A
l-Shabaab’s hasty retreat from the port city of Kismayo in September 2012 all but ended the militant group’s dream of converting Somalia into a utopian Islamist State that forbids soccer, TV and music. But what’s good for Somalia may have adverse consequences for the region. Even before African Union troops chased the Islamists from their last stronghold, seizing their main source of supplies and tax revenue, al-Shabaab had begun to forge tactical alliances with other Islamist groups across the East African region. Now the movement’s survival and relevancy will depend on them.

Islam reached Africa’s Horn more than one thousand years ago from the Arab Peninsula. By the seventeenth century it had spread across much of East Africa. Radical Islam first made contact with the region in the 1950s, when a small number of Muslims returned after studying under Wahhabist teachers at Egypt’s Al-Azhar University. At the time, Africans traditionally practiced Sufi or “popular” Islam, and few actively promoted the strict Middle Eastern-infused strains of Islam like Wahhabism and Salafism. Matters changed in the 1970s, however, when Saudi Arabia, plush with petrodollars, began funding mosques, madrassas, social centers, charity groups and educational exchanges through organizations like the Muslim World League. Locals now commonly refer to Wahhabi-Salafism as “purified” or “uncorrupted” Islam.

Other outside influences included Libya under Muammar Gaddafi as well as the Islamic Republic of Iran. Gaddafi trained and sent abroad Islamic teachers and funded the construction of mosques in order to “make Islam triumph in Africa.” The region’s
biggest mosque in Kampala, which bears the Libyan dictator’s name, is one obvious example of Gaddafi’s ideological influence. Many East African Muslims mourned his death, as they considered him a great contributor to Islam in Africa.

Tehran has a minor influence in Africa as well: it has expressed a desire “to restore Islam to its former glory, while attacking satanic forces of imperialism and Zionism” in Kenya. The Iranian regime has established a headquarters for such purposes in Jinja Uganda and Bunju, Tanzania.¹

Somalia, however, since the collapse of the central government in 1991, has distinguished itself most as an incubator for radical Islam in the region.² Al-Itihaad al-Islamiya (AIAI), or the Islamic Union, was the most prominent movement to rise from the leadership vacuum. Born in the 1990s with Saudi financing, AIAI largely consisted of educated Muslims who had studied in the Middle East and saw political Islam as the solution to the corruption and tribalism plaguing the Siad Barre Regime.³ After the regime’s collapse in 1991, Osama bin Laden sent foreign fighters to train local fighters with the aim of establishing a Horn-wide Islamic State.⁴ By 1996, AIAI had taken to exporting terrorism, carrying out assassination attempts and bombings in Ethiopia’s capital, Addis Ababa. It also succeeded in building ideological and operational connections with Somalis in Kenya and Tanzania.

Domestically, however, Somalia’s clan-based social structure and its inherent resistance to foreign and puritanical forms of Islam such as Wahhabism limited AIAI’s reach and influence. Reverence for tradition has typically superseded adherence to Islam, which is considered by many to be a form of cultural imperialism, and clan law and norms are viewed as the means to preserving Somali identity. This led AIAI to put a greater focus on indoctrination through Islamic education, which it offered primarily by means of aid from international Islamic charity organizations.⁵

U.S. intelligence officials accused AIAI of being an al-Qaeda cell and cooperating with bin Laden and al-Qaeda in plotting the 1998 United States embassy bombings in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam. Interference from the outside—mainly from the U.S. and neighboring Ethiopia—has over time, along with the war on terror, helped generate support for radical Islam in Somalia among outsiders, who painted the Americans and Ethiopians as infidel occupiers. The country experienced an uptick in violence targeting foreigners, including suicide bombings and improvised explosive devices, as well as an influx of fighters from foreign countries and the Somali diaspora who are linked with al-Qaeda.

