NEW MEDIA, PERFORMATIVE VIOLENCE, AND STATE RECONSTRUCTION IN MOGADISHU

PETER CHONKA[*]

Abstract

Since 2012, Mogadishu has been the site of both unprecedented optimism around the reconstruction of the Somali state, as well as persistent violence perpetrated by the Islamist militants of Harakat Al Shabaab Al Mujahidiin (Al Shabaab). In attacking hotels and restaurants, as well as other sites broadly associated with the state, Al Shabaab has prosecuted a strategy intended to foment the un-governability of the city, undermine the nascent Federal Government of Somalia's claims to authority, and denounce the alleged "foreign" capture of the re-emerging state. Based on discursive analyses of local political commentary, and fieldwork in Mogadishu, this article examines media contestation between the re-emerging state and the armed opposition in a context of prolonged political fragmentation. The article argues that not only does the highly decentralized and transnational modern media environment facilitate a dynamic and dialogic exchange of propaganda between the state and the insurgents but, furthermore, the technological context of this discursive contestation has important implications for the ways in which counter-terrorism and state reconstruction are undertaken by political and military actors on the ground.

ON 1 NOVEMBER 2015, HARAKAT AL SHABAAB AL MUJAAHIDIIN (Al Shabaab) detonated a car bomb at the fortified gate of the Saxafi ('Journalist') Hotel in downtown Mogadishu, opposite the Somali Police Force's Criminal Investigation Directorate. In the following hours, gunmen moved through the hotel killing their stated targets: politicians, members of state security forces, and other civilian bystanders. As this was happening, an Al Shabaab representative made direct contact with a foreign journalist to confirm the group's responsibility for the attack.[1] At the same time, pro-militant radio broadcast a live phone interview with the fighters who were themselves eventually overwhelmed by US-trained

---

[1] BBC correspondent Mary Harper, Tweet, 1 November 2015, <https://twitter.com/mary_harper/status/660728136712257536 > (accessed 1 November 2015).

National Intelligence and Security Agency (NISA) special forces.[2] Between 2014 and 2017, seven other large hotels in Mogadishu were directly attacked in a similar manner, some on more than one occasion, resulting in an estimated 150 fatalities.[3] Three months after the Saxafi Hotel attack, Al Shabaab militants stormed the Beach View cafe on Mogadishu's Liido beach killing 17 people, mostly civilians. The victims had been relaxing next to the white sands and turquoise waters of a beach that has become a potent symbol of the city's apparent rebirth, a testament to improved security, and the return of diaspora visitors and investors contributing to an apparent renaissance of the Somali capital.[4] Somali social media responded to the violence with the *#tweetliidopictures* Twitter hashtag, calling on users to post positive images of the beach being enjoyed by Mogadishu residents and visitors alike.[5]

These attacks – along with numerous others which have punctuated political and economic change in Mogadishu since 2012 – direct this article's focus towards the targeting of spectacular forms of political violence in the context of Somali state reconstruction and "new" media development. Following Zeynep Tukefci and Christopher Wilson, new media is understood here as a 'connectivity infrastructure [that] should be analyzed as a complex ecology rather than in terms of any specific platform or device'.[6] Post Arab Spring scholarship has highlighted the influence of transnational satellite news television and social media on both the discursive context of political debate and opportunities available for

[2] *Andalus Radio, 'Idaacadda Andalus Oo baahisay codad laga duubay walaalihii fuliyey howlgalkii Hotel Saxafi'* [Andalus Radio broadcasts recording of the brothers who carried out the Hotel Saxafi operation], 1 November 2015 <http://radioandalus24.com/?p=5709> (3 November 2015).

[3] A conservative estimate based on a survey of media reporting of average death-tolls of each attack. Figures vary between sources and consolidated data from multiple healthcare providers is limited. Estimate includes attackers, security forces and civilians. This article was accepted for publication before the Zoobe junction truck bombing of 14 October 2017 that killed more than 500 people. Although this detonated outside (and seriously damaged) the Safari Hotel, it is unlikely that this was the intended target on this occasion.

[4] Laura Hammond, 'Somalia rising: Things are starting to change for the world's longest failed state', *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 7, 1 (2013), pp. 183-193.

[5] Abdi Latif Dahir, 'Somalia's Lido Beach: The heart of Mogadishu and the place my friends died', *The Guardian,* 1 March 2016, < https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2016/mar/01/somalia-lido-beach-heart-mogadishu-place-my-friends-died> (12 April 2017).

[6] Zeynep Tukefci and Christopher Wilson, 'Social media and the decision to participate in political protest: Observations from Tahrir Square', *Journal of Communication* 62, 2 (2012) pp. 363-379, p. 365.

popular mobilisation.[7] The emancipatory potential of decentralized media technologies is highly contested and debates increasingly emphasize the importance of the particular political environments in which such networks have gained prominence.[8] As such, and in the Horn of Africa context, Iginio Gagliardone stresses the need to look beyond the media suppression/emancipation debates to understand a state such as Ethiopia's use of new media technologies for particular developmental priorities.[9]

Neighbouring Somalia differs in that its Federal Government (FGS) does not represent an established and coherent authoritarian power adapting to (or taking advantage of) a changing media environment. Instead, state power is being slowly reconstructed in the context of a highly decentralized and fragmented electronic public sphere that has emerged as part of the telecommunications boom in the hitherto largely stateless economy.[10] Although an achievement of the FGS has been its communicative self-reassertion since 2012 through control of "state" media such as Somali National Television or Radio Mogadishu, it is nonetheless bound to compete in a media landscape that it cannot dominate in any systematic fashion. Media is nonetheless highly important for state reconstruction, facilitating a 'politics of participation' in the ongoing federal reconfiguration of the country and defining the scope of debate around 'Somali-owned' constitution-making and post-conflict transition.[11] Elsewhere, studies of the Somali media ecology have illuminated commercial logics which underpin news production in a conflict environment, influencing patterns of violence against

---

[7] Naomi Sakr, *Arab television today* (IB Tauris, London, 2007); Marc Lynch, 'After Egypt: The limits and promise of online challenges to the authoritarian Arab state', *Perspectives on Politics* 9, 2 (2011), pp. 301-310; Evgeny Morozov, *The net delusion: The dark side of Internet freedom* (Public Affairs, New York, NY, 2012); Axel Bruns, Tim Highfield, and Jean Burgess, 'The Arab spring and social media audiences: English and Arabic twitter users and their networks', *American Behavioral Scientist* 57, 7 (2013), pp. 871-898; Gadi Wolfsfeld, Elad Segev and Tamir Sheafer, 'Social media and the Arab spring: Politics comes first', *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 18, 2 (2013), pp. 115-137.
[8] Lisa Anderson, 'Demystifying the Arab spring.' *Foreign Affairs* 90, 3 (2011), pp. 2-7, p. 2.
[9] Iginio Gagliardone, 'New media and the developmental state in Ethiopia', *African Affairs* 113, 451 (2014), pp. 279-299.
[10] Bob Feldman, 'Somalia: Amidst the rubble, a vibrant telecommunications infrastructure', *Review of African Political Economy* 34, 113 (2012), pp. 565-572.
[11] Nicole Stremlau, 'Constitution-making, media, and the politics of participation in Somalia', *African Affairs* 115, 459 (2016), pp. 225-245.

media workers and calling into question many of the normative assumptions of external observers around how journalists should and can operate in such settings.[12] In relation to other Somali political entities, Alice Hills illustrates the opportunities presented by the use of information and communications technology to more consolidated state structures such as the secessionist Republic of Somaliland. Importantly, she highlights the significant limitations faced by state actors in their use of such tools in extending state power, as well as logics of consensus that may override the political necessity of expanding direct hierarchical control over security agents in peripheral regions.[13]

This article expands on these insights and focuses on media technology use in a highly conflicted capital city where (unlike Somaliland) an armed opposition both substantively challenges the internationally-recognised state, and has experience of providing alternative forms of governance. The article thus poses two questions. Firstly, how do the modern realities of Somali media (encompassing multiple overlapping "old" and "new" formats) affect a re-emerging state's ability to establish urban security control? Secondly, how do performances of targeted violence by militants both take advantage of – and reflect – this highly decentralized media ecology and contested ideological environment? The use of media by militant actors is hardly new, and terrorism has long employed communication technologies to amplify its impact.[14] Nonetheless, this article argues that certain features of the modern Somali media ecology present novel dilemmas for state actors torn between asserting their discursive legitimacy in the public sphere, and waging effective "counter-terrorism" operations against a highly organized, brutal, and media-savvy armed opposition.

