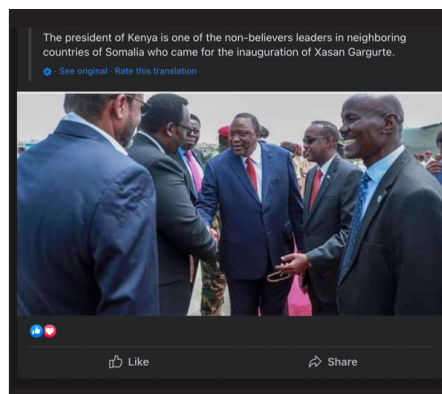

Image 4: A post by a Somali-language supporter of al-Shabaab indicates that the current president of Kenya is a non-believe and who similarly endorsed Somalia's leadership, hence both were seen as illegitimate.

Key Findings

ISD researchers found 30 public Facebook pages promoting official al-Shabaab and Islamic State propaganda, resharing "news" updates and promoting central al-Shabaab and Islamic State narratives. This set of Facebook pages classified themselves as blogs, publishers, media personalities and media outlets. The pages were often affiliated with al-Shabaab news websites, which researchers dubbed *the al-Shabaab News Network,* and their Islamic State competitors, have a collective follower base of 39,488, and have grown by more than 8,600 followers since January 2022 to June 2022.

The Facebook pages found by ISD researchers were either directly linked to the open web disinformation and propaganda ecosystem of al-Shabaab and Islamic State websites and encrypted messaging channels, or direct copies of the same sites and channels rebranded for the platform. These networks were further supported by a series of al-Qaeda and Islamic State websites that serve as content drives, and contain reams of current and legacy al-Qaeda and Islamic State content.

The Facebook pages that shared al-Shabaab and the Islamic State media in Somali, Kiswahili and Arabic posted 850 videos over the two-year period of the ISD investigation, generating some 450,000 views on content (Image 5). Using CrowdTangle, researchers found that the most popular video during this two-year period was a al-Shabaab video shared by a "TV" page, and claimed that western governments were seeking to undermine Islam in Somalia by promoting "gender politics." The video was posted in October 2021, garning 41,200 views, and was shared 185 times. The second most popular video was an Islamic State video from Iraq shared by a Somali-language Islamic State page claiming to be a "media company." The video was posted in late March 2021, generating 13,226 views. It was shared 232 times.

Official, branded al-Shabaab content and the groups' various media outlets were readily available on Facebook, seemingly getting past moderators, and exploiting language and expertise gaps. Content clearly featuring the branding of al-Kataib Media Foundation — al-Shabaab's official media arm— has been on the platform for upwards of 6 years . Researchers consistently found Somali-, Swahili-, and Amharic- language content, clearly branded with al-Kataib logos on Facebook (Image 6). The oldest pair of videos found were official al-Kataib videos celebrating the killing of Kenyan soldiers that date back to 2016.

Researchers found the same al-Shabaab assassination video shared by 5 different users on the Facebook, all with the official al-Shabaab media outlet branding, moderated with only the use of a sensitive video warning (Image 7). This suggests that moderators do not recognise or are unsure of the terrorist branding linked to al-Shabaab[21]. Islamic State networks went to greater efforts to hide the branding of their content, suggesting that the supporters are well aware of the platform's moderation practices and what it means for the sharing of Islamic State content. Researchers found Islamic State content re-branded with Netflix and Amazon Prime logos.

Researchers tracked 445[22] Kiswahili, Somali and Arabic language profiles supportive of al-Shabaab and the Islamic State linked to the public pages found, all of which were sharing unofficial, official and unique media content supportive of the groups on Facebook. Researchers found 33 "super users," all with duplicate accounts were often sharing the most content, which were further fanned out by accounts dedicated to resharing the content. A Somali-language al-Shabaab supporter that ISD tracked had 11 duplicate accounts, all of which used the same profile name. The use of duplicate accounts goes against Facebook community guidelines, and is a hallmark of what is dubbed "inauthentic coordinated behavior."

Researchers analyzed 600 posts linked to Swahili-language accounts within the dataset of al-Shabaab and Islamic State Facebook supporters, and found that most of the Kiswahili posts were dedicated to calls for violence (168). Calls for violence were followed by *takfir* (excommunication), (106), and then support for the Islamic State (101) in some shape or form. These 600 posts were shared by just 33 of 126 Kiswahili language supporters of al-Shabaab and the Islamic State.

Of the Kiswahili posts analyzed, an overwhelming number called for violence at a time when Kenya is gearing up for general elections, which have been previously marred by widespread violence. 50% of these posts (84) promoted a form of violent jihad, which researchers specifically disaggregated from posts that referenced the "Greater Jihad," which is the battle within oneself. Another 47% (79) of the posts called for Muslims to fight for Islam and take up arms, and 3% (5) promoted joining al-Shabaab or the Islamic State.