In 2000, a rival group to AIAI emerged that was made up of ten sharia courts. Known as the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), or Ittih d al-Mah kim al-Isl miyya in Arabic, the group included the former head of AIAI Shaykh Hassan Dahir Aweys, who headed its consultative council. A former army colonel, Aweys reportedly organized the group’s military
training and strategy. He was also the group’s spiritual leader and helped arrange funding from the government of neighboring Eritrea.6

The ICU sought to set up an Islamic government ruled by sharia courts. It demanded strict adherence to Islam, issuing a fatwa in 20047 that declared the celebration of the New Year punishable by death and shutting down cinemas showing “immoral” Western fare.8 The ICU declared sport in general a “satanic act,” segregated seating for men and women at sporting events, and constructed mosques on site to ensure that players did not miss prayers. Needless to say, the ICU’s rule was unpopular. Several thousand protested in Kismayo. The unpopularity of radical Sharia notwithstanding, the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) and Ethiopian troops clashed with the ICU in various locations across the country in December 2006. The ICU painted Ethiopia’s involvement as an attempted foreign takeover, and this invited even greater resentment. The TFG and U.S.-backed Ethiopian troops managed to take back Mogadishu and other key towns and forced the ICU into retreat towards the Kenyan border in late 2006. However, the ICU’s youth wing, al-Shabaab, meaning “The Youth,” broke away to wage jihad against what it deemed the enemies of Islam and restore the Caliphate.

Like AIAI and the ICU before it, al-Shabaab’s ideology is rooted in Wahhabi-Salafism, a puritanical form of Islam that finds inspiration from the way the earliest Muslims practiced the religion; violence and terrorism are essential to its socio-political aims. Al-Shabaab is distinguished, however, in that it relies more heavily on violence and terrorism and has a more regional than global outlook. “Salafi-Jihadist” is how some have described the group.9 10 Al-Shabaab officially allied itself with al-Qaeda in February of 2012.

Until his death by a U.S. airstrike in May 2008, Adan Hashi Farah Ayro (sometimes spelled “Eyrow”) led Al-Shabaab. He was thought to be a Canadian Somali who received military training in Afghanistan before 9/11. He lacked religious credentials, but was nonetheless instrumental in strengthening al-Shabaab’s ties with the global jihadist movement. These ties had concrete results: in 2006 Ayro sent 720 Somali volunteers to Lebanon to assist Hezbollah in fighting Israel. In September of that same year, five members of Hezbollah and 20 Somalis who received military training in Lebanon arrived in Somalia.11

Al-Shabaab also provided cover to key al-Qaeda operatives in the region. One prominent example is Fazul Abdullah Mohammed, the alleged leader of al-Qaeda in East Africa who was killed at a Somali military checkpoint last year. Al-Shabaab also revered the writings of al-Qaeda senior leaders and clerics such as Abu Qatada and Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi; al Shabaab’s magazine, “Millat Ibrahim,” is named after a book by Maqdisi.12

Al-Shabaab uses video, radio and the Internet to bolster support among Somalis and international jihadists. It broadcasts on numerous stations using confiscated equipment,13
and uses video and the Internet, including social media platforms like Twitter, to reach fellow jihadists and sympathizers beyond Somalia’s borders. It portrayed itself as a restorer of order in a lawless state and a resistor of “foreign occupiers” (namely Western-backed Ethiopian and African peacekeeping troops sent to support the fragile Transitional Federal Government). It employed guerilla tactics, including the use of improvised explosive devices and suicide bombings, to fend off Ethiopia’s advance from the north. It also pursued a political strategy: in southern Somalia it won many allies by engaging clan leaders, distributing food and money and settling local disputes swiftly through makeshift courts.14 Deep clan loyalties in Somalia, however, have prevented al-Shabaab from advancing a unified cause.15 Al-Shabaab has succeeded where it has convinced clans that its utopian religious aims are compatible with the day-to-day challenges faced by clans. In parts of southern Somalia, for instance, clan leaders lacking institutional capacity welcomed al-Shabaab’s assistance to the poor and its meting out of justice to criminals through makeshift sharia courts.16

But by 2008, with much of southern Somalia under its control, al-Shabaab’s harsh rule inspired by the example of early Islam had begun to alienate many Somalis. The group stoned accused adulterers, declared gold and silver dental fillings un-Islamic, banned women from wearing bras, and beheaded those it accused of embracing Western ideals. Meanwhile, the African Union had begun to beef up troop levels and diminish its territorial control of the south. The rapid loss of territory and popular support that followed may have led the group to shift its focus more to external targets and to establish a formal alliance with al-Qaeda in February of this year.