---

[12] Nicole Stremlau, Emanuele Fantini, and Ridwan Osman, 'The political economy of the media in the Somali conflict', *Review of African Political Economy* 43, 147 (2015), pp. 43-57.

[13] Alice Hills, 'Off-road policing: Communications technology and government authority in Somaliland', *International Affairs* 92, 5 (2016), pp. 1061-1078.

[14] For an overview of these debates in the pre-9/11 and pre-'Web 2.0' era see Paul Wilkinson, 'The media and terrorism: A reassessment', *Terrorism and Political Violence* 9, 2 (1997), pp. 51-64.

Al Shabaab's militancy is but one aspect of a complex security environment in Mogadishu. Numerous armed groups deploy violence in various constellations of political or economic cooperation or competition, albeit alongside the gradual and often faltering reassertion of coherent state power.[15] This case study demonstrates how media-influenced perceptions of political division and extraversion impact on the practical and discursive parameters of violent contestation in the city and over the state. Multiple actors (from diaspora returnees, foreign donors, "peacekeepers", to international and local militants) compete for control over narratives of political reconstruction in a dynamic and highly internationalised media environment.[16] Although such debates are increasingly characterised by transnational contestation over the cultural identity of Somali sovereignty, they are not driven by simple radical/moderate, traditional/liberal, Western/African or local/diaspora binaries. Instead, they often involve multiple representations of the relative "foreignness" of different cultural-religious orientations of state reconstruction.

The modern media landscape of overlapping new and traditional forms of news and comment facilitates this ideological blurring. The analysis below, for instance, highlights the rebroadcasting of militant media within broader Somali news networks, and the opposite process whereby *jihadi* communications make use of a much wider range of "mainstream" source material. This complex bricolage of production cautions against reductive generalisations that portray modern media consumers or producers in clearly defined ideological dichotomies – either as "radical" propagandists, "nationalists", or passive audiences susceptible to "brainwashing".[17] Recent scholarship on global militant Islamist

---

[15] Ken Menkhaus, 'Non-state security providers and political formation in Somalia' (Centre for Security Governance Paper No. 5, Ontario, 2016).

[16] The multinational forces engaged in the African Union's 'peace support' operation in Somalia are often described in international media reporting as 'peacekeepers'. This label is arguably misleading in that it fails to fully reflect AMISOM's wide mandate to conduct conventional military operations against a clearly defined enemy (Al Shabaab).

[17] This problematic tendency in African media studies is highlighted by Wendy Willems and Winston Mano 'Decolonizing and provincializing audience and internet studies: Contextual approaches from African vantage

media focuses on the content and recruitment potential of propaganda, and thus tends to reproduce clear "War on Terror" distinctions between those consumers who have been 'radicalised' and those who have not.[18] This analysis, by contrast, does not attempt to explain media incitement to violence.[19] Its contribution instead lies in its examination of the position of militant communications within a broader Somali-language media landscape; one that must be understood with reference to its technological emergence in conditions of statelessness and gradual, fraught reassertions of state power.

Such complex ideological contestation over state reconstruction can be identified in the targeting and broadcasting of spectacular acts of violence in the city. The performativity and performance of violence are understood here in two distinct ways. The former draws from Judith Butler's conceptualisation of the 'reiterative and citational practices by which discourse produces the effects that it names'.[20] The ways in which violence provokes responses that recursively feed back into mediated political narratives are analysed below: Al Shabaab attacks precipitate the further barricading of locations associated with the state, contributing to the heightened perceptions of elite segregation and foreign conspiracy in the city that are used by the group to justify its violence in the first place.

Secondly, violence is understood to be performed for different audiences to give it social meaning,[21] to communicate power, legitimacy and history to witnesses who may not be directly targeted by the act itself.[22] Examining violence in the Israel/Palestine context,

---

points' in Wendy Willems and Winston Mano (eds), *Everyday media culture in Africa* (Routledge, New York, NY, 2017), pp. 1-26.

[18] J.M. Berger, 'The metronome of apocalyptic time: Social media as carrier wave for millenarian contagion', *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, 4 (2015), pp. 61-71; James Farwell, 'The media strategy of ISIS', *Survival* 56, 6 (2014), pp. 49-55.

[19] On the difficulty (or futility) of proving direct incitement by media even in a supposed archetype case see Scott Strauss, 'What is the relationship between hate radio and violence? Rethinking Rwanda's "radio machete", *Politics & Society* 35, 4 (2007), pp. 609-637.

[20] Judith Butler, *Bodies that matter: On the discursive limits of 'sex'* (Routledge, London, 1993), p. 2.

[21] Bettina Schmidt and Ingo Schroder, 'Introduction: Violent imaginaries and violent practices', in Bettina Schmidt and Ingo Schroder (eds), *Anthropology of violence and conflict* (Routledge, London, 2001), pp. 1-24.

[22] Neil Whitehead, 'Introduction: Cultures, conflicts, and the poetics of violent practice', in Neil Whitehead (ed.), *Violence* (James Currey, Oxford, 2004), pp. 25-54.

McDonald highlights the inadequacy of purely politico-economic explanations for violence, arguing that:

> violent performances, are laden with cultural meaning, drawn from a repertory of culturally salient forms and practices. These… constitute a poetics through which violence comes to take on meaning for its participants... Why do Palestinians choose to throw stones? Why has one specific pizza place in West Jerusalem been the site of no less than three suicide attacks since 2001?[23]

Why, then, does Al Shabaab attacks hotels in Mogadishu? Why attack civilians at Liido beach in a manner that would cause great outrage amongst a large proportion of the Somali population, given the importance of the location for the 'Somalia rising' narrative? Such attacks against icons of "progress" in Mogadishu, constitute communicative contestation with the FGS and engage with wider popular multi-media debates around the character and ideological orientation of re-emerging Somali statehood.

After a reflection on methodology and data collection, a historical contextualisation of iconoclastic Islamist violence in Mogadishu is provided. This is followed by an overview of FGS state reconstruction since 2012 (primarily under the previous government of President Xasan Sheekh Maxamuud), the modern Somali media environment, and the practical political and security implications of media competition between the state and militant opposition. The final section examines the targets of performative violence themselves and the ways in which they illuminate wider popular political debates around ongoing state reconstruction. Although targeted Al Shabaab violence failed to derail the 2017 selection of the new Somali Parliament and President, many of the same constraints face Maxamed Cabdulaahi "Farmaajo's" government in attempting to consolidate modest security and political gains made by the previous administration against this resilient and undefeated insurgency.[24]

---

[23] David McDonald, 'Poetics and the performance of violence in Israel/Palestine', *Ethnomusicology* 53, 1 (2009), pp. 58-85, p. 59.
[24] Faduma Abukar Mursal, 'Somali elections online: View from Mogadishu', *Horn of Africa Bulletin* 29, 1 (2017) pp. 5-8.