Of the Kiswahili posts analyzed, 8.5% (51) mentioned Kenya, and were primarily focused on praising the Islamic State, Kenyan democracy being anti-Islamic, and the need for an Islamic caliphate as an alternative to its current government. The posts claimed that Kenyan democracy was anti-Islamic and the source of numerous injustices faced by Muslim populations in the country and beyond. These narratives ended with calls to boycott the election, and the *takfir*, or excommunicating, of Muslims who have plans to participate. The injustices referenced by this set of accounts included events such as the "Yala River Massacre[23]," which these accounts attributed to the Kenyan police targeting Muslims.

Accounts that were restricted or banned by the platform, often reappeared, under the same name or a variation of it, with the same avatar, illustrating the challenge in keeping these accounts off of the platform. Continually monitoring of the same account names, essentially repeat offenders, over a period of time can ensure that the platform is able to keep the most egregious abusers of the platforms' community guidelines off the platform.

Image 5: The most popular video shared by a Somali language Islamic State news page was a translated video from Iraq. The video generated more than 13,000 views and was shared 232 times.

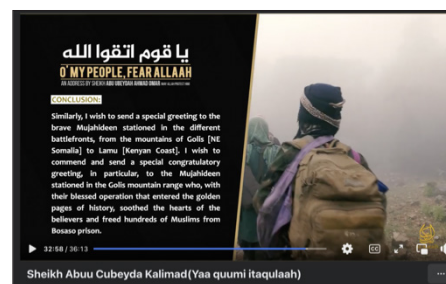Image 6: A video shared on Facebook carrying the branding of al-Kataib Media Foundation. The outlet is the official mouth piece for the terrorist group.
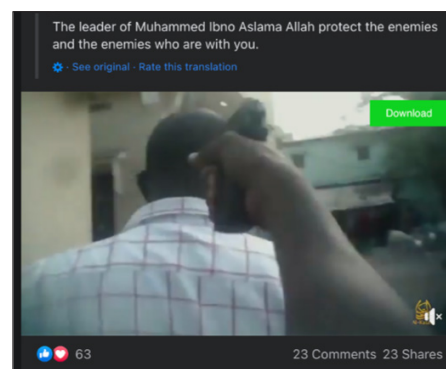

Image 7: An official al-Shabaab video of assassinations in Somalia was shared by a Somali-speaking al-Shabaab supporter. Researchers found the same video shared by 5 different users. The video was sometimes accompanied by a sensitivity warning but was not taken down by moderators.

Recommendations

The networks of Somali, Kiswahili and Arabic pages and profiles on Facebook supportive of al-Shabaab and the Islamic State are a case study into the moderation blind spots of the platform in languages outside of English and illustrate just how terrorist supporters are expoiting these gaps (Image 8). This issue of language parity in moderation efforts is not new, and in fact, has been a topic of discussion for 5 years[24], and has seen the challenges become more acute in periods of conflict and civil strife in locales all over the world[25]. Even with the use of the algorthrims to root out terror content in other languages, Facebook and others have also mistakenly classified non-terrorist content, which points to another issue when it relates to lingusitic moderation issues. It is not Facebook only that faces this challange, but all of the platforms that are currently grappling with hate, polarization and terrorism. Facebook happens to be among the largest with high reach in certain geographic contexts, such as Kenya, Somalia and neighboring East African countries.

The networks identified through the ISD research on Facebook, which often linked to the open web and encrypted messaging application presence of al-Shabaab and Islamic State support online, were more active publicly on the platform than on others, such as Twitter and YouTube, where researchers also traced them. They utilized the platform to **amplify, coordinate, target, and attempt to deceive audiences** in East Africa through languages that have been previously noted to have serious moderation gaps[26]. With the challenges Facebook has had with its moderation in the region, the effect is being felt online as well. This report, and the research behind it, supports the notion that languages other than English face a substantial issue with moderation.

Facebook does provide community standards in more than 60 languages, including in Arabic and Swahili, however, they do not exist in Somali. That would be a welcome first step based on the research in this report. However, there should also be more equitable support for moderation in languages outside of English, where these gaps resurface again and again[27]. There is no doubt that moderating the world's largest social media

is a challenge, but Thus, a series of recommendations can be made to strengthen the ability of Facebook, civil society and government in combating the proliferation of terrorist content in East Africa.

Moderation gaps in identifying terrorist content affiliated with al-Shabaab's primary media outlet brand is staying on the platform untouched, sometimes for years (Image 9). Enhancing the ability of the artificial intelligence used to find[28] this content would undoubtedly result in more of this content being taken down. However, this issue will not be solved by technology alone, and improving the training of moderators, or entities being outsourced to moderate Facebook, will also result in the ability of this content to be flagged and ultimately stripped from the platform.