Al-Shabaab’s first major attack outside Somalia was its twin suicide bombing of nightclubs in Kampala, Uganda, during the closing minutes of the 2010 World Cup. Al-Shabaab said the attacks were retaliation for Ugandan troops stationed in Somalia. That conclusion is contestable. In fact, according to Kenyan officials, members of two al-Qaeda-linked groups had reportedly left Somalia for Kenya to set up terrorist cells as far back as 2005.17 Further investigations into the Kampala bombings revealed al-Shabaab to have stronger ties to neighboring countries than previously estimated. Kenyan and Ugandan authorities arrested suspects of Pakistani, Kenyan, Ugandan and Yemeni in connection with the attacks. Some were later released.

In any case, it stands to reason that al-Shabaab’s domestic setbacks hardly signal an end to Islamism in East Africa. It could in fact bolster the cause.
After al-Shabaab

Islamism in East Africa has grown over the years amid weak institutions, oppression and corruption, rampant poverty, and the perception among many Muslims that the West is waging a war against Islam.

Across the region, disillusionment with the corrupt states has resulted in a growing Islamic consciousness and energized Islamic political movements. There is a growing call across the region for Muslim institutions to run parallel to traditional ones. Kenyan Muslims, for instance, successfully lobbied for the establishment of Kadhi courts in the country’s new constitution, ratified in 2010. Muslims in Uganda are fighting for similar rights. Tanzanian Muslims are fighting for marriage and other rights specific to Muslims in anticipation of the country’s drafting a new constitution.

Over the years, Islamists throughout Africa’s Horn have forged temporary alliances with the aim of bringing down governments or repelling external forces. Al-Shabaab has increasingly been tailoring its strategy to this broader cause, seeing it as a means of remaining relevant and advancing Islamism’s power regionally. Nowhere is this more evident than in Kenya, where al-Shabaab has conducted a series of bomb and grenade attacks on civilian targets ever since Kenya sent troops into Somalia to fight al-Shabaab October 2011.

In January of this year, it formally linked up with the Muslim Youth Center (MYC, also known as Pumwani Muslim Youth) and which renamed itself al-Hijra, meaning New Year, in early 2012. MYC has reportedly restructured its financing and membership to make it easier for its organization in Nairobi, the Pumwani Riyadha Mosque Committee, to fund Al-Shabaab.

While African Union troops were closing in on al-Shabaab’s last major stronghold, Kismayo, in September, MYC declared in a statement that it would send reinforcements and raise “the flag of Tawheed high over Kenya and East Africa.” AU and Somali troops seized the town in early October.

MYC has allegedly funded, recruited and fostered training networks for al-Shabaab recruits in Kenya. According to a UN Report in 2011, Ahmad Imam Ali, the MYC’s head, visited Somalia in 2009. The group has cultivated sympathizers and members in Eldoret, Mombasa, Garissa and other Kenyan towns, doing so through the Pumwani Riadha Mosque Committee and through ideological leaders like Shaykh Aboud Rogo Mohammed.

Beginning in around 2007, Shaykh Aboud conducted weekly sermons from Masjid Musa in Mombasa, declaring al-Shabaab’s war in Somalia the road to martyrdom and insisting that working for the Kenyan government was haram. He rejected all for-
mal learning, inter-religious dialogue, and considered it a duty to wage war against infidels.

Aboud was charged in January of this year with possession of guns and ammunition, and released on bail by a Mombasa court this past July. He has been alleged to have personal links to al-Qaeda’s East African chief, Fazul Abdullah Mohammed, and to have helped him orchestrate the twin U.S. Embassy Bombings in Tanzania and Kenya in 1998. He also allegedly introduced Fazul to Kubwa Mohammed Seif, who helped Fazul mastermind the suicide attack on the Israeli-owned Paradise Mombasa Hotel in 2002. Aboud was shot and killed by unknown assailants as he drove his wife to a hospital on August 27, 2012.

Islamism in Kenya was not diminished with Aboud’s death, however. Several thousand Muslims took to the streets in Mombasa, burning vehicles, looting two churches, and firing on police with machine guns during a second day of clashes to protest his murder. Speaking days before his arrest with the newspaper *The Daily Nation* in Kenya, Aboud’s close ally Said Abubakar Shariff said, “Al-Shabaab are Somalis. They should be left to rule Somalia.” He also accused American, British and Israeli security agencies of forming hit squads to target Muslims in Kenya.

Puritanical interpretations of Islam that condone violence are most acute in the coastal city of Mombasa, where a majority of the population is Muslim (compared to 11 percent nationally), and influence from the Middle East dates back centuries through trade links. Tens of thousands of Muslims of Arab descent in addition to Somalis now live in Mombasa.

