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# DAESH'S EXPANSION IN SOMALIA, ITS STRATEGY, AND REGIONAL SECURITY IMPACTS

OSMAN TÜRK



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# DAESH'S EXPANSION IN SOMALIA, ITS STRATEGY, AND REGIONAL SECURITY IMPACTS

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He completed his master's and doctoral studies at the International Security Department of the Police Academy. In this process, he conducted fieldwork, interviews, and observations in numerous countries, including Syria, Afghanistan, Libya, Jordan, Chad, Sudan, Niger, Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Benin, Togo, Ghana, Ivory, Cameroon, Guinea, Kenya, Madagascar and Sudan. He is fluent in both English and Arabic.

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## INTRODUCTION

**I**n the international security and terrorism literature, DAESH has emerged as a hybrid entity that exhibits the characteristics of a proto-state structure and reflects the strategic evolution of al-Qaeda ideology (*al-Qaedaism*). The organization, which underwent a transformation after splitting from al-Qaeda in Iraq, has developed a terrorism model that reshaped international security dynamics.

The geopolitical fragilities in Syria and Iraq have been the main dynamics behind DAESH's rapid rise. In particular, the structural security vacuum created after the 2003 invasion of Iraq by the U.S., the chaotic environment resulted from the civil war, and the ethnic and sectarian tensions in the region enabled the organization to systematically gain ground. The complete dismantling of the Baath regime and the dissolution of state institutions in the post-invasion period led to

the exclusion of Iraq's Sunni Arab population from the political system. The "de-Baathification" policies implemented by the Iraqi central government under Nouri al-Maliki have removed almost all Saddam-era civil servants, officers, and security personnel from public office.<sup>1</sup> This paved the way for a significant number of qualified members of the security structures and bureaucracy to be pushed out of the system and potentially radicalized.<sup>2</sup> The Shiite-dominated central government's exclusionary and discriminatory policies toward Sunni regions have further escalated tensions in the region.<sup>3</sup> The failure to effectively restructure the Iraqi army and the prolonged security vacuum have created ideal conditions for radical groups to grow. This structural unraveling became one of the main dynamics that enabled DAESH's rapid expansion in the region, compounded by the impact of the Arab Spring and the Syrian civil war.

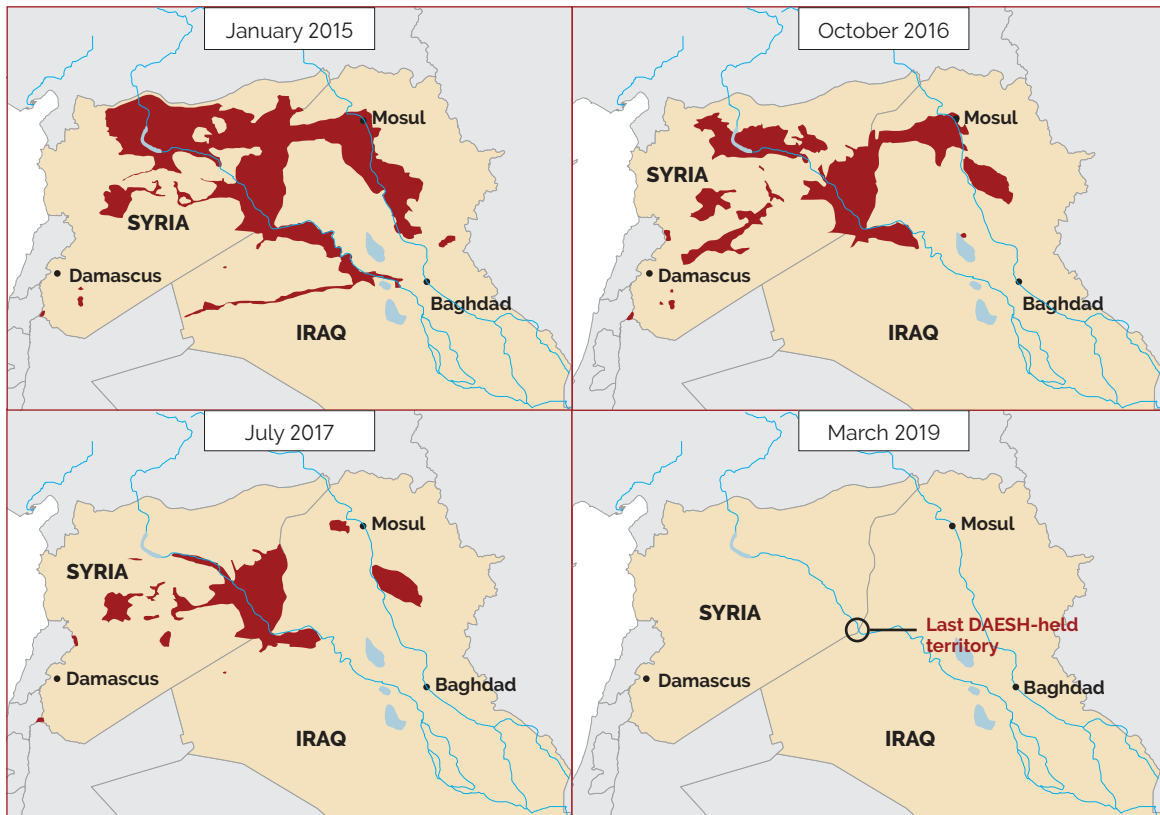
1 Fawaz A. Gerges, *ISIS: A History (Rev. ed.)*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016.