Moderators, and the tools they use to identify terrorist websites, should be better supported. According to internal documents viewed by media organizations, moderators should be given increased time to view content, and provided a continually updated website list of platforms linked to seeding al-Shabaab and Islamic State content across the open web. Over the past year, there has been increased scrutiny on the dismal working conditions of Facebook moderators in Kenya, where some 200 moderators working for the platform via a contractor called Sama[29] were tasked with rooting out the most egregious regional content on the platform[30]. A Time Magazine report noted that internal Facebook moderation documents instructed "content moderators to watch only the first 15 seconds of a video before marking it as OK to remain on the platform." Much of the official content found by researchers could have been flagged within a 15-second time frame since official al-Shabaab videos start with the same message and logo. Terrorism experts can assist in supporting the moderators in ensuring this content is found and stripped off the platform.

Public profiles are key to sharing al-Shabaab and Islamic State content on Facebook. While ISD tracked 30 pages operating on the platform, researchers found hundreds of accounts sharing and producing content in support of both groups. ISD found the

Recommendations

users through content shares from the primary Facebook pages, and moderators can replicate this process to take down prominent terrorist support "super users." One Kiswahili user shared 45 pieces of Islamic State content over the course of a year, generating more than 19,000 views on the content in the process. Another Somali language user shared 50 videos in support of al-Qaeda and al-Shabaab, generating 24,000 views over the course of a year.

As elections draw nearer in Kenya, it is clear that al-Shabaab and Islamic State Swahili-language accounts seek to delegitimize the electoral process and undermine democracy in Kenya and the East Africa region as a whole. Understanding that these supporters ultimately want to delegitmize elections and disenfranchise minorities from taking part requires a strategy that seeks to unite rather than divide at the upcoming polls.

An observatory for online harms should be developed and supported by international and national donors in order to track and understand the depth of extremist and hateful narratives across a range of platforms in East Africa. This observatory can then help shape policy and practice as it relates to the proliferation of harmful content online, assisting technology companies, civil society and government. It can also play a critical role ahead of polls in a range of East African contexts. Understanding the overall ecosystem, rather than just the regional, group, and platform-specific dynamics, and how platforms can be manipulated is needed more than ever. Supporting not just language expertise, but language and subject expertise should also be a priority for the platform.

Image 8: A video of Islamic State fighters in the midst of praying is shared by a dual-language Islamic State account in March 2021 (Somali and Arabic.) The video garnered 11,500 views, and 253 shares.

Image 9: An official video from al-Kataib Media Foundation, the official media outlet for al-Shabaab, shared through a Somali-language page linked to an al-Shabaab news site on the open web, had been on the platform for six years. The video generated some 6,200 views in that timeframe.

Introduction: al-Shabaab and Islamic State in the Open

The open web has become a frontline for a range of terrorist groups. Controlling digital territory is clearly just as integral to the survival of the ethos and ideologies of groups as physical territory. The open web presence of the Islamic State , al-Qaeda, and their regional affiliates, are deliberate strategies to avoid regulation, and provide supporters with steady streams of propaganda.

Al-Shabaab is no different. For years, starting in 2009, al-Shabaab-linked websites began proliferating across the expense of the surface web. Researchers[31], international organizations[32], and journals[33] monitoring the conflict in Somalia, and its impact across East Africa, identified these sites in a number of briefing papers on radicalization and recruitment into al-Shabaab's ranks, as well as the group's "information warfare strategy." The sites identified by a range of experts and international non-governmental organizations included the following (the names of the sites have been obscured in order not to funnel traffic into them):

- *SM*
- *ASN*
- *BC*
- *SA*
- *RF*

A significant portion of these websites were created as "news outlets," further supported by al-Qaeda websites that function as repositories of propaganda and are the backbone of the group's propaganda machine online. One of these repositories, linked to the al-Shabaab outlet al-Kataib, received all of its traffic from Kenyan IP addresses —roughly 2,000 visitors—from March through May 2020, before it was taken offline. The symbiotic relationship between the online al-Shabaab news outlets, and al-Qaeda websites, could be tracked through links shared by these platforms and embedded in "news articles."

ISD researchers tracked the five primary news outlets linked to al-Shabaab over the course of two years (2020-2022), identifying central narratives. These narratives can be broadly classified into three categories that support local grievances:

- Corruption and its correlation to the democracies functioning as "client states" in the region, selling out its citizens and coming into direct conflict with sharia law.

- Security (police and military) overreach, an extension of "the imperial visions" of nations like the United States of America, United Kingdom, and European countries.

- Subjugation of Muslims, whether through the politics or security forces of regional countries that are allied with the United States or other western countries.