It was in Mombasa that Aboud’s sermons first found a receptive audience, especially among the youth. The city’s high rate of unemployment, combined with the fact that the tourist trade has disproportionately benefited local elites and outsiders from inland Kenya and from overseas, has generated sentiment among the youth and others that non-believers who are against Islam are running the government.

After Aboud’s death, MYC delivered the news to the mujahideen in Tanzania and took to Twitter to vow revenge on unbelievers, signaling a possibility that it is looking to strengthen ties regionally. In another Twitter post, dated August 3, 2012, MYC said, “For the privileged brothers and sisters who join jihad they are given training in everything from the true meaning of Islam to using RPGs, AK-47s and other weapons.” (The group’s Twitter account is MYC_Press.)

According to local media reports, Masjid Sunna, which is located in the Majengo area of Mombasa, has been the center of the MYC’s activities and the base for terrorism in the region. The mosque’s imam, Alzadin Muriuki Omar, a Salafist, denies the characterization. Indeed, not all Kenyan Salafists support terrorist methods; however, militant Salafist Somalis have grown in presence and influence in Kenya.
Another group suspected of fanning radicalism is the Mombasa Republican Council. Banned in 1999 for calling for secession, the council re-emerged in 2008 calling for Mombasa’s secession from Kenya. Although the council’s ties with radical Muslim groups have been unforthcoming, the group’s members have drawn attention to land grievances and the fact that outsiders dominate the local economy thus feeding the ire of coastal Muslims. The council’s lacking ties with radical Muslim organizations notwithstanding, the majority of its members are Muslim.

Eastleigh, a Somali-dominated suburb of Nairobi and subdivision of Pumwani, has also been a hotbed of Salafism at least since AIAI reached out to Somalis there in the mid 1990s. Al-Shabaab has raised funds and recruited from the neighborhood. Jihadist sermons and propaganda at Salafist mosques in the area have waned of late; however, it’s possible that jihadism has merely grown less visible amid greater surveillance from authorities. There are indications that jihadists are conducting lectures and study group sessions in Eastleigh with growing frequency in homes and madrassas.

Some observers say that after al-Shabaab, jihadism may be waning even though adherence to Salafist and Wahhabist strains of Islam may be growing amid relentless teachings. As noted above, extremists are spreading their message through the internet and social media. Al-Shabaab’s media wing, the Al-Kata’ib (The Brigades) Media Foundation, has grown significantly since its launch in 2007, producing videos in English, Swahili and Arabic. MYC and Al-Shabaab have used Twitter to inform extremists of leadership changes and to stoke outrage. For instance, MYC’s Twitter account featured a picture of radical MYC-connected Kenyan Muslim preacher Samir “Abu Nuseyba” Khan Hussein after he was found dead in a forest in Voi, southern Kenya, in April. With few job prospects, jihadists are having some success in persuading Muslim youths with rewards such as money and prizes to carry out acts of terrorism. A growing number of these recruits are non-Somali converts. Al-Hijra’s Ahmad has reportedly recruited up to 500 foreign-born, Arab fighters from the Swahili coast in Kenya and Tanzania. Arab recruits can more easily avoid the detection of the local authorities than Somalis because of the Arab world’s historical connection to the Swahili coast, which resulted in inter-marriage and some cultural overlap.

Rights activists claim that the Kenyan police’s heavy-handed response to Muslim political activism and extremism, coupled with the country’s poor economic prospects and other perceived injustices against Muslims, are fanning radicalization among Muslims. These are surely contributing factors. However, the relentless and increasingly well-organized efforts at ideological outreach by locals and outsiders who preach an us-versus-them, under-siege mentality, suggests that radical Islam is the result of more than economic and political grievances against the government.
In May 2012, Muslim rioters set two churches ablaze on the historic island chain of Zanzibar a day after the arrest of Shaykh Farid Hadi Ahmed, a leader of the UAMSHO (“Awakening”) group, for participating in an illegal demonstration. UAMSHO, more fully known as Jumikior Jumuiya ya Uamsho na mihadhara ya kislam (The Association for Islamic Mobilization and Propagation), began as an Islamic NGO in 2001. More recently it has called for Zanzibar to break away from mainland Tanzania and be ruled by sharia law. Zanzibar’s government says the movement holds strict fundamentalist views. The group has threatened attacks against Christians, including through its Facebook page. A script on the group’s office wall hails the Lebanese militant Islamist group, Hezbollah. The group denies any connection to terrorism, however, and the chairman of UAMSHO’s trustees, Abdulrahim Salim, has insisted the group is peacefully pursuing independence for Zanzibar and dismisses claims that it is looking to impose sharia law.