Methodology and data collection

This article is based on six months of fieldwork on news media production and consumption undertaken in Mogadishu (and elsewhere in Somalia) in 2015. In order to comparatively analyse the media environment across the Somali territories 40 semi-structured interviews were conducted with local online, radio, television and print journalists, as well as political and civil society figures whose work related to media production or regulation. Mohamed Haji Ingiriis's recent comparison of Al Shabaab with the early twentieth century Dervish movement emphasizes the importance of Somali-language media texts for researchers seeking to understand the emergence and evolution of modern Islamist militancy in Somalia.[25] The discussion below involves analysis of a range of Somali-language media texts related to militant and state propaganda around violence in Mogadishu. Since 2012, I had been working in the same environment for a major international humanitarian organisation where part of my duties involved media monitoring of conflict dynamics and militant communications. Confidentiality prevents me from using data gathered during that period, however my interactions with state and international political and security actors, and extensive movements around governmental compounds in the city, help contextualise the media texts I discuss. Reflecting on political violence and state reconstruction witnessed both first-hand and through local media commentary, my critical discourse analysis 'focuses on the ways discourse structures enact, confirm, legitimate, reproduce, or challenge relations of power and dominance in society'.[26]

---

[25] Mohamed Haji Ingiriis, 'The invention of Al Shabaab in Somalia: Emulating the anti-colonial Dervishes movement', *African Affairs,* online (2018) pp. 1-21. DOI: 10.1093/afraf/ady001

[26] Teun Van Dijk, 'Introduction: What is critical discourse analysis?' in Deborah Schiffrin, Deborah Tannen & Heidi Hamilton (eds) *The handbook of discourse analysis* (John Wiley & Sons, London, 2001), pp. 352-371, p. 353.

Wendy Willems and Winston Mano critique accounts of African media cultures that overplay the agency of digital media producers and consumers, arguing that textual and audience-focused methodologies remain useful for generating new accounts of media reception and production from the 'vantage point' of non-Western contexts[27]. This article conceptualises the coexistence and overlap of so-called old and new media within a wider Somali public sphere. State and armed opposition agency is thus analysed in terms of their engagement with this truly multi-media environment. The difficulties faced by researchers such as myself undertaking systematic audience studies in Mogadishu are compensated for with a focus on the discursive character of a range of local-language media texts, and analysis of relationships between certain spaces of media consumption (targets such as hotels and cafes in particular areas of the city) and certain types of violence.

As such, I was a resident of a hotel inside the city (not the 'secure' airport zone) during my fieldwork. Although my movements were limited by security constraints, in my previous employment I had been fairly mobile and was privileged to see much of the dynamic and changing city. Meeting informants at the hotel (particularly local journalists who responded to my requests for interview) and inserting myself into the distinct hotel *milieu* has informed my reflections of targeted urban violence. Hotels in Mogadishu are ostensibly attacked by Al Shabaab on the basis of the types of individuals who are (or are perceived to be) resident there – often politicians, civil society actors with links to foreign organisations, diaspora business people, and (allegedly) security or intelligence operatives. Discussions with residents and hotel staff about their understanding of this violence was therefore an important part of the fieldwork. Indeed, the hotel where I was based had been attacked in the past. Somewhat counter-intuitively, this was one of the reasons I chose it, as it could be assumed that it was unlikely to be targeted again. This rationale is left purposively

---

[27] Willems and Mano, 'Decolonizing and provincializing audience and internet studies', pp. 8-10.

opaque to avoid giving further information that would disclose the location. The analysis below emphasizes the political sensitivity of these potential targets and this explains the anonymity given to this location and all informants.

Iconoclastic Islamist violence in a conflicted capital

Visual and discursive links can be drawn between recent patterns of Al Shabaab violence in Mogadishu and previously publicised acts of religious iconoclasm. Understanding the types of violence focused on in this article requires the historicising of wider cultural-religious shifts that shape the modern ideological space in which Al Shabaab operates today. Modern Islamist mobilisation in Somalia dates back to resistance against the assertive secularism of former dictator Siyaad Barre's 'scientific socialist' agenda, and remained an undercurrent of post 1991 attempts to restore political order in the aftermath of state collapse and civil war.[28] Talk of Islamist involvement in the actual fall of Siyaad Barre, or popular resistance to the United States' intervention in the post state-collapse period is certainly overplayed by modern Somali *jihadis*. Nonetheless, acts of religious iconoclasm such as the destruction of Mogadishu Cathedral highlighted the spectre of religio-political violence and a desire to energise what remains a Somali *Ummah* defined by a near universal adherence to Islam.[29]

The emergence of Islamist governance structures in southern Somalia from the late 1990s both conditioned, and was conditioned by, shifts in popular religious practice away from Sufi-influenced forms of "traditional" Somali Islam to more conservative doctrines of Sunni orthodoxy and increased emphasis on public piety. Al Shabaab has emerged out of a long-running history of Islamist mobilisation dating back to the activism of groups such as Al

---

[28] Abdurahman M. Abdullahi, 'Women, Islamists and the military regime in Somalia: The new family law and its implications', in Markus Hoehne and Virginia Luling (eds) *Milk and peace, drought and war: Somali culture, society and politics* (Hurst, London, 2010), pp.137-160; Oscar Gakuo Mwangi, 'State collapse, Al-Shabaab, Islamism, and legitimacy in Somalia', *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 13, 4 (2012), pp. 513–527.
[29] Cabdishakuur Mire Aadam, *Kobocii Islaamiyiinta Soomaaliya* [Rise of the Islamists in Somalia] (Graphic Lineups, Nairobi, 2013).

Itihaad Al Islaami and the eventual establishment of the Union of Islamic Courts.[30] This political-judicial experiment was overthrown by the Ethiopian invasion of 2006, an intervention which precipitated the rise of Al Shabaab as a splinter of the Courts, framing its struggle as resistance against the historical Ethiopian Christian foe. During the subsequent period, in which the group established structures of administrative governance across large swathes of Southern Somalia, numerous performances of religious iconoclasm were carried out against various Sufi-associated targets, particularly tombs of locally revered Saints.[31]

Following its expulsion from Mogadishu in 2011 by African Union (AMISOM) and Transitional Federal Government forces, and its progressive loss of urban territory since then across South-Central Somalia, Al Shabaab has increasingly relied on the use of asymmetrical violence.[32] Their military strategy in Mogadishu has involved targeted assassinations of Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) or government-associated figures, the use of mobile mortar fire against locations of state authority, hit and run attacks on government checkpoints or convoys, and "complex" suicide assaults against ministries, hotels and restaurants.

It is also necessary to situate modern Al Shabaab violence in Mogadishu in the context of broader popular interpretations of post civil-war social fragmentation and a contentious politics of land and power in the Somali capital.[33] In the early 1990s, Mogadishu witnessed some of the worst civil war violence, culminating in what Lidwien Kapteijns

---

[30] Cedric Barnes and Harun Hassan, 'The rise and fall of Mogadishu's Islamic Courts', *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 1, 2 (2007), pp. 151-60; Roland Marchal, 'A tentative assessment of the Somali Harakat Al-Shabaab', *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 3, 3 (2009), pp. 381–404; Roland Marchal, 'The rise of a jihadi movement in a country at war: Harakat al Shabaab al Mujaheddin in Somalia' (CERI Research Paper, Sciences Po, Paris, March 2011); Stig Jarle Hansen, *Al-Shabaab in Somalia: The history and ideology of a militant Islamist group, 2005-2012* (Hurst, London, 2013); Daniel E. Agbiboa, 'Ties that bind: The evolution and links of Al-Shabab', *The Round Table: The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs* 103, 6 (2014), pp. 581–597.