Spreading these narratives are websites such as RF, which serves as the group's online audio platform. Al-Shabaab's most sophisticated and well-known website, is ASN, which has a multi-platform presence that extends to encrypted messaging applications like Telegram, and whose creators understand the workarounds required to cement it across social media platforms. Two other websites, BC and SM are both blog-style news platforms, which not only "report" on political updates within the country and its neighbors, but similarly host sections dedicated to al-Shabaab propaganda.

For example, the most viewed article on the SM website is the al-Kataib Media Foundation —— al-Shabaab's official media production outlet—— film release of the 2013 Westgate Mall attacks in Kenya, which resulted in 68 people being killed. The "article" has been visited some 208,496 times, has been upvoted 212 times, and links to the full video on Archive.org.

On BC, many of the same dynamics exist as SM, for instance a dedicated section to "audio and video" features a front page of 30 al-Shabaab- and al-Qaeda-linked videos and audio. Illustrating the interplay between these websites and the central al-Qaeda repository sites that serve as a content distribution backbone, are 132 links directly into sites like GN —— the Global Islamic Media Front's (GIMF) content drive —— an al-Shabaab content archive —— embedded in the 30-front page "articles" in the "audio and video" section of BC .

While there has been no holistic study of this al-Shabaab News Network online, researchers and international organizations alike utilize these websites to monitor and track the terrorist group and its propaganda. Recognizing the dearth of analysis on this network, ISD began a investigation into the open-web presence of al-Shabaab and its linkages to pages and profiles that spread Somali-, Arabic-, and Swahili- terrorist propaganda across social media platforms, including Facebook.

In this information battle of attrition, al-Shabaab is primarily focused on competing with news outlets across East Africa to spread disinformation with a journalistic veneer, while still linking to the large, complex machinery of its propaganda arms, namely encrypted communication platforms, content caches, and "local influencers." This is a strategy that is somewhat unique to al-Shabaab, but ultimately one that mimics al-Qaeda's larger strategy of rebranding itself as a broad-based resistance force following the Arab Spring[34]. It is a mission driven by providing "local news" to local audiences, and ultimately aims at converting this effort into localized support.

The ability of these sites to survive means that al-Shabaab propaganda is more readily available and poses a significant threat and challenge.[35] It is not just that the al-Shabaab News Network is brazenly online, it is that its multilingual appendages extend across multiple platforms while speaking to a range of audiences, and ultimately promoting al-Shabaab tropes to more people across East Africa and beyond.

While al-Shabaab has been growing and nurturing this propaganda machinery for years, the Islamic State similarly relies on a set of news pages linking to a dedicated set of stand-alone websites that are continually reinvented in the face of takedowns. Unlike al-Shabaab, the Islamic State network has been frequently subject to takedowns and bans, and hence has developed a system of reliance on public profiles on Facebook and other platforms to spread content, which often links back to dedicated Telegram channels for content. This strategy has been in play for several years, based on research conducted by ISD.

The Islamic State accounts that ISD tracked through this investigation linked to 6 public Facebook pages, half of which are dedicated to translating Islamic State Arabic language content for Kiswahili and Somali speaking audiences. This network, which calls itself AH media, produces hour-long audio updates, sharing news, fatwas, in English religious edicts, that are linked to the Islamic State. Much of the content linked to AH media is unmoderated, and often left on the platform to be continually shared by a dedicated set of supporters.

The al-Shabaab News Network Across Facebook

The al-Shabaab News Network extends across the web, well beyond centralized websites. The readiest example of this strategy is the al-Shahada News Agency, which not only commands a well-designed central website for "exclusive news" but also a dual presence on Facebook and Twitter. *ASN* is known amongst counterterrorism intelligence services for being an al-Shabaab linked outlet, and has been called "al-Shabaab's news channel." The website's articles are in Arabic, with no bylines. It presents itself as providing "dedicated coverage of Somalia and East Africa," complete with "exclusives" of interviews with prominent al-Shabaab leaders, or the latest attacks, but it also spreads a certain political worldview through its coverage of regional issues like the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, or the Nile River dam tensions.

ASN's primary website features "latest news" consisting of regional news stories, which further down on the site turns into al-Shabaab exclusives. However, this website also extends its reach by cloaking its content on a range of social media platforms. Under the guise of "East Africa News," *ASN* is building its brand as an Arabic-language news outlet on Twitter and Facebook. ISD researchers tracked its articles to a Facebook page with more than 6,900 followers, which was taken down and then reconstituted repeatedly, and a Twitter account with more than 3,300 followers. The dynamics of how al-Shabaab has branded this outlet on both Twitter and Facebook highlight its determination to mainstream its content beyond its base on the website, as well as its efforts to influence Arabic-speaking audiences. Both *ASN*'s Facebook page and Twitter account used the same cover photograph logo, and similar usernames. While the Twitter account was formed in January 2020 and has been functional since, the Facebook page was disrupted in September 2021, and then reappeared as several individual profiles sharing *ASN* articles as public posts, and then finally, a public page once more.