Authorities brushed off the church violence as an isolated case. But in fact, the seeds of extremism on the tourist islands have been germinating for some time. As with Kenya’s coast, Zanzibar’s contact with the Arab world dates back centuries. While Tanzania is mostly Christian, ninety eight percent of the island is Muslim. Zanzibar’s development lags far behind the mainland, and there is a widely held perception that the island’s tourist trade and other commercial activity have disproportionately benefited non-Muslims.

While mainland authorities blamed the sectarian attacks on UAMSHO, the group has denied involvement. However, local experts say the radical group at least provided the intellectual justification for the attacks. The group has openly protested the construction of more churches on Zanzibar. Since the recent influx of small traders from the mainland has increased the number of island churches, UAMSHO’s protests carry significance with regards to threats of terrorism against Christian houses of worship. Moreover, radical voices have been granted significant air-time at Muslim-owned radio stations, heightening tensions with Christians.

The group has also fed on disillusionment with the island’s main opposition party, the Civic United Front (CUF). CUF and CCM formed a unity government in 2010, which has left many island Muslims feeling unrepresented. The unity government has left Zanzibar with less autonomy to address economic woes, and some island Muslims detect therein an attempt to deprive them of forming viable economic links with other Muslim nations. The unity government, for instance, denied Zanzibar the right to become a member of the Islamic Conference Organization (IOC), which Muslims say...
would provide much needed external financing. Zanzibar Muslims also feel that the tourist trade disproportionately benefits mainlanders, and that mainland authorities’ leniency toward dress codes, which appeals to foreigners and has been good for business, is disrespectful towards Zanzibar’s Islamic cultural norms.

At a press conference in June 2012, Shaykh Farid called for Zanzibar to secede from the mainland, while denying accusations that his group received outside financial support and that he once served as an infantryman in the Oman army.37 Shaykh Farid has admitted to making frequent trips to Oman.38 Police suspect UAMSHO is funded by Arab individuals and organizations, and Saudi money reportedly influences the movement. The group has disseminated jihadist training videos and literature and called for the assassination of Tanzanian officials who do not support the implementation of sharia law.39 Some Western observers have accused the group of plotting terrorist attacks; however, according to the investigations of several Western embassies, the group does not promote violence despite its strict commitment to sharia law.40

At the press conference, Shaykh Farid said UAMSHO represents thirty local Muslim communities. UAMSHO’s deputy Shaykh Azzani Khalid Hamdan has openly called for sharia law in Zanzibar, stating that “Sharia law is the basis of all law. It allows us to render judgment based on the Koran against those who don’t follow the laws of Allah.”

Another Islamist group that has risen to prominence is the Ansar Muslim Youth Center, which is based in Tanga along Tanzania’s north mainland coast. In January of this year, it announced links to the MYC in Kenya. AMYC has recruited and raised funds for al-Shabaab, and has built linkages with a number of mosques around Tanzania.41 Shaykh Salim Abdulrahim, who reportedly has been in contact with MYC’s Abubakar Shariff, heads the group. MYC’s Aboud Rogo has made arrangements for AMYC members to study at radical madrasas in Kenya. Some of AMYC’s members have also traveled to Somalia via Mombasa.42 43 Ten Tanzanians were arrested in November 2011 along with al-Shabaab militants in Mogadishu, and in August 2012 three Tanzanians suspected of al-Shabaab links were arrested trying to sneak into Somalia.