2 Lan Coles and Nicholas Parker, "How Saddam's men help Islamic State rule", *Reuters*, 11 December 2015.

3 Ahmed R. Hassan, "Sectarianism and Exclusion: The Political Dynamics of Sunni-Shia Relations in Iraq", *Middle Eastern Politics*, Volume 14, Issue 3, pp. 225-240, 2020.

After expanding by filling power gaps in the region, DAESH lost important strategic centers it controlled in Syria and Iraq as of 2017 due to coordinated operations by international coalition forces.<sup>4</sup> The fall of key cities such as Mosul, Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor led to the de facto collapse of DAESH's state-like organization. The killing of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in a U.S. operation in 2019<sup>5</sup> was a heavy blow to the symbolic and operational leadership of the organization. In this process, DAESH lost approximately 50,000 militants and suffered a significant loss of territory. However, although these operations seem to have narrowed the territories controlled by the organization in Syria and Iraq, they have not completely ended DAESH's ideological and organizational structure. On the contrary, it has developed a flexible network and organizational model to survive on a global scale.

**Figure 1:** How DAESH-controlled territory has shrunk?



**Source:** Conflict Monitor by IHS Markit

4 Türkiye's military operations have been a critical turning point in the decline of DAESH's territorial dominance in Syria. In particular, Operation Euphrates Shield (2016-2017) brought about the elimination of the organization's strategic bases along the Turkish border, and the seizure of the city of al-Bab dealt a significant blow to DAESH's logistical network. As a result of these operations, the organization lost an area of approximately 2,015 km<sup>2</sup> and was completely removed from the Turkish border. Through the Turkish Armed Forces' conventional ground operations and airstrikes, more than 3,000 DAESH members were neutralized, and the organization's weapons and ammunition depots, as well as critical infrastructure, were destroyed. These military achievements significantly limited DAESH's mobility and resource flow in the region and accelerated the organization's withdrawal process

5 "Bağdadi operasyonu- Trump: İŞİD lideri öldürüldü", *BBC Türkçe*, 27 October 2019.

This strategic transformation demonstrates that the terrorist organization has evolved from a purely armed group into a complex entity that exploits areas of socio-political disintegration. As part of this process, the organization began channeling its global networks into various conflict zones around the world. In the Horn of Africa, Somalia became a critical geographical area for DAESH's new expansion and reconstruction strategy.

Weak state structures, chronic security weaknesses, and ethno-religious tensions in the region have provided a favorable geopolitical backdrop for the organization to grow further. In particular, the region's strategic location—the intersection of the Red Sea, the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Peninsula—offers a unique geopolitical opportunity for the expansion strategies of terrorist organizations such as DAESH.

The geostrategic importance of the region shapes DAESH's potential expansion corridors in terms of trade routes, maritime security, and global power competition, directly affecting the organization's regional and global objectives. The presence and activities of DAESH in Somalia warrant a detailed examination within the context of its fragile state structure, its rivalry with the al-Shabaab terrorist organization, and regional dynamics. However, when analyzing DAESH as a ter-

rorist organization, a more accurate approach would focus on its ideological foundations and the factors that enable the spread of this ideology, rather than purely numerical data. In this context, the organization systematically applies the practices of marginalization, polarization, and legitimization of violence with historical references. The organization's ideological framework has the potential to quickly find a base and expand its sphere of influence in any region where favorable social, political, and economic conditions exist.

From this perspective, when assessing DAESH's presence in Somalia, it is essential to examine the dynamics that fuel the organization's ideology and the local reflections of these dynamics, rather than focusing on the quantitative data of the organization's members. This approach provides a more comprehensive analytical framework to understand the sustainability of the organization's presence in the region and potential areas of expansion. In other words, it must make sense of its existence through the questions of *why* and *how*. DAESH completed its radicalization steps through ideological, technical, and physical training in various parts of the world, subsequently having the opportunity to put these experiences into practice in Somalia. Peter Neumann, discussing this process of DAESH, emphasizes that coun-

**However, although these operations seem to have narrowed the territories controlled by the organization in Syria and Iraq, they have not completely ended DAESH's ideological and organizational structure. On the contrary, it has developed a flexible network and organizational model to survive on a global scale.**

terterrorism strategies should not be limited to security measures but should also take into account economic, social, psychological, and political factors.<sup>6</sup> According to Neumann, understanding the conditions that lead to the radicalization of individuals before acts of terrorism enables more effective counterterrorism efforts. From this perspective, focusing on “what happens before the bombs go off” is critical to understanding DAESH's presence in Somalia.

On the other hand, John Horgan offers a different perspective, analyzing DAESH's presence in Somalia through the question of *why*, but focusing on *how* this process occurred.<sup>7</sup> This approach provides a broader perspective in understanding DAESH's recruitment strategies. Together, these two approaches offer an important framework for analyzing how and why DAESH took root in Somalia. To understand DAESH's expansion in the Somali context, addressing both the questions of *why*

individuals are radicalized and *how* this process unfolds will enable a more comprehensive assessment of the organization's expansion strategies. These factors suggest that the organization should be considered not only a terrorist group but also a radical ideological movement.