The strategy used for *ASN* on both platforms is to link its articles to "straight news" offerings complete with photographs and article links, and its al-Shabaab-related news with no photographs or links to articles. Both the Twitter account and Facebook page used the same

tagline to describe themselves in their respective About and Bio sections. The Twitter account linked directly to the *ASN* website, while the Facebook page did not. The Facebook page used the same tagline as the *ASN* in its avatar photograph, which reads in Arabic "dedicated news coverage of Somalia and the countries of East Africa."

ASN, was, and is, the most blatantly clear example of the multi-platform machinery, and exploitation, of online moderation by al-Shabaab "news" purveyors both on the open web and popular social media platforms. When the Facebook page was taken down by the platform, the group repurposed individual accounts and dubbed them "East Africa Affairs" to continue seeding al-Shabaab news and content on the platform. Content included al-Shabaab branded press releases on the group's official letterhead. At one point, during ISD's investigation, the page shared COVID-19 misinformation about the Astra-Zeneca vaccine on al-Shabaab letterhead, and the material was not flagged by moderators as misinformation or terrorist content.

Unlike *ASN*, another al-Shabaab news site, SM, does not obfuscate its branding on Facebook. The standalone website linked to its Facebook, Twitter and YouTube[36] accounts from its home page. The website does have the distinction, however, of being named by the United Nations Assistance Mission in Somalia (UNSOM) as key to spreading al-Shabaab messaging locally. SM identifies itself as a news and media website on Facebook, an "independent Somali news website" on Twitter, and runs a now defunct "TV channel" on YouTube. Its content was presented as "news," but references al-Shabaab militants as "warriors" and links directly to, or embeds, official al-Shabaab propaganda in articles. SM has had the longest presence on Twitter, beginning in 2013, followed by YouTube in 2019, and then October 2020 on Facebook, where it has numerous pages in its name.

SM's Facebook presence is its largest, with some 5,452 followers. It often posts its headlines with links back to the website on the platform. Al-Shabaab's leader Ahmed Umar, also known as Abu Ubaidah, made a meandering 36-minute-long speech about the Somali federal

elections[37], in which he threatened local delegates planning to take part in a July 25 poll. SM carried it in full, linking to it on Facebook, Twitter and the website. Rather than natively upload the content to the social media platform, SM always links official al-Shabaab content back to the website to avoid takedowns.

SM had previously launched a Facebook page named after the site in 2015. The page garnered 2,226 followers, and uploaded only two videos, both of which were officially al-Shabaab media outlet videos, and had been on the platform for the past six years. These videos included scenes of dead Kenyan soldiers from an official al-Kataib Media Foundation release, under a post that read "a happy scene from al-Shabaab's media arm, al-Kataib, presenting a video showing the defeat of the Kenya army in Ceel Cade District." The video, along with another official al-Shabaab video of recruits from East Africa training, titled "SM's Video," had some 10,400 views since. It then launched another public Facebook page in 2019 titled SM Media, which claimed to provide "unique up-to-date and balanced perspective of the political situation in Somalia & The East Africa in general."

Unlike SM, BC, another al-Shabaab-linked news purveyor, relies on its articles being shared through third-party branded social media affiliates. Through an intermediary page, BC's video of al-Shabaab's leader — which used the audio of the speech overlaid on a still photograph of a Somalia map — was uploaded natively to Facebook. The video garnered 88,000 views, 703 shares, and 706 comments, in 6 days, before it was targeted for take down almost six months after being uploaded (Image 10).

Image 10: The full audio speech of an al-Shabaab leader deriding delegates in Somalia's election is shared by a "media outlet" over a map of Somalia. The speech was shared by official al-Shabaab outlets, and then repurposed by Facebook pages that further amplified the content. The speech garnered 88,000 views before it was taken down by the platform.

Jostling for Audiences: Islamic State of Somalia and Beyond

While not as vast, there is a burgeoning network of Islamic State pages and accounts, mimicking the tactics of al-Shabaab accounts and pages across Facebook. ISD researchers found 6 Somali and Kiswahili pages dedicated to the Islamic State, which were functioning like the al-Shabaab News Network pages and accounts. These competitor agencies and entities borrowed tactics from the al-Shabaab News Network pages.