[31] *BBC Somali, 'Shabaab oo burburineysa qabrigii Shiikh Maxamed Biya Maaloow'* [Shabaab destroying tomb of Sheikh Maxamed Biya Maaloow], 25 March 2010 <http://www.bbc.com/somali/news/story/2010/03/100325_sawirro_qabriga_biyomaaloow.shtml> (June 28, 2016).

[32] Bohumil Doboš, 'Shapeshifter of Somalia: Evolution of the political territoriality of Al-Shabaab', *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 27, 5 (2016), pp. 937–957.

[33] Rift Valley Institute/Heritage Institute for Policy Studies, 'Land matters in Mogadishu: Settlement, ownership and displacement in a contested city' (RVI/Heritage Institute Report, Nairobi, 13 April 2017). That the authors chose to remain anonymous is indicative of the tension surrounding this type of conflict in the city.

describes as 'clan cleansing' targeting those (even loosely) connected with the lineage group of the former dictator.[34] Much of the modern contestation over land and property in the city can be traced back to this period of violence and group displacement. With regard to the current conflict and federal state reconfiguration, suspicions of political intrigue often engage with an institutional politicisation of clan. The much debated '4.5' system has allocated governmental seat quotas on the basis of the four major Somali clan families, with a half share for the *beesha shanaad* (fifth clan) of "minorities". This account cannot do justice to the complexity and fluidity of clan-based political identifications or the relationships between genealogical identifications and material political or economic agency.[35] Nonetheless, it must be recognised that the ideas of conspiracy discussed below may take on a clanic-hue, regardless of taboos that exist around the use of direct clan hate-speech.[36] This tension is linked to the semi-institutionalisation of clan in the language of state politics and news media (for instance the listing of clan affiliations of '4.5' appointed politicians in print newspapers)[37] and the ways in which control of the capital may be discussed in the public sphere by elite actors in terms of competing interests of the major clan-families.[38]

Al Shabaab's agency may itself also be characterised in terms of clan conspiracy by certain commentators. Across a wider Somalia that is split into multiple (and often antagonistic) federal, autonomous, or secessionist administrations conspiracy theories periodically circulate in popular media about the perceived political utility of Al Shabaab's

---

[34] Lidwien Kapteijns, *Clan cleansing in Somalia: The ruinous legacy of 1991* (University of Pennsylvania Press Philadelphia, PA, 2012).

[35] Abdi Ismail Samatar, 'Destruction of state and society in Somalia: Beyond the tribal convention', *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 30, 4 (1992), pp. 625-641; Cedric Barnes 'U Dhashay—Ku Dhashay: Genealogical and territorial discourse in Somali history', *Social Identities* 12, 4 (2006), pp. 487-98.

[36] Lidwien Kapteijns, 'Making memories of Mogadishu in Somali poetry about the civil war', in Lidwien Kapteijns and Annemiek Richters (eds) *Mediations of violence in Africa* (Brill, Leiden, 2010), pp. 25-74.

[37] *Xog Ogaal* newspaper, *'Magacyada, qabiiladaiyo jufooyinka ay ka soo jeedaan wasiirada, wasiiro ku xigeenada iyo wasiiru-dowlayaasha'* [The names, clans and positions of ministers, vice ministers and state ministers], 8 February 2015.

[38] *Goobjooge, 'Dhageyso: Nabadoon Axmed Diriiye: 'Gobolka Banaadir Hawiye ayaa leh inta kalena marti ayay ku tahay'* [Listen: Peace-maker Axmed Diriiye: 'Banaadir region belongs to the Hawiye, others are guests (here)'] 30 March 2016 <http://goobjooge.com/axmed-diiriye-gobolka-banaadir-hawiye-ayaa-leh/> (28 June 2016).

violence for certain (clan-defined) actors. [39] This picture is further complicated by Al Shabaab's continued extortion of money from local businesses (possibly including hotels), which itself overlaps with these narratives of clan intrigue and may also influence Al Shabaab's targeting of attacks. [40]

State reconstruction, counter-terrorism and media competition

With the essential support of AMISOM, the FGS succeeded in establishing a modicum of security and political control over all of the districts of the capital. Formal or, at least, daylight Al Shabaab control of neighbourhoods in Mogadishu ended with their expulsion in 2011, and security is managed by an amorphous mix of forces which are part of, or are aligned with, the FGS. These include the Somali Police Force, the National Intelligence and Security Agency (NISA), the Somali National Army, AMISOM troops and police, as well as militias of local District Commissioners, and a burgeoning local and international private security industry. Whilst this combination of actors brings with it its own internal tensions, the fact that the state has at least nominal authority over all districts marks a change from the pre-2011 reality of widespread Al Shabaab control and the division of the city into separate neighbourhood fiefdoms dominated by militias unaligned to any central government.

With the promise of greater security and political cohesion, the local economy has gone through a visible period of growth, driven by returnee diaspora investors and

---

[39] Muuse Xaji Abees, *Dunida Online*, *'Digniin culus ku socota xildhibaanada daarood'* [Strong warning to Daarood MPs] 20 July 2014 <www.dunidaonline.com/index.php?id=12999> (19 September 2016).

[40] Evidence of the link between the payment (or non-payment) of "protection money" and Al Shabaab's targeting of certain hotels is difficult to verify in the context. However, the FGS recognises the problem of Al Shabaab's parallel 'taxation' system and has warned businesses that they will be subject to prosecution if they pay (Security Minister Maxamed Abuukar Ducaale, statement to local press, 22 July 2017). The extent to which the FGS can guarantee the security of those that refuse is questionable and this also has implications (discussed below) for those in the telecom and media industries who face dilemmas around their compliance with the state's anti- Al Shabaab directives.

infrastructure projects undertaken by high-profile international donors, such as Turkey.[41] Nowhere is such dynamism more evident than on important arteries of the city such as the Makka Al Mukarama thoroughfare, running from the airport road all the way up to the Parliament building and the Villa Somalia Presidential compound. The newly re-paved roads, lined with the colourful hoardings of recently opened shops, banks, restaurants, hotels, and outdoor tea stands, speak to an increased sense of consumer and investor optimism. All of the large hotels that have been attacked by Al Shabaab in the city since 2014 have been located along (or just beyond) this politically symbolic route that connects the seat of the FGS with the international airport and the fortified AMISOM/UN presence there.[42]

On the national political front, the FGS in Mogadishu has played an important (if varied) role in the ongoing creation of the new federal states, now at different levels of consolidation.[43] In February 2017, the (delayed) indirect process designed to replace the legislative and executive branches of government was completed. This involved clan elders in new federal regions in the selection process of MPs who then elected the new President. Al Shabaab's strategy of targeting hotels (where many electors and candidates were based) provided a serious test for security forces. Although Al Shabaab succeeded in undertaking deadly attacks against locations such as the Dayax Hotel (on 25 January 2017) the wider selection process in Mogadishu was finished.