Accordingly, this study aims to examine DAESH's presence and expansion dynamics in Somalia within a multidimensional analytical framework. The study analyzes the organization's structure in the region not only from a security perspective but also in terms of ideological, socio-political and, geostrategic parameters. The focus of the research is on DAESH's interaction with factors such as ideological diffusion mechanisms, competition dynamics with al-Shabaab, and state fragility. In this framework, the study aims to conceptualize the organization's presence in Somalia as a multi-layered entity.

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6 Peter Neumann, “The trouble with radicalization”, *International Affairs*, Volume 89, Issue 4, pp. 873-893, 2013.

7 John Horgan, “From profiles to pathways and roots to routes: Perspectives from psychology on radicalization into terrorism”, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, pp. 80-94, 2008.

## DAESH'S EXPANSION STRATEGY IN AFRICA



DAESH's pivot to Africa has become evident as a strategic imperative following the organization's heavy military defeats in Syria and Iraq. The loss of Mosul and Raqqa between 2016 and 2019 largely ended the organization's territorial dominance in the Middle East.<sup>8</sup> In this process, under intense pressure from international coalition forces, DAESH sought alternative areas of operation, and the favorable conditions in Africa created a new operational space for the organization. Weak state structures, large uncontrolled territories, ethnic and religious conflicts, and deep socioeconomic problems in Africa have fostered a favorable environment for DAESH's reconstruction. However, the claim of an absolute correlation between these dynamics and radicalization processes, as well as participation in terrorist organizations is not entirely relevant. In other words, social, political, economic, or identity crises are not the only, nor absolute dynamics of radicalization in every region. In this framework, the effect of dependent variables on radicalization pro-

cesses is shaped by factors such as target group, practitioner, time, and place.

The roots of radical movements in Africa can be traced back to Osama bin Laden's time in Sudan in the early 1990s. Using Sudan as a base between 1992 and 1996, bin Laden established a permanent headquarters for radical movements in Africa with the infrastructure and connections he developed there. The safe haven provided by Sudan during this period allowed al-Qaeda to establish organizational structures in Africa, develop relations with local groups, and build logistical networks. DAESH's rapid expansion in Africa after 2014 was essentially built on this historical foundation.<sup>9</sup>

Al-Qaeda's network in Africa is particularly strong in East Africa and the Sahel region. The presence of groups such as al-Shabaab, AQIM (Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb) has created a favorable environment for the spread of al-Qaedarism in the region. With al-Baghdadi's declaration of a caliphate in 2014, DAESH suc-

8 "İŞİD 2016'da Suriye ve Irak'taki topraklarının çeyreğini kaybetti", *BBC Türkçe*, 15 December 2016.

9 Osman Türk, *Afrika'da Bölgesel Güvenlik ve Terörizm*, Nobel, Ankara, 2024.

ceeded in using this existing structure to its advantage. By skillfully exploiting disagreements and leadership conflicts within al-Qaeda affiliates, the organization has managed to attract many groups to its ranks.

DAESH's first official organization in Africa was the West Africa Province (ISWAP), established in 2015 with the allegiance of Boko Haram. During this period, Boko Haram's allegiance to DAESH marked an important turning point in the organization's African strategy. However, the extreme violence and uncontrolled tactics of Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau disturbed Daesh's central leadership, leading to a split within the organization. As a result of this split, DAESH rejected Shekau's group and supported the more controlled and strategic ISWAP organization.<sup>10</sup>

The second phase of DAESH'S expansion in Africa occurred in 2015 with the creation of the Libya and Sinai provinces. The Libya province has been strategically important, especially as a transit point to sub-Saharan Africa, while the Sinai province has served as a critical base for operations in northeast Africa. These structures have strengthened DAESH'S Middle East-Africa connection and deepened the organization's presence on the continent.<sup>11</sup>

In 2018, the Central African Province (ISCAP) was established, evolving from former rebel groups in Uganda.<sup>12</sup> This province coordinated activities in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Mozambique, increasing the organization's influence in East Africa. The establishment of ISCAP signaled that DAESH continues to expand globally despite its territorial losses in the Middle East. In 2022, under

the new caliph of the organization, Abu al-Hasan al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi, two new provinces were declared: Wilayat Sahel (covering Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso) and Wilayat Mozambique. These new provinces gained independent status from ISWAP and ISCAP and were particularly notable for their capacity to resist international intervention forces.

DAESH's governance strategy in Africa is based on a delicate balance between centralized control and local autonomy. The organization allows local groups a certain degree of freedom of movement, while maintaining ideological and strategic direction through the central structure. This approach has enabled groups with different regional dynamics to be coordinated under one roof.

Another pillar of DAESH's structure in Africa was established in Somalia. Despite al-Shabaab's strong control, the organization has started to establish a presence, especially in Puntland. A group led by Abdulkadir Mumin pledged allegiance to DAESH in 2015, laying the foundation for the organization in Somalia.<sup>13</sup> Although DAESH's presence in Somalia has not established as wide a sphere of influence as in other African provinces due to the strong presence of al-Shabaab, it remains an important base for the organization's strategic objectives in East Africa. This organization functions as a critical transit point for the flow of logistical support and foreign terrorist fighters, particularly through Yemen. To analyze DAESH's presence in Somalia, the strategic position and importance of Somalia in the Horn of Africa must first be understood. This assessment provides a solid framework for the study.

10 Osman Türk, *Afrika'da Bölgesel Güvenlik ve Terörizm*, Nobel, Ankara, 2024.

11 James Warner, Robert O'Farrell, Hamza Nsaibia ve Richard Cummings, "Outlasting the Caliphate: The Evolution of the Islamic State Threat in Africa", *CTC Sentinel*, Volume 13, Issue 11, s. 18-30, 2020.