This set of outlets included pages dedicated to *AH* media, a Somali and Kiswahili language media production initiative, which includes an East African version of the Islamic State's al-Bayan radio[38]. The Islamic State previously ran a territorial FM radio station[39] broadcasting primarily from Mosul, until it was bombed off of the airwaves in 2016. Since then, Islamic State supporters online have been creating and building repositories of Islamic State radio content. The primary page for *AH* uploaded 28 videos as of March 2021 and had garnered some 8,400 views. The videos were often innocuous stills of the *AH* brand and did not have any signifiers or symbols associated with the Islamic State. Of the 28 videos, only 2 had specific Islamic State branding, both were audio releases by the spokesman for the Islamic State Abu Hamza al-Qurashi.

Supporters also launched a Swahili-language version of the *AH* radio. Unlike the Somali-language version of the page, the Kiswahili version was linked to a Kiswahili Islamic State channel on the decentralized messaging application Element. The channel, with only 73 members, linked to channels of Kiswahili support on Telegram. Both *AH* pages were supported by a business page for a media organization on Facebook, *and* another *AH* radio page, formed in late March 2021, and intended to provide not just radio content, but similarly fatwa, or edict, based content to supporters.

AH was also linked to a branded third-party media page, called *GMC*. *GMC* functioned as both a Telegram channel sharing official Islamic State content in Somali, as well as a Facebook page sharing the audio releases of Sheik Abdul Qadir Mumin[40], the British-Somali leader of the Islamic State in Somalia. Mumin once took part in a report release event in 2010 for the Muslim advocacy group CAGE[41], before he joined al-Shabaab, and then defected to the Islamic State. While *AH* was in itself a self-contained media ecosystem, sharing content in Kiswahili and Somali, and focused on the ideologues of the Islamic State, other efforts by supporters to create Islamic State media outlets on Facebook have been in play since January 2021.

In an effort to mimic the tactics of al-Shabaab news purveyors on Facebook, Islamic State supporters similarly set up media outlet pages such as *BNS* — which carried the unofficial Islamic State motto of *baqiah*, which in English translates to remaining. The page, set up in March 2020, was used to share "Islamic news," sharing content from Telegram channels affiliated with the Islamic State. *BNS* was the precursor to another Somali Islamic State News page launched in late June 2020. The page, a purveyor of Islamic State news, acts as an amplifier for Islamic State Somali language content. The page shared 130 official Islamic State photographs culled from Telegram channels spreading official content of conquests across Africa, including the ransacking of Cabo Delgado in Mozambique in March 2021.

The largest of these Facebook pages was M, a page launched in late January 2021, which had a follower base of 1,779. The page shared some 40 videos, 15 of which were slightly augmented official Islamic State videos from outlets such as *al-Amaq* and others. The 15 videos had a collective view count of 35, 300 views. Unlike the al-Shabaab pages, the Somali-language Islamic State pages had to augment their content, obfuscate branding and ultimately, alter the media to ensure its survival on Facebook. This included blocking out or pixelating logos in videos.

While the al-Shabaab News Network on Facebook was supported by an open web ecosystem of "news" sites, the Islamic State pages and outlets on the platform were supported by a network of encrypted messaging channels on Telegram and Element. The cross-group learning, however, was evident during the investigation. The methods and tactics used by the al-Shabaab News Network of media outlets on Facebook are being replicated by Islamic State supporters on the platform.

Support Networks: Localizing Extremist Content

ISD researchers identified 445 Somali, Kiswahili and Arabic profiles that shared content from two or more of the pages identified as part of the al-Shabaab News Network and competing Islamic State pages on Facebook. Using this sample, researchers noted the accounts' self-identified locations. The largest follower-base of these accounts providing location identities were in East Africa, namely Somalia, Kenya, Ethiopia, Uganda, and Tanzania.

The profiles produced over 5,509 posts over a span of two years[42]. Using a set of 10 Kiswahili keywords, which were also replicated in Somali and Arabic, researchers honed in on 600 posts that focused on the Islamic State, al-Shabaab and East African ideologues and countries mentioned in propaganda by both groups. These posts were classified into prominent narratives shared by the profiles, which were as follows: *calls for violence, Islamic State or al-Shabaab updates, failed Islamic scholars/ leaders, injustices faced by Muslims, building a caliphate, praise for the Islamic State or al-Shabaab, enemies of Islam (comprising the United States of America, Jews, Kenya, Tanzania and democracy) un-Islamic democracy, takfir, and Jews against Islam.*

The largest set of narratives was split amongst calls for violence (168), *takfir* (excommunication), (106), and Islamic State or al-Shabaab updates (101). Calls for violence were primarily geared toward Muslims in the East African region, primarily in Kenya, Tanzania and Somalia, to rise up against corrupt leaders subjugating Muslims or participating in "un-Islamic democracy." This incitement could be further broken down to promoting violent jihad, posts inciting individuals to fight for Islam, and posts asking individuals to join a terrorist group. Posts promoting violent jihad were those that praised people who have undertaken jihad and discussed the importance of killing in order to build a caliphate and protect Muslims. Posts classified as fighting for Islam were posts directly asking followers to take up arms against governments, people of other faiths, and/or opposing jihadist groups. Posts asking others to join a terrorist group directly asked individuals to terrorist groups, such as al-Shabaab or the Islamic State.