Secretary General of the Association of Muslim Organizations, Shaykh Ponda Issa Ponda, has also gained clout. The Islamist preacher has led calls (with the endorsement of 91 Muslim organizations) for the establishment of *kadhi* courts across Tanzania. He presently heads the influential Council of Imams, along with the Islamist group *Simba wa Mungu* (God’s Lion), which is based out of Zanzibar and has reportedly bombed bars, beaten women for dressing “immodestly,” taken over mosques, and disseminated literature promoting violence against tourists.44 Shaykh Ponda was arrested in October this year for allegedly using hate speech toward Christians and the government, after Muslims torched five churches in Dar es Salaam in response to rumors that a 14-year-old boy urinated on a Quran.45
Moreover, a loose movement called Ansar al-Sunnah has been active in propagating a “purified” Islam, which is rooted in Wahhabi-Salafism. The group has gained influence in towns and cities across the country, as has the Tablighi Jamaat, which has called for greater adherence to sharia. Saudi Arabia spends roughly $1 million a year on mosques, madrasas, and health centers in Tanzania. Students receive funding to study in Sudan and Medina, Saudi Arabia, while teachers from Pakistan and Sudan have received funding to teach at two Saudi-funded Islamic universities in Dar al Salaam.

Some analysts note that traditional Sufi influence and local customs, including belief in witchcraft, are to some extent checking the spread of Islamic extremism. However, less tolerant and politically activist strains of Islam are gaining ground amid feelings of marginalization, particularly among the young, uneducated and unemployed. The irony is that calls for independence and the imposition of sharia law on Zanzibar would hurt tourism and feed the economic despair that is turning many Muslims away from moderation in the first place. For its part, the government must balance a zero-tolerance approach to radical Islam with a sincere effort to address legitimate Muslim grievances and avoid harsh crackdowns where possible. If government fails at this, it risks feeding the radical tide.

Uganda

In the aftermath of the 2010 World Cup bombings, Uganda arrested thirty suspects, and this raised questions about the extent to which radical Islam had festered undetected in the relatively stable, landlocked East African country. In the end, only two of those arrested, a Ugandan and a Rwandan, were found guilty of terrorism.

Meanwhile, the Ugandan military raised its troop levels in Somalia and took the lead in diminishing al-Shabaab’s influence there so the non-Islamist Transitional Federal Government could restore order to the lawless country. The U.S. committed more equipment and intelligence sharing to fight radical Islam, and it also increased funding to assist marginalized Ugandan Muslims with health and education.

There have been no terrorist attacks on Ugandan soil since the World Cup, and Uganda is now frequently cited in the West and in Africa as a model of what is doable when African governments resolve to tackle Islamic extremism. Despite Uganda’s efforts to combat extremism, however, jihadist groups have been developing a harder line among Ugandan Muslims, and especially among the youth.

Now, radicalized youth increasingly accuse the older generations of not practicing true Islam and of aligning with President Yoweri Museveni’s corrupt government rather
than combating the vice. For instance, Uganda’s head mufti, Shaykh Shaban Mubajje, a Musevni appointee, is widely perceived to be corrupt. In April 2012 hundreds of Muslims marched to the country’s largest mosque, Gaddafi Mosque in Kampala, to protest his reelection to head Uganda’s Muslim Supreme Council. Such outbursts from Muslims have coincided with a growing displeasure with Museveni’s increasingly unaccountable rule, which has seen massive youth unemployment, as high as eighty percent by some estimates, crumbling infrastructure and rising inflation.

Muslim youths may be at a double disadvantage in Uganda’s inhospitable job market. Many have complained of discrimination, especially if their commitment to their faith is visible in their appearance. They are certainly also underrepresented in government, notably at the policy-making level. Muslims make up 12 percent of the population; however, only one cabinet member is a Muslim. Muslims also complain about the difficulty of registering activist and humanitarian organizations, especially if they do not show strong allegiance to the ruling regime.

Youths in growing numbers are seeking to purify the faith, and many are turning to the Tablighi Jamaat to do so. The Tabligh in Uganda often takes political form, whereas in many other parts of the world the movement self-consciously steers clear of politics and focuses primarily on proselytizing the faith. In 2011, Muslim protests in Kampala over a land wrangle in which Uganda’s head mufti and close presidential ally, Shaykh Shaban Mubajje, was accused of illegally selling Muslim property, is an example of the movement’s political thrust. Many of the protesters were Tabligh.

Muhammed Yunus Kamoga founded Tabligh in Uganda in 1989. Komoga was deported from Kenya in 2008 on suspicion that he had dealings with Somali Islamists. That being said, the group has generally not been associated with violence. Nor have they found common cause with Uganda’s growing Somali community, who generally attend their own mosques and do business among their own.

Tablighs, particularly a small breakaway Salafi sect, have been connected with violent uprisings in the past. Some have moved to western Uganda beginning in 1989 to fight for the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), in an effort to overthrow