12 Kaan Devocioğlu, "Afrika'da DEAŞ'ın yayılımı: Stratejik etki ve ekonomik güvenlik boyutları", *Kriter Dergi*, 15 December 2021.

13 "DEAŞ'ın Somali'deki yeni kolu bağlılık yemini etti", *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 29 July 2019.

**Figure 2:** DAESH's African Provinces





## THE HORN OF AFRICA AND THE STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE OF SOMALIA: WHY SOMALIA?



The Horn of Africa is one of the most complex and sensitive subsystems in the global balance of power. Bearing deep traces of its historical colonial legacy, this region sits at the center of international relations and geopolitical rivalry.<sup>14</sup> The region is a complex geography that has historically been characterized by imperialist interventions, ethnic conflicts, cross-border security threats, and geopolitical rivalries. The geopolitical importance of the region is rooted in its location and resources. The Horn controls the oil trade and key trade routes through the Bab el-Mandeb Strait and the Suez Canal, making the region indispensable for global trade and energy security. The U.S.-China rivalry, particularly in the global south, further complicates the

security dynamics in the region. However, the borders shaped during the colonial period have become one of the region's most fundamental security problems. These borders have divided communities of the same ethnic groups into different states, creating a constant source of cross-border tensions. The weakness of the central authority and the difficulties in building a unified national identity have been primary drivers of instability. Despite these challenges, the Horn of Africa possesses great economic potential due to its rich cultural heritage and young population. However, political instability, ethnic conflicts, and economic injustices continue to hinder the realization of this potential.

14 From a Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) perspective, multilayered and interdependent dynamics shape the security fabric of the Horn of Africa. Developed by Barry Buzan and Ole Waever, the ISCT offers a holistic approach that takes a regional perspective on security beyond the purely national level. Buzan and Waever identified four basic criteria for a region to be considered as a security complex:

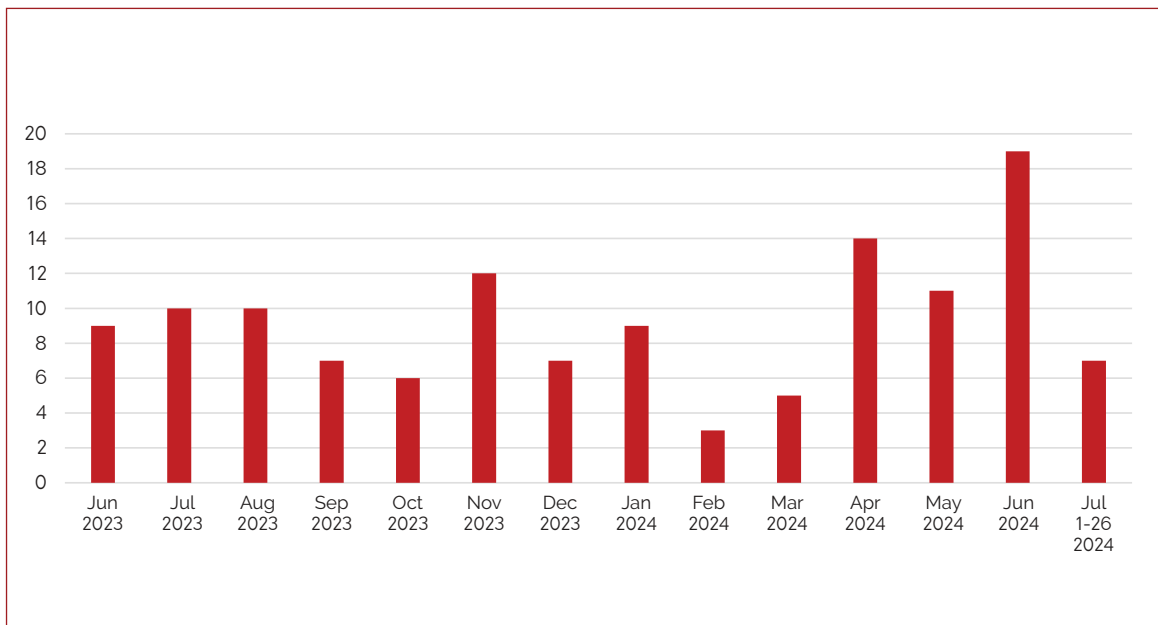
- Border and geographical proximity that separates the RSCT from its neighbors.
- The existence of a group of states whose primary security concerns are closely intertwined and whose national security cannot be separated.
- Anarchic structure within the complex.
- Social dynamics involving patterns of friendship and enmity between states.

Buzan and Waever questioned the widely accepted approach of analyzing the dynamics affecting regional security from a purely political and military perspective. However, they adopted a broader perspective by claiming that security should be analyzed in five dimensions: political, military, economic, social and environmental.

The security structure of the Horn of Africa is dynamic, multi-layered, and interdependent. States, ethnic groups, fundamentalist movements, and international actors constantly reshape the security fabric of the region. This process places Somalia in a distinct position within the Horn of Africa Security Complex. The active presence of non-state armed actors in Somalia has triggered a dialectical process between the central authority and these armed actors. In other words, the weakness of the central authority and the challenges in building a national identity are the factors that feed instability in the region. In this context, the presence of DAESH alongside al-Shabaab in Somalia further deepens the region's security dynamics. DAESH's expansion in Somalia represents a critical turning point in the regional terror ecosystem. Since 2015, DAESH's presence in al-Shabaab's traditional areas of control and its efforts to reshape the balance of power in the region highlight this shift.