These calls for violence come at a time when the region is experiencing both an uptick in al-Shabaab related violence, and the threat of electoral violence in Kenya where polls will be held in August. The posts calling for violence often used the injustices Muslims faced in Kenya as a rationale for taking up arms and ultimately fighting back against the "unIslamic democracy" set-up to further subjugate Muslims.
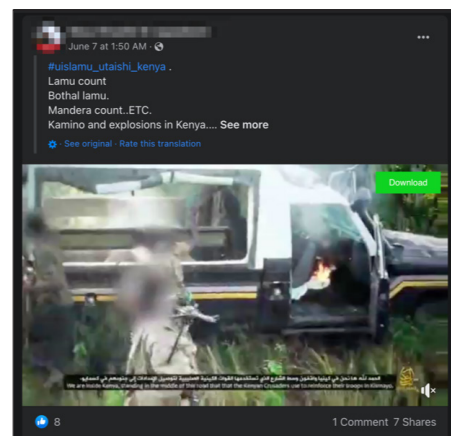

Image 11: A Kiswahili supporter of al-Shabaab shares an official video from al-Shabaab that included the capture and killing of Kenyan security forces.

Many of the accounts promoting these narratives (Image 11) had followers in the thousands, which require further investigation into whether they similarly share al-Shabaab and Islamic State propaganda and calls for violence. Researchers believe, much like other extremist networks[43] that ISD have surfaced on Facebook, these accounts are part of multilingual pockets of support connected to other supporters propagating terrorist content and narratives in other languages. Researchers found instances of duplicate accounts sharing al-Shabaab and Islamic State content and linking to one another. These accounts were dubbed "super fans," and often had four or more accounts to fall back on when they were either restricted or banned from the platform. In the event of bans, these accounts would shift to another account, using the same exact profile name, and oftentimes the same profile. ISD considered these accounts to not just function as "super fans" but also micro-networks.

The most notable of these coordinated al-Shabaab support micro-networks was the *WCC Channel* group. Branded as a news outlet, this micro-network was

spread across individual profiles and public pages. The network owned two public pages, one dubbed *WCC* and the other *CC*, both of which shared al-Shabaab, Taliban, and broader al-Qaeda content. As for its public profiles, the network owned five, each with similar avatars, those included *WCC (2), MM, WCC Channel*, and *CC Channel*. It used similar branding for each of the individual accounts, with two variations in the brand.

These micro-networks share similarities to others linked to the Islamic State that ISD researchers previously surfaced on Facebook in 2020, in that they continue to respawn accounts regardless of takedowns and are branded so that they are easily identifiable by supporters. The ability of these micro-networks to proliferate is likely due to gaps in moderation, but similarly a lack of understanding of the shift in tactics by extremist group propagandists on the platform. Researchers found, and flagged users that were sharing posts that included hijacked Facebook accounts for auction.
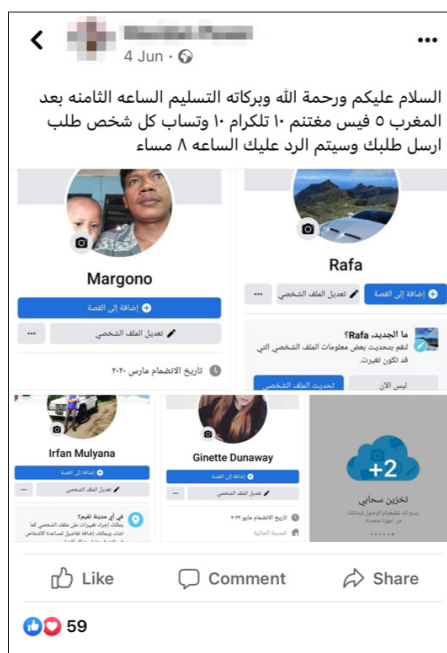

Image 12: An Arabic-language account linked to supporters of al-Shabaab shares a post auctioning off five hijacked Facebook accounts. The post indicated that users could claim accounts and would get an answer by 8 pm. The account was also auctioning off Telegram and WhatsApp accounts, which were similarly hijacked.

Prominent Kiswahili language Islamic State profiles were similarly using multiple accounts to seed content connected to the group. A single Kiswahili language Islamic State "super fan" set up four accounts in order to spread Islamic State propaganda (Image 12). The

accounts named after a woman, shared 45 Islamic State videos over a period of a year, which collectively garnered 19,664 views, and were left unmoderated and up on the platform even after the account was restricted for its posting habits. Researchers found multiple instances of this behavior. The account shared videos featuring child soldiers of the Islamic State.