In representing a relatively substantive departure from earlier transitional governance arrangements - but in the absence of popular elections – the 2012-2017 FGS was required to pay close attention to its presentation of legitimate authority and attempted to gain control

---

[41] Sulaiman Momdou, 'Somalia is rising from the ashes' *Africa Renewal* (UN), April 2016 <http://www.un.org/africarenewal/magazine/april-2016/somalia-rising-ashes> (11 March 2018); for a more critical perspective on this narrative see Yusuf Dirie 'Somalia rising and the single story of progress' *Maandeeq,* 1 July 2015 <http://themaandeeq.com/somalia-rising-and-the-single-story-of-progress/> (9 March 2018).

[42] Author's mapping of hotel locations. Al Shabaab spokesman Sheikh Cali Dheere explicitly noted the Makka Al Mukarama thoroughfare as a primary target for hotel assaults, asserting the political significance of the route. See *Dalsoor Media, 'Wareysi qaybtii 1aad: Sheekh Cali Dheere'* [Interview Part One: Sheekh Cali Dheere] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BJwuw-H0mgs> (12 April 2017).

[43] Jason Mosley, 'Somalia's federal future: Layered agendas, risks and opportunities' (Horn of Africa Project report, Chatham House, London, 2015).

over a narrative of securitisation, re-establishment of governance structures and the fight against terrorism. State media such as Somali National Television (SNTV) and Radio Mogadishu compete with multiple local FM radio stations, foreign-based Somali-language radio and television broadcasters (including the BBC's Somali Service and Universal TV), innumerable local news websites and several print newspapers. Internet access (including via smart-phones) is prevalent in Mogadishu, a result of the telecommunications sector boom in the wider, and hitherto largely stateless, Somali economy.[44] There is significant overlap between traditional media (in the form of newspapers, FM radio broadcasts, satellite television) and online news or social media, with virtually all content finding its way online. This multiplies possibilities for consumption and reproduction, and the interface between social media platforms and conventional news media broadcasters is examined below. Clear distinctions are also often difficult to make between informal and state media, in that government agencies largely communicate through the same channels – and on a comparable footing – with producers in the private sector. For instance, although the use of social media by state security forces shows the FGS' sensitivity to the need to win "hearts and minds", this could also be seen as a degradation of its sovereign prestige. The FGS' National Intelligence and Security Agency's @HSNQ_NISA Twitter feed (with its 17,900 followers), for example, operates as but one voice in a highly fragmented discursive space where opposition responses are often almost instantaneous.[45]

The state projects its interlinked narrative of political reconstruction and counter-terrorism through the broadcasting of documentaries (on state television and social media)

---

[44] Survey data from local commercial research firm Datagrid reports 97 percent phone ownership amongst Mogadishu residents of all 17 districts, with 56 percent of the sample (386) owning smartphones. Datagrid Report (June 2015) <http://datagridsomalia.com/media/Telecom_Survey_Summary-Final-email.pdf> (28 June 2016); 77 percent of the 325 university students who were surveyed by the author in four Somali cities (including Mogadishu) in 2015 indicated that they regularly used mobile internet for local news media consumption.

[45] The National Intelligence and Security Agency, Twitter account, <https://twitter.com/HSNQ_NISA> (number of followers as of 12 March 2018).

presenting the conspiratorial nature of Al Shabaab militancy within Mogadishu communities.[46] Such films feature dramatic shots of elite FGS forces in full battle-gear, engaging the enemy over an action movie-esque soundtrack. The patriotism of the FGS forces is emphasized along with the warning to the population that the state will seize property rented to Al Shabaab, a practice justified by clerics' reference to Islamic law. The FGS has frequently broadcasted footage of its battlefield or intelligence successes, including interviews with captured operatives and judicial processes (up to and including executions) of either alleged Al Shabaab members or government forces accused of killing civilians.

This relationship between the media and state counter-insurgency actors in Mogadishu has been critiqued by prominent local commentators such as the former head of the BBC Somali Service, Yusuf Garaad.[47] He points out the negative effects on intelligence gathering and criminal prosecutions of allowing (or even encouraging) journalists to interview suspects of attacks shortly after their capture.[48] On this dynamic media battlefield the state is torn between attempting to present its forces' successes whilst actually prosecuting an effective counter-intelligence operation against a foe which has infiltrated all levels of society and, at times, state and security forces themselves.[49] Regulating flows of information in this conflict-setting can often have tangible implications for protagonists or those caught up in the violence. Elsewhere, Garaad lambasts rolling media coverage of ongoing attacks (including the use of Twitter by local journalists) for putting more lives at

---

[46] *SNTV, 'Barnaamij ku saabsan shabakado Al Shabaab ah oo la soo qabtay'* [Program about apprehended Al Shabaab Networks] 7 December 2014 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jEaiTnXcuXM> (28 June 2016).

[47] Garaad was appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs in President Farmaajo's new government in March 2017.

[48] Yuusuf Garaad, *'Saxaafadda iyo sirdoonka'* [Journalists and the intelligence agencies] 15 July 2014 <http://voiceofsomalia.net/2014/07/15/saxaafadda-iyo-sirdoonkaqore-yusuf-garaad/> (28 June 2016).

[49] Hills presents anecdotal evidence of FGS soldiers 'sympathetic' to Al Shabaab. Stories of defections and infiltration are a common feature of news, propaganda and rumours in the city. Alice Hills, 'Making Mogadishu safe', *The RUSI Journal,* 161, 6 (2016), pp.10-16, p. 15.

risk, and being capitalised on by attackers who can use such updates to predict security forces' responses.[50]

At times, the state attempts to take direct charge of the conflict narrative. In May 2015, the Head of the National Intelligence and Security Agency (NISA) made a public 'request' to the media in Mogadishu to stop using the name 'Al Shabaab' and instead use the Somali acronym 'UGUS' ('Organisation for the Slaughter of the Somali Ummah').[51] Although this initiative illustrated the importance placed by the state on media narratives, it also highlighted the limitations of its sporadic control of the industry. The dynamic and almost real-time dialogue between the state and militants was amplified by multiple non-aligned online media sources which broadcast Al Shabaab's response with their own 'UGUS' acronym (labelling the FGS as the 'Organization for the humiliation of the Somali Ummah').[52] Furthermore, aside from the irony of the announcement of this state directive on 'World Press Freedom Day', its ambiguity was troubling for local media given the FGS's past attacks on journalistic freedom. Since 2012, there have been several high profile arrests, detentions, prosecutions and convictions of journalists in Mogadishu, ostensibly for the reporting of information that has incited popular discontent directed against the state. This has included the prosecution of journalists for reporting rape allegations against government forces, or against media networks such as Shabelle Radio, targeted for broadcasting Al Shabaab statements or *vox-populi*-esque programming of uncensored public opinions which, the FGS has claimed, is tantamount to incitement of inter-clan violence in the city.

---

[50] Yusuf Garaad, *Xaqiiqa Times* newspaper, '*Warfaafin mise sirfaafin?'* [News broadcasting or secrets broadcasting?], 10 April 2015.

[51] UGUS: *Ururka Gumaadka Ummadda Soomaaliyeed. Radio Kulmiye, 'Warbaahinta Muqdisho oo laga dalbaday in ay joojiyaan isticmaalka magaca Al-shabaab'* [Mogadishu Media requested to stop using the name 'Al Shabaab] 3 May 2015 <http://radiokulmiye.com/knn/warbaahinta-muqdisho-oo-laga-dalbaday-in-ay-joojiyaan-isticmaalka-magaca-al-shabaab/> (10 May 2015).

[52] *Baarcadeeye*, *'Dagaal dhanka saxaafaddaha ah oo u bilowday Al Shabaab iyo Maamuulka Muqdisho+Magacyo la is waydaarsaday'* [A battle for journalists starts between Al Shabaab and the Mogadishu Administration] 4 May 2015 <http://baarcadeeye.com/?p=8013> (28 June 2016).