However, the conflict dynamics between traditional authority and the central authority in Somalia essentially create porous gaps in the regio, which are exploited by both al-Shabaab and DAESH. The traditional authority-based social structure that has historically existed in Somalia has been a useful argument for conflict and instability today. Tribal conflicts, which escalated notably in the first half of 2024, further deepen the social vulnerabilities that al-Shabaab and DAESH exploit. Clan conflicts intensified from February 2024 onwards, reaching a one-year high in June 2024.<sup>15</sup>

**Table 1:** Clan conflicts in Somalia



Source: (ACLED: 2024)

15 "The looming threat: A resurgence of Islamic State and inter-clan fighting in Somalia", ACLED, 31 July 2024.

The geographical distribution of conflicts is particularly concentrated in strategically important regions. Ongoing conflicts in Gedo, Lower Shabelle, Middle Shabelle and Lower Juba weaken state authority in these regions and create security gaps. Nearly 50% of the clashes recorded in June took place in the Mudug region of Galmudug province, indicating the regional concentration of the problem.

The underlying causes of authority conflicts are multidimensional. Local power struggles, control of scarce resources (especially rangelands and water resources), disputes over infrastructure projects (such as dam construction) and the breakdown of traditional governance systems are the main factors triggering conflicts. This conflict environment paves the way for radical organizations to increase their influence over local communities. Radical organizations take advantage of the insecurity generated by conflicts of authority to position themselves as an alternative provider of order and security. The uncertainty and insecurity created by tribal conflicts, especially among youth, serves as a catalyst that accelerates the radicalization process. These groups exploit social vulnerabilities by offering victims of tribal conflicts the promise of

protection, justice, and a sense of belonging.

Although DAESH's Somali branch appears to have limited numerical strength (100-400 militants), the organization's true threat potential in the region lies in the infrastructure it has established and the operational capacity it has developed. The fact that the organization carried out a limited number of actions between 2022 and 2024, according to ACLED data, indicates that it is in a strategic preparation process rather than a weak activity in the region. In fact, the organization captured the strategically important Buuraha Cali Miskat mountain range in the Bari region of Puntland, creating a secure base for future expansion operations.<sup>16</sup>

Despite al-Shabaab's strong presence, DAESH's main threat is seen in the social networks it has established in the port city of Bosaso and surrounding settlements as well as the local clan connections of its leadership, especially through the Majeerten clan. Using its clan ties in the Qandala region, the organization has built a social base and logistical infrastructure that can mobilize quickly when the conditions are right. This shows that DAESH's potential for expansion is the main threat rather than its visible presence in the region.

**Radical organizations take advantage of the insecurity generated by conflicts of authority to position themselves as an alternative provider of order and security. The uncertainty and insecurity created by tribal conflicts, especially among youth, serves as a catalyst that accelerates the radicalization process.**

<sup>16</sup> "The looming threat: A resurgence of Islamic State and inter-clan fighting in Somalia". *ACLED*, 31 Temmuz 2024.

As a result, the Horn of Africa holds an important position in terms of global security and geopolitical competition. The region's complex security dynamics constitute an important part of not only the regional but also global secu-

urity. In the future, the stability and security of the region will continue to be shaped by the interplay of global power balances and local dynamics, leading to a multi-actor asymmetric intervention in Somalia and the Horn of Africa.

## DAESH IN SOMALIA: HISTORICAL PROCESS, ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE AND PROPAGANDA



A view of damage after a violent explosion occurred at a restaurant near the Presidential Palace in Mogadishu, Somalia, Sept. 28, 2024. (AA Photo)

DAESH's presence in Somalia began on October 14, 2015 when Abdulkadir Mumin, the former senior commander of al-Shabaab, pledged allegiance to then-DAESH leader al-Baghdadi.<sup>17</sup> Mumin also convinced a group of about 20-30 al-Shabaab militants from the Puntland region to join DAESH. Prior to pledging allegiance, Mumin was a prominent figure within al-Shabaab and served as a senior commander in charge of the group's operations in Puntland between 2010 and 2015.<sup>18</sup>

Mumin's role and influence in DAESH-Somalia is critical to DAESH's presence and transformation in the Horn of Africa. Born in Puntland in the late 1960s, Mumin immigrated to the UK in the early 1990s and became active in the Salafist establishment in London. Mumin's activities in London were particularly

centered around the Finsbury Park Mosque, where he strengthened his contacts with radical groups and became an important figure in the Somali diaspora.<sup>19</sup> In 2010, Mumin returned to Somalia and quickly rose through the ranks of al-Shabaab to become the organization's commander in the Puntland region. During his five-year tenure in al-Shabaab, he held critical positions, including responsibility for ideological training and foreign relations coordinator. On October 14, 2015, Mumin pledged allegiance to DAESH leader al-Baghdadi with a group of around 20-30 people and explained the reasons behind his decision as his vision of global jihad and his belief in the caliphate system. This explanation reveals that Mumin's leadership period in DAESH-Somalia was very productive in terms of organizational structuring.