As noted, researchers found similar dynamics among al-Shabaab influencers posting in Somali. One profile, Ibrahim S was in control of 11 accounts simultaneously, using them to flit between and post content affiliated with the terrorist group. Ibrahim S shared 50 videos supportive of al-Shabaab or put out by the group, and/or al-Qaeda, between the six accounts, garnering 25,238 views. One account affiliated with Ibrahim S did not post any video content, and instead used the profile to post photographs supportive of al-Shabaab. One of the videos posted by the account was an officially branded assassination video released by the group. While the platform placed a violent imagery warning over the video, the video was not removed.

The accounts sharing the al-Shabaab News Network content and claiming Kenya as their locations spread the terrorist content from these pages to a more diverse set of followers. One account shared an al-Kataib produced Kenyan army ambush video with a Facebook group of 112,000 followers linked to The Mandera Tribune, a media outlet based in a Kenya border county in Somalia. These accounts were primarily engaged in spreading content in Kiswahili and were often engaging in tit for tat attacks on the platform against Islamic State supporters also spreading and seeding content in Swahili.

Narratives espoused by al-Shabaab-linked profiles across Facebook concentrated on denigrating the actions and statements of the Africa Union Mission to Somalia (AMISOM), United States Africa Command (AFRICOM), and the military and security forces of Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, and Somalia.

The narratives also sought to position al-Shabaab and the Islamic State as the rightful protectors of the Muslim Ummah in the Horn of Africa, simultaneously takfiring

(excommunicating) Muslim leaders, community influencers, and "infidel Muslims" in Kenya and East Africa. There was also direct conflict with the Islamic State of Somalia set of accounts and pages, with a brewing battle of words in the comment sections of each group's content shared by individual users.

Many of these attacks between extremists centered around the authenticity of the group being promoted. While Islamic State supporters attacked central al-Qaeda ideologues, such as Aymenn al-Zawahiri, they reserved the most vitriol for the leaders of the Taliban, who were seen as *murtad* (apostates) for engaging in politics and negotiations with the United States and China. Primary attacks against Islamic State supporters centered around their status of *Khawarij*, a sect considered deviant, even to those affiliated with al-Qaeda.

Conclusion: The Ecosystems of Extremism in East Africa

The al-Shabaab News Network and its Islamic State competitor network function as an expansive, interlocking ecosystem of websites, social media pages, and accounts. Much of the "news" peddled through the networks, whether officially branded, or self-branded by supporters of al-Shabaab or the Islamic State, is finding its way past moderators and eschewing platform policies on Facebook. ISD researchers believe that moderation efforts in East African languages such as Somali and Kiswahili are lackluster. It is similarly clear that there has been an overt focus on Islamic State branded content, and perhaps less focus on al-Shabaab branded content.

Image 13: A Kiswahili supportr of the Islamic State shares a still of a child featured in an Islamic State video.

To blunt the effects of al-Shabaab and Islamic State supporters in East Africa, technology companies, national governments and community groups are going to have to work on disrupting the distribution mechanisms of the al-Shabaab News Network and the corresponding Islamic State network, by attempting to limit the effects of the narratives spread by these pages and profiles.

The centralized and decentralized narratives being spread by the al-Shabaab News Network and the Islamic State highlight a clear need to update understanding around the drivers of radicalization that shift with fluid political and social environments in East Africa. For instance, the use of Covid-19 narratives by al-Shabaab news pages were used to highlight corruption, inaction, and poor governance. The Muslim *Ummah*, and its subjugation at the hands of "imperial forces," is similarly

a staple narrative by al-Shabaab and Islamic State news pages and profiles.

These narratives will continue to remain in flux as time goes on. As the ground shifts politically and militarily in Somalia, and the larger East Africa region, so do the narratives. While centralized narratives fall into three broad categories, which were outlined as *corruption, security,* and *the subjugation of Muslims,* they are further supported by sub-narratives that number in the dozens. These sub-narratives create a much more complex narrative theater. Counter narratives need to have this nuanced understanding of shifting sub-narratives, often spurred on by events on the ground, to be effective.

Without the ability to disrupt both the mechanics of the al-Shabaab News Network and the corresponding Islamic State network, and delegitimize the narratives to stop their spread, these networks will continue to grow, attracting new audiences and spreading extremist content and tropes. The risks the al-Shabaab and Islamic State networks present in the already fractious political environment of East Africa are many. Pulling the plug on the networks, however, will require a more concerted effort on the part of Facebook, and one that bears in mind the dynamics between the open web and social media platforms.

Footnotes

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