The FGS's ambiguous relationship with the internationalised pan-Somali news media was illustrated by a 2015 confrontation with Universal TV, arguably the most popular Somali-language satellite television channel, broadcast from London across the entire region. A director and journalist were arrested and held for six days by NISA after the broadcasting of a debate featuring two members of Parliament, one of whom made provocative statements about Somalia being under the 'colonial' control of neighbouring powers. Both the debate and the subsequent arrests were picked up by pro-Al Shabaab media, spun to verify their frequent claims of external dominion over Somalis.[53]

Although such examples illustrate the state's ability (and willingness) to restrict press freedom, this does not extend to control of Al Shabaab's media capabilities. In February 2016, the Office of the Attorney General put pressure on local internet service providers to block 35 websites deemed to be a threat to national security. The companies eventually complied, but restricted access to only 29 of these sites. The remaining six were all Al Shabaab-affiliated and the companies refused to block them on the basis that the FGS could not provide guarantees for their security from possible retaliation.[54]

The ways in which the emerging state attempts to utilise social or popular media have implications for the extent to which it is able to consolidate a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence. An example of this dilemma – illustrating state media agency and the role of journalists not only as communicators but combatants – occurred in early 2016. Xasan Xanafi, a journalist affiliated with Al Shabaab's Radio Andalus, had been extradited to Somalia from Kenya to face trial for his involvement of the killing of several other media workers in Mogadishu between 2007 and 2011. Prior to him being sentenced to death by the Military

---

[53] *Somalimemo*, *'Dood wadaag: Xildhibaano xaqiijiyay in Somalia gumeysi ku jirto'* [Debate: MPs confirm that Somalia is under colonial rule] October 2015, <http://somalimemo.net/play.php?action=video&id=20&do=video> (28 June 2016).
[54] United Nations Assistance Mission in Somalia/Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 'Report on the right to freedom of expression: Striving to widen democratic space in Somalia's political transition' (UNSOM/OHCHR Report, Mogadishu, August 2016) p. 27.

Court, Somali National Television (in collaboration with NISA) released a documentary on the case featuring a lengthy confession from the accused in custody.[55] Two months later Xanafi was executed by firing squad. This was, essentially, a public execution: pictures from local journalists appeared in Twitter newsfeeds as it occurred. Unlike in other photographed executions at Mogadishu's General Kahiye Police Academy, the condemned man's face was initially photographed un-hooded. It is conceivable that this was part of the state's performance of justice for this highly publicised case involving a very recognizable Al Shabaab-affiliated individual.

Considerations of appropriate judicial process (or affronts to basic human dignity) aside, this case demonstrates both the capacity and challenges faced by the state in waging a public discursive battle against Al Shabaab in state and social media. The very broadcasting of Xanafi's confession enabled the construction of a counter-narrative by pro-Al Shabaab propagandists who purportedly obtained a voice recording of Xanafi in custody distancing himself from what he alleged was a forced confession at the hands of local and Western intelligence operatives. Released as another video documentary on Youtube, the film was less concerned with Xanafi's alleged guilt but rather the role of foreign security agencies.[56] Characteristic of other highly internationalist *jihadi* propaganda material, the film featured edited reportage from the UK's Channel Four News: a piece by British-Somali journalist Jamaal Cusmaan on foreign detention and interrogation in Mogadishu.[57] The film was promoted via pro-*jihadi* websites, although it is claimed to be the work of 'Journalists for Justice'. Distinct from the organisation of the same name in Kenya, this group has little else in the way of an online footprint and is likely a front for *jihadi* sympathisers. The film is

---

[55] *SNTV, 'Dilaaga Wariyaha – waa kuma Xasan Xanafi?'* [The journalist killer – who is Xasan Xanafi?] 5 February 2016 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c-nGbpr0Wkc> (28 June 2016).

[56] Journalists for Justice, *'Confessions of a killer',* 28 March 2016 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=egKm-ibQkM8> (28 June 2016).

[57] Channel 4 News, 'Is the US overseeing torture in Somalia?', 9 December 2014 <https://www.channel4.com/news/somalia-torture-united-states-cia-al-shabaab-video> (15 February 2017).

bilingual (Somali audio/English subtitles) and the organisation behind its production is branded in the style of an international human-rights advocacy group. Aside from demonstrating the range of formats employed by anti-state elements in their propaganda, this example highlights the constant discursive interaction, via social and official media, between the state and the armed opposition, or their supporters. Such counter-narratives feed into (and further condition) a public sphere highly responsive to conspiracy theories and the frequent critique of external agendas.

As evidenced above, the state communicates in a public sphere where the armed opposition has the capacity to broadcast widely online and, arguably, produces material of a higher level of technical polish. Al Shabaab communicates to multiple audiences both domestically and internationally through numerous platforms.[58] These include "official" audio-visual broadcasting from Al Shabaab's Al Kataib media-wing, often featuring battlefield footage from embedded *jihadi* journalists narrated in English or Arabic; nationalistic Somali-language propaganda documentaries about life under Al Shabaab rule from affiliated media networks such as Al Furqaan; radio broadcasting across areas still under their control; and via numerous pro-*jihadi* websites. Audio and video recordings with prominent spokesmen (particularly following major attacks) are reproduced across *jihadi* cyberspace and in the wider media. Often mainstream local news producers (who may not directly identify with the group's *Jihadi-Takfiri* ideology) reproduce such high-profile media products, in that they are deemed newsworthy in themselves and will thus generate internet traffic for online news sites.[59]

---

[58] Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, Shiraz Maher, and James Sheehan, 'Lights, camera, jihad: Al-Shabaab's western media strategy' (International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence report, London, 2012); Peter Chonka, 'Spies, stonework, and the suuq: Somali nationalism and the narrative politics of pro-Harakat Al Shabaab Al Mujaahidiin online propaganda', *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 10, 2 (2016) pp. 247-265.

[59] *Caasimadda, 'Daawo sawirada Al Shabaab oo soo bandhigay meydadka askarii Burundi ee lagu dilay Leego'* [See pictures that Al Shabaab has published of bodies of Burundian soldiers killed in Leego] 1 July 2015, <http://caasimadda.com/daawo-sawirada-alshabaab-oo-soo-bandhigay-meydadka-askarii-burundi-ee-lagu-dilay-leego/> (28 June 2016).

Whilst terrorism has always relied on media coverage to amplify its effects[60], the simultaneity of multi-platform communications around militant operations in modern Mogadishu illustrates the novel circumstances faced by a weak state in managing a highly decentred electronic media battlefield. As noted above, during the assault on the Saxafi Hotel an Al Shabaab spokesman made direct contact with BBC Journalist Mary Harper to confirm their responsibility, while at the same time pro-Al Shabaab Radio Al Andalus broadcast a telephone interview with the fighters inside the hotel shortly before their apparent 'martyrdom'. Such coverage is designed to illustrate the control that the attackers have achieved, and the language used in their communications echoes this formal military discourse. Phrases (in Somali) such as 'the Forces of the Mujahidiin have captured' or 'are in full control of [the space in question]' are frequently used and convey the sense that the attacks are not merely characterised by senseless violence, but rather the explicit taking and holding of space from state authorities.[61] Nonetheless, the *kamikaze* nature of the raids is apparent with the dispassionate acknowledgement that whilst the attackers will attempt to hold this space for as long as possible, they will not be coming out alive. The juxtaposition of transcendental martyrdom themes alongside the calculated and impersonal language of military operations is characteristic of an insurgency which discursively blends spiritual appeals to mobilization alongside the presentation of an organized, disciplined and state-aspiring militant structure.

The contact made with a foreign journalist illustrates Al Shabaab's awareness and utilisation of external media channels. Despite aligning themselves against all western enemies, the group's affiliated propagandists frequently reference (or translate into Somali) English language media reporting or analysis that emphasizes their military capacity or the

---

[60] Wilkinson, 'The media and terrorism'.

[61] Al Shabaab spokesman's statement, See *Sabaax* News, *'Dhageyso: shabaabul mujaahidiin oo war kasoo saaray weerarkii Hotel Saxafi ee Muqdisho'* [Listen: Al Shabaab release news about Saxafi Hotel Attack in Mogadishu] 2 November 2015 <http://sabaax.com/?p=4981> (28 June 2016).

deficiencies of the FGS.[62] Their sensitivity to the international focus on Mogadishu – as a symbolic site in the struggle for the reconstruction of the Somali state – is highlighted by their choices of targets, which is where the analysis now turns.

The politics of performative violence: targets

As Al Shabaab's targeting has shifted towards fortified locations such as hotels and ministries, their attempts to justify violence take advantage of the physical and cultural detachment popularly perceived to exist between elites and the wider population. Suspicions of political intrigue are often characterised in terms of what goes on behind the walls and barricades of the hotels in which politicians work and live. The wider threat of political violence and assassinations means that many politicians (particularly those who do not hail from Mogadishu itself) base themselves in heavily fortified hotel compounds. The myriad conspiracy theories which circulate in the public sphere regarding the machinations of political elites and their external patrons often make reference to mobile actors ensconced behind hotel walls.[63]

In a self-published Somali-language article entitled 'The newspaper seller of Mogadishu', Cabdishakuur Mire Aaden, a former Puntland politician, media owner, writer, and political commentator, describes an encounter with the eponymous vendor at a hotel cafe.[64] He laments the boy's poverty and comments on the attitude of the elites (MPs, businessmen whose children live in diaspora) with whom he is sitting drinking coffee. 'What

---

[62] *Somalimemo, 'Hay'adda ICG: Al Shabaab muruqa iyo maalka Soomaalida ayay hanteen mana laga adkaan karo warbixin'* [ICG Report: Al Shabaab have the muscle and resources of the Somalis and cannot be resisted] 27 June 2014 <http://somalimemo.net/articles/237/Hayadda-ICG-Al-Shabaab-Muruqa-iyo-Maalka-Soomaalida-Ayay-Hanteen-Mana-Laga-Adkaan-Karo-Warbixin> (28 June 2016).

[63] *Keyd Media, 'Dagaallada Shabeellaha yaa hurinaya?'* [Who is inciting the conflict in the Shabelle regions?] 14 June 2014 <http://www.keydmedia.net/editorial/article/dagaallada_shabeellaha_yaa_hurinaya/> (28 June 2016).

[64] *'Ibiyihii wargaysyada Muqdisho'* https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=948561345172073&set=a.122990087729207.15523.100000546487 399&type=1 (28 June 2016).

shocked me the most' he notes 'is that little Cabdiraxman [the boy] was met not with compassion but suspicion, and much of the talk was about whether he had been sent [to the hotel] by "the children" [Shabaab]'. Mogadishu, he says, is characterised by fear. On 20 February 2015, the writer was killed in an Al Shabaab attack on the city's Central Hotel, along with up to 24 others.[65]

During my time in Mogadishu, informants would often remark that the number of people out on the streets – congregating to drink tea, listen to the radio and read newspapers around hotels, businesses, universities and government Ministries – was a clear barometer of the perceived level of the threat of violence. Whilst major Al Shabaab attacks continue to occur on a sporadic basis, the general trend of increasing numbers of people coming out in public to do business and socialise (even at night) has been maintained. The re-emergence of "everyday" urban life is a key component of the 'Mogadishu rising' narrative and, as such, public space has acquired political salience.[66] Al Shabaab's asymmetrical mode of urban warfare has made social destabilization and a derailing of this narrative a key priority. The targeting of restaurants or cafes being opened with diaspora finance or by returnees has been justified both on the grounds that these locations were haunts of members of the 'apostate' government and the accusation that such places were hotbeds of vice and inappropriate or 'culturally' unacceptable behaviour. Mogadishu's Liido beach has been associated with tensions manifest in the wider public sphere regarding the scope and nature of transnational influence on the re-emerging Somali state, particularly in cultural-religious terms. Opinion pieces in the wider Mogadishu media reference the beach and hotels as sites where politicians

---

[65] A bitter irony not only given the content of the piece, but also because Mire Aaden was the author of the only book-length (and largely sympathetic) Somali-language account of the history of Islamism in Somalia (cited above).

[66] See external coverage of diaspora returnee and social media personality Ugaaso Abokor for examples of these "everyday" counter-narratives to the city's violent reputation. BBC, '#BBCtrending: The Somali woman who's become a global star on Instagram' 17 February 2015 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-31462954> (28 June 2016).

(often returned from the diaspora) promenade with female 'assistants' in contravention of local norms of appropriate public conduct.[67]

Such moral condemnations are echoed by Al Shabaab spokesmen and play into tensions surrounding the role of external diaspora returnees perceived to be dominating re-emerging state structures.[68] Whilst there is popular appreciation for many of the benefits that returnees bring to a re-developing capital city, a locally articulated distinction between *qurbe-joog* (diaspora) and *qorax-joog* (locals, 'those who stayed in the sun') at times focuses on the capital, skills and international connections enjoyed by the former and their ability to take greatest advantage of new economic opportunities in Mogadishu.[69]

Another element of this discursive contestation over "foreignness" can be seen in local and diasporic critiques of external mainstream media portrayals of Somalia. During my fieldwork, I published a blog post entitled 'Beaches or bombings?' reflecting on my experiences in the city and tension between foreign media accounts of violence and a Somali counter-narrative that emphasized a city rising rapidly from the ashes of conflict – an optimism epitomized by an *Instagrammed* Liido beach.[70] With the aforementioned attack on the Beach View Cafe, these two tropes intersected in a way that, for all its horror, was not unpredictable. The narrative contestation continued in the immediate aftermath of the attack

---

[67] *Keyd Media, 'Wasiirada DFS oo curyaaminaaya mustaqbalka hablaha soo kacaya – dhaqan xumo!'* [FGS Ministers compromise the future of girls – bad behaviour!] 26 September 2014 <http://www.keydmedia.net/news/article/wasiiradda_dfs_oo_curyaaminaaya_mustaqbalka_hablaha_soo_kacaaya_-_dhaq/> (28 June 2016).

[68] *Somalimemo, 'Sheikh Cali Dheere: Duulaanka dhanka akhlaaqda ah ayay gaaladu kusoo qaaday shacabka magaalada Muqdisho'* [Sheikh Cali Dheere: 'The infidels are leading an assault on good conduct against the population of Muqdisho] 28 February 2015 <http://somalimemo.net/articles/2270/ShCali-Dheere-Duulaanka-Dhanka-Akhlaaqda-ah-Ayay-Gaaladu-Kusooo-Qaaday-Shacabka-Magaalada-Muqdisho> (28 June 2016); *Xog Doon* newspaper, *'Maxaa laga dheefey mashruuca QUEST?'* [What was gained from the Quest program?], 13 April 2015.