17 East Africa Institute for Policy (EIP), Islamic State in East Africa, *EIP*, Ekim 2018.

18 International Crisis Group, The Islamic State in Somalia: Responding to an Evolving Threat, 2024.

19 Austin Doctor ve Gina Ligon, "The Death of an Islamic State Global Leader in Africa?", *CTC Sentinel - Combating Terrorism Center*, Temmuz/Ağustos 2024, Cilt 17, Sayı 7.

Mumin, who personally managed the selection of experienced assistants who had previously worked within DAESH's structures in Iraq and Syria, as well as the determination of task distribution and the establishment of decision-making mechanisms, also shaped the organization's Puntland-based expansion strategy. Mumin's leadership style is characterized by centralized control, quick decision-making and limited consultation. He adopted harsh disciplinary practices and a loyalty-based promotion system within the organization, with a particular emphasis on ideological education. Under Mumin's leadership, the number of militants in the organization grew from a core cadre in 2015 to between 300 and 500 militants by 2021, reflecting a significant improvement in operational capacity.<sup>20</sup>

One of Mumin's most remarkable achievements is his network of relationships with local actors. By negotiating with tribal leaders, establishing local collaborative networks, and developing economic relations, Mumin also established a strong line of communication with DAESH headquarters and coordinated with regional groups. Making effective use of his diaspora connections, Mumin was able to diversify the organization's financial resources. Under Mumin's leadership, DAESH-Somalia became one of the fastest growing radical organizations in the region. The system the organization established in the regions it controls, the social services it provides, and the legal system it applies have enabled it to gain a certain level of legitimacy in the eyes of the local population.<sup>21</sup> This decentralization

strategy is based on several key elements. The organization first identified gaps in local governance and sought to position itself as an alternative service provider in these areas. It aimed to gain social legitimacy by providing services such as basic healthcare, water supply, basic infrastructure and education support. Additionally, the organization has created an economic ecosystem by integrating into local trade networks, which increased the economic dependency of the local population. Sources of revenue such as control of local markets, customs duties and "protection" fees were established.<sup>22</sup>

DAESH respected tribal structures and cooperated with traditional authorities rather than clashing with them. This approach minimized local resistance and increased social acceptance. The forensic services provided by the organization were also a critical factor. Promising order and security that the existing administration could not provide, the organization established a fast and effective system through sharia courts. Paradoxically, this was perceived by some local communities as a form of stabilization. The long-term effect of this decentralization strategy has been the weakening of state authority and the establishment of an alternative system of governance. This shows the necessity of a comprehensive socio-economic approach in the fight against terrorism, not just a military one.<sup>23</sup>

Mumin's propaganda strategies have played an important role in the growth of the organization. By using social media effectively, regularly broadcasting videos and developing local media strategies, Mumin has

20 Ibid.

21 In 2024, personal meetings with Somali security bureaucracy officials provided information on Somalia's security situation and bureaucratic structures.

22 Osman Türk, "Somali'deki saha çalışmaları ve gözlemler", Personal observations, 2023.

23 International Crisis Group, *The Islamic State in Somalia: Responding to an Evolving Threat*, 2024.

managed to develop an effective discourse, particularly with the younger population. Under Mumin's leadership, DAESH-Somalia has transformed from a purely military organization into a complex entity with social, economic and ideological dimensions. This transformation process has made the organization's presence in the region more sustainable and a greater threat to international security.

Especially in the early years of its establishment in Somalia, DAESH based its strategy on gaining legitimacy, building a social base, and completing its organizational structure in line with Somalia's cultural dynamics. Among the organization's early initiatives were its activities in the Bari region of Puntland, with a particular focus on gaining control over the port of Qandala and its surroundings. In 2016-2017, DAESH strengthened its local tribal connections and managed to increase the number of its militants.<sup>24</sup> The year after following this period marked a turning point for the organization, which made its presence felt strongly with the attacks on the port of Bosaso. During this period, the organization established strong ties with DAESH in Yemen and transferred weapons and militants through the Gulf of Aden.

However, between 2019-2020, the organization sought to diversify its financial resources, doubling its annual income.<sup>25</sup> During this period, DAESH increased its operational capacity, especially through extortion, smuggling and financing through diaspora connections.

Somalia serves as a critical operational center in DAESH's global financial architecture. Financial operations managed through the al-Karrar office are strategically important for the sustainability of the organization's regional and global activities. According to data from the U.S. Treasury Department, DAESH-Somalia earned approximately \$5 million in 2021-2022, and according to the 2024 UN report, its monthly income reached \$360,000. These revenues are mainly derived from coercive collection and illegal taxation activities.<sup>26</sup>

Al-Karrar's financial sphere of influence extends beyond the African continent. It is claimed that a transfer of \$400,000 was made on the Somali-South Africa line between 2019 and 2021 alone. A significant portion of these transfers was directed to ISCAP and DAESH's Mozambique Province. Additionally, al-Karrar has been found to provide regular financial support to DAESH elements

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24 "Deaths Linked to Militant Islamist Violence in Africa Continue to Spiral", *Africa Center for Security Studies* 29 January 2024.

25 "Treasury Designates Senior ISIS-Somalia Financier", *U.S. Department of the Treasury*, 2023.

26 Caleb Weiss, "Reigniting the Rivalry: The Islamic State in Somalia vs. al-Shabaab", *CTC Sentinel - Combating Terrorism Center*, April 2019, Volume 12, Issue 4.

in Yemen, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Afghanistan. UN reports specifically claim that DAESH's Khorasan Province receives a monthly cryptocurrency transfer of \$25,000.<sup>27</sup>

The killing of Bilal al-Sudani, the architect of this sophisticated financial network, confirmed the organization's critical role in global financial structuring. Under al-Sudani's leadership, al-Karrar became a significant indicator of DAESH's evolution from a centralized structure to regional offices. This structural transformation demonstrates the organization's capacity to conduct integrated operations through regional offices such as al-Sadiq (Afghanistan), Umm al-Kura (Yemen) and al-Furqan (Nigeria). Following al-Sudani's elimination, statements from the U.S. Secretary of Defense also revealed the role of this financial network in financing critical actions such as the Kabul Airport attack.

In 2021-2022, the organization adopted a strategy of expansion towards the south of Somalia and began forming cells around Mogadishu. During this process, the organization avoided direct confrontation with al-Shabaab and targeted state institutions and security forces. In the 2022-2023 period, the organization intensified its propaganda activities, particularly aiming to reach the young population through social media. During this period, the number of militants in the organization ranged between 300 and 500<sup>28</sup>, while the number of sympathizers reached thousands.

By 2024, the organization had evolved into a more complex organizational structure, strengthening its military wing as well as its media, intelligence and financial affairs units. The most striking feature of the organization throughout its nine-year existence has been its constant adaptation and development.

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27 Caleb Weiss and Lucas Webber, "Islamic State-Somalia: A Growing Global Terror Concern", *CTC Sentinel - Combating Terrorism Center*, Eylül 2024, Volume 17, Issue 8.

28 As stated in the introduction, for organizations like DAESH, which have a strong ideological structure and are embraced as a form of salvation in times of crisis, ideology holds significance beyond simply sustaining the existence of the organization. In this context, the transformation of al-Qaeda, which was on the verge of extinction in Iraq in 2010, into a state-like organization in a short period of time following the gap created by the Arab Spring, demonstrates that it is misleading to assess DAESH's future in Somalia solely based on the number of recruits.

## A PARADOX THAT HAS FED DAESH: AL-SHABAAB



The rivalry between terrorist organizations in Somalia has become one of the most important factors shaping the region's security dynamics. In particular, the multidimensional struggle between DAESH and al-Shabaab has critical implications not only for local but also for regional and global security. Situated at the center of the Horn of Africa Security Complex, Somalia remains a focal point for DAESH's efforts to strengthen its presence and its relationship with al-Shabaab, the region's current dominant group. DAESH's presence in the region is driven by a dual strategic approach. On one hand, it seeks to exploit al-Shabaab's operational capacity, while on the other, it encourages recruitment by deepening intellectual divisions within the organization.<sup>29</sup> At this point, within DAESH's expansion and deepening efforts in Somalia, al-Shabaab is already a bigger stakeholder of the regional legacy than DAESH.

However, al-Shabaab's connection to al-Qaeda is considered both an obstacle and

an opportunity for DAESH. This dynamic is characterized as "competitive fundamentalism" between radical actors, especially in civil war settings. By targeting young militants within al-Shabaab, DAESH presents its "global jihad" concept in a more radical framework, fueling internal conflicts. DAESH has the potential to change the balance of power in Somalia and continues to mobilize disgruntled elements within al-Shabaab to increase its influence over the local population and militant groups. This competition is reshaping not only the conflict between the two groups but also the dynamics of radicalization across the region.

The increasing political instability and security vacuum in Somalia, which are also influenced by this rivalry, create a favorable ground for DAESH to expand its operational space and capacity. DAESH's attempt to gain territory, especially in Puntland, by exploiting conflicts within local tribal structures and the weakness of state authority, reveals the

<sup>29</sup> Thomas Bacon, Andrea C. Doctor ve James Warner, "A Global Strategy to Address the Islamic State in Africa", *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT)*, 29 June 2022.

**DAESH has the potential to change the balance of power in Somalia and continues to mobilize disgruntled elements within al-Shabaab to increase its influence over the local population and militant groups.**

organization's ability to skillfully use regional dynamics. DAESH's strategy for gaining ground in Somalia is based on turning its rivalry with al-Shabaab into a strategic advantage. Despite al-Shabaab's long presence in the region, DAESH has sought to expand its sphere of influence, especially by exploiting the weak points of the organization and the dissatisfaction of the local population. DAESH's strategy is shaped by three main dimensions: ideological differentiation, a modern organizational model, and a social service network.

DAESH first criticizes al-Shabaab's locally focused understanding of jihad and presents its vision of global jihad as an alternative. In its propaganda activities, especially targeting the young population, the organization emphasizes the discourse of "global Islamic resistance" in contrast to the "parochial" and "local" approach of al-Shabaab.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, DAESH's modern organizational model is presented as an alternative to al-Shabaab's traditional hierarchical structure. DAESH operates with a more flexible and autonomous cell structure, especially in urban areas. This structure provides the organization with operational flexibility and makes it easier to evade surveillance by security forces.

One of DAESH's most effective strategies for gaining territory is to exploit popular discontent in al-Shabaab-controlled areas. The organization seeks to establish a base by promising a more "moderate" governance in contrast to the harsh taxation and strict Sharia law imposed by al-Shabaab. Particularly in rural areas, DAESH aims to capitalize on clan leaders who are tired of al-Shabaab's oppressive practices by offering economic concessions and greater autonomy.