[69] Studies of diaspora engagement have hitherto focused mainly on Somaliland, although similar tensions can also be identified. Laura Hammond, 'Diaspora returnees to Somaliland: Heroes of development or job-stealing scoundrels', in Lisa Akesson and Maria Eriksson Baaz (eds), *Africa's return migrants: The new developers* (Zed Books, London, 2015), pp. 44-63.

[70] Peter Chonka 'Beaches or bombings? Writing the 'real' Mogadishu', personal blog, 27 February 2015 <https://petechonka.wordpress.com/2015/02/27/beaches-or-bombings-writing-the-real-mogadishu/ > (16 February 2017).

with a call for Somali social media-users to *#tweetliidopictures*, re-asserting the targeted beach as an icon of hope, peace, and development for Mogadishu and Somalia.

Although there exists an important public sphere discourse criticising manifestations of "un-Somali" or "un-Islamic" liberal social practice brought by a returning diaspora, critiques of Al Shabaab may also describe its militancy and salafi/takfiri-*jihadi* ideology in terms of foreign importation at odds with "traditional" Somali Islamic practices. In this sense, discursive contestation goes beyond simple local/foreign binaries and engages a much more complex struggle for definitions of modern Somali cultural identity in the context of state reconstruction.

Al Shabaab attacks in Mogadishu against the Ministry of Culture and Higher Education were partly justified in terms of the government's collusion with foreign agencies in developing educational materials to promote democracy and "un-Islamic" behaviour. "Democracy", in the Somali *jihadi* discourse, is conflated with secularism, social liberalism, and various practices deemed foreign and un-Islamic. Al Shabaab propaganda frequently links the military invasion of Somalia by Westerners and both black and white 'infidels' with a cultural-religious attack on Somali, Islamic tradition and custom.[71] The state's propaganda campaign against Al Shabaab does not engage specifically secular discourses for the reconstruction of the Somali state and, ideologically, Mogadishu's power-holders have been generally orientated towards various factional brands of political Islam.[72] The growing influence of competing Islamic-world patrons such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, and

---

[71] Al Shabaab spokesman, *Dhageyso: Sheekh Cali dheere oo faafaahiyey weerarkii Wasaaradda Waxbarashada, digniin culusna jeediyey* [Listen: Sheikh Cali Dheere gives information about the attack on the Education Ministry, gives strong warning] 14 April 2015 <http://somalimemo.net/articles/2611/DhageysoSheekh-Cali-dheere-oo-faafaahiyey-Weerarkii-Wasaaradda-Waxbarashada-digniin-culusna-jeediyey> (28 June 2016).
[72] Ingiriis, 'The invention of Al Shabaab in Somalia', p. 6.

Turkey further conditions and complicates the ideological context of Somali state reconstruction.[73]

Although there is little nostalgia shown for the secularism of Barre's pre-1991 regime, the FGS has taken on the nationalist mantle of the former unified Somali state. As such, it performs its sovereignty (and the fiction of national control) through ceremonies and institutions that hark back to anti-colonial struggles and commemorations such as those for the independence days of the former British and Italian Somalilands.[74] Nonetheless, the realities of the FGS' dependence on external patrons often leave it open to the common charge that it remains beholden to neo-colonial influences. A short documentary by aforementioned journalist Jamaal Cusmaan's Dalsoor Media entitled 'Re-colonising Somalia' is illustrative of this type of critique as it accuses the European Union – extraterritorially ensconced in their Mogadishu airport 'Green Zone' HQ – of following a no-hire policy for Somali workers.[75]

That these places are conceptualised as lying beyond Somali sovereignty is, in part, a result of the targeting of violence highlighted above. Al Shabaab has a proven capacity to penetrate into these most secure sectors of the city and the security concerns that have influenced this alleged EU policy help reinforce the militants' own narrative. A self-perpetuating cycle of destabilisation, barricading, and segregation unfolds, allowing propagandists to emphasize the 'extraversion' inherent in this type of securitised

---

[73] Alex De Waal, 'Africa's $700 billion problem waiting to happen', *Foreign Policy,* 17 March 2016, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/03/17/africas-700-billion-problem-waiting-to-happen-ethiopia-horn-of-africa/> (18 April 2017).

[74] *Radio Mogadishu*, *'RW Cumar ayaa hambalyo ku aadan 26 June u diray dhamaan shacabka Soomaaliyeed'* [PM Cumar sends congratulations of 26 June to all of the Somali people] 26 June 2015, <http://www.radiomuqdisho.net/r-wasaare-cumar-oo-hambalyo-ku-aaddan-26-june-u-diray-dhamaan-shacabka-soomaaliyeed/> (30 May 2017). Such performances demonstrate the FGS's re-assertion of the identity and mandate of the unified post-independence state. The government of the now *de facto* independent Republic of Somaliland (whose independence from Britain this ceremony was commemorating) would reject the FGS's appropriation of this history, indicative of the division and mistrust across the wider Somali political environment.

[75] *Daalsoor Media*, *'Dib u gumaysiga Soomaaliya'* [Recolonising Somalia] 21 March 2016 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d4jU0uAW7Lc> (28 June 2016).

extraterritoriality and highlight external actors' detachment from the interests of the wider population.[76] Although the journalist in this example is not an Al Shabaab affiliate, it is unsurprising that this particular documentary has been publicised via pro-*jihadi* media. Once again, this highlights the blurring of boundaries between what might be called Somali "mainstream" and "*jihadi*" media producers.[77]

Conclusion

Daniel Esser points out that focus on spectacular attacks, often directed against international targets, can draw attention away from endemic forms of violence that have a quantitatively greater impact upon ordinary citizens, particularly marginalized groups.[78] This is an important insight, especially in regards to the value of such narratives for actors with vested interests in falsely portraying a city as being secure, with the exceptions of sporadic terrorist violence. Nevertheless, this article has argued that a close reading of the politics of performative violence in Mogadishu (not simply through the binaries of a Global War on Terror vocabulary) can generate insight into multi-dimensional contestation for re-emerging political authority playing out in a dynamic, decentred, and often uncontrollable media environment.

The relationship between the discursive and the practical implications of mediated violence in Mogadishu has been highlighted, for instance, in the ways in which attacks precipitate further physical barricading and segregation in the city, which in turn enable militant propagandists to emphasize the alleged extraversion of Somali sovereignty. The

---

[76] Tobias Hagmann, *Stabilization, extraversion and political settlements in Somalia* (Rift Valley Institute, London, 2016).
[77] Dalsoor media (featuring Al Jazeera journalist Hamze Maxamed) secured a remarkable face-to-face interview with Al Shabaab spokesman Sheikh Cali Dheere in early 2017 (See footnote 38). The journalist was detained by NISA on his return to Mogadishu. Although the tone of the questions was critical, the interview was reproduced across a wide variety of online Somali media platforms, including pro-Jihadi sites.
[78] Daniel Esser, 'Security scales: Spectacular and endemic violence in post-invasion Kabul, Afghanistan', *Environment and Urbanization* 26, 2 (2014), pp. 373-388.

intersection of transnational multimedia production and brutal, spectacular violence demonstrates that the public sphere does not merely constitute a discursive sideshow to "real" politics, but instead serves as a tangible arena of conflict that continues to define trajectories of ongoing Somali state reconstruction. The role of new media ecologies in contexts of prolonged armed conflict and political fragmentation deserves further comparative analysis, particularly with other cases where the scale of destruction hampers re-emerging and embattled state structures' ability to control narratives of political legitimacy. The data presented here from Mogadishu begins to illustrate some of the novel dilemmas a state is faced with when choosing to engage (and fight) in a modern public sphere that has itself emerged from prior conditions of statelessness and conflict.