There is also significant competition in terms of propaganda and communication strategies. DAESH's effective use of modern technology and social media platforms makes it easier for the organization to find a base, especially among urban youth. DAESH's digital propaganda techniques have an edge over al-Shabaab's traditional communication methods. In fact, the main reason for the rivalry between terrorist organizations in Somalia is the strategic importance of the region and the opportunities it offers. The Horn of Africa's geopolitical location, proximity to maritime trade routes and weak state control allow terrorist organizations to increase their operational capabilities. These strategic advantages exacerbate competition between organizations and affect conflict dynam-

<sup>30</sup> United Nations Development Programme, "Dynamics of violent extremism in Africa: Report", United Nations Development Programme, 2023.

ics. In particular, control of financial resources is an important dimension of competition. This financial rivalry directly affects the operational capacities and spheres of influence of organizations.

Another factor is that the presence and interventions of international actors in the region paradoxically enrich the propaganda material for both organizations. The presence and actions of international actors in Somalia have become a key factor feeding the propaganda and legitimacy discourses of terrorist organizations. In particular, DAESH and al-Shabaab are using this situation to their advantage, strengthening their efforts to recruit supporters and gain legitimacy.

From al-Shabaab's perspective, especially the presence of African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) forces strengthen the organization's discourse of "resistance against foreign occupation". The organization tries to mobilize the nationalist sentiments of the local population by developing a narrative based on Ethiopia's historical hostility. Al-Shabaab's characterization of the presence of Ethiopian troops as a "Christian occupation" reveals its combination of religious and nationalist discourses. DAESH, on the other hand, views the presence of international actors within a broader ideological framework. The organization interprets the military pres-

ence of Western powers, especially the U.S., in the region through the discourse of a "global crusade." By using this discourse, DAESH seeks to integrate local conflict into the global jihad narrative.<sup>31</sup> What is particularly striking is the way in which both organizations use international interventions in their internal rivalries. Al-Shabaab positions itself as a "local resistance" while trying to portray DAESH as a "foreign organization." DAESH, on the other hand, describes al-Shabaab as an organization "stuck in local problems" and "lacking a vision of global jihad."

The international community's counter-terrorism strategies also produce paradoxical results. Drone strikes and civilian casualties caused by special operations enrich the propaganda material of both organizations. This situation enables the groups to assume the role of "protector of civilians" thereby gaining legitimacy in the eyes of the local population. In conclusion, the rivalry between DAESH and al-Shabaab persists as a multidimensional struggle within Somalia's complex sociopolitical structure. Managing and mitigating this competition requires a better understanding of local dynamics and the development of appropriate strategies. In terms of regional security and stability, it is critical to analyze these competitive dynamics correctly and to determine appropriate intervention methods.

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31 Osman Türk, "Somali'deki saha çalışmaları ve gözlemler", Personal observations, 2023.



## CONCLUSION



DAESH's expansion strategy in Africa clearly demonstrates the organization's adaptability and ability to exploit local dynamics. After its territorial losses in the Middle East, the organization turned to Africa, leveraging the infrastructure left by al-Qaeda, and expanded its area of influence by establishing six provinces in different parts of the continent. The organization's success has been driven as much by its ability to understand and adapt to local dynamics as by instability, weak state structures and socioeconomic problems in the region.

Its organization in Somalia is an important indicator of DAESH's overall Africa strategy. While the organization's presence in Puntland may seem limited in terms of numbers (100-400 militants), its real threat potential lies in the infrastructure it has built and the operational capacity it has developed. The training camps and logistical networks it has established in the region, particularly since 2015, reflect the organization's long-term planning. By

utilizing local clan connections, strategic geographical locations and favorable social terrain, it has created a structure that can expand rapidly when the conditions are right. This organization functions as a critical transit point for the flow of logistical support and fighters, especially from Yemen. Thanks to its strategic location in the Gulf of Aden, the organization is able to transfer both human resources and materials by sea. This shows that DAESH's presence in Africa cannot be evaluated solely by the number of militants. Unlike al-Qaeda, the organization uses local dynamics more flexibly and strikes a more pragmatic balance between central control and local autonomy. In particular, strategic alliances with local tribal structures and ethnic groups increase the organization's regional influence. This strategy ensures a sustainable presence of the organization in Africa and paves the way for potential areas of expansion. This approach allows DAESH to position itself as an alternative governance and security provider, especially in regions where state authority is weak. The

organization seeks to increase social support by establishing social services and local security mechanisms in these regions.

DAESH's presence in Africa continues to pose a serious security threat to the international community. To effectively counter this threat, it is necessary to strengthen regional cooperation mechanisms, enhance local governance capacity, and implement socioeconomic development programs that consider the region's complex clan structure and historical conflict dynamics, rather than security-oriented approaches that rely solely on unilateral Western interventions. In particular, it is important to share intelligence based on local ownership and develop joint operational

capacities between the countries of the region without turning into a competition area for external powers. Moreover, given the organization's ability to exploit local dynamics, it is imperative to develop comprehensive strategies that take into account structural problems such as drought, poverty and lack of infrastructure, and aim to increase social resilience and prevent radicalization. These strategies should include educational programs specifically aimed at preventing the radicalization of young people and the creation of sustainable economic opportunities. However, it needs to be implemented in a framework that respects local dynamics, learning from the failed intervention experiences of Western actors in the past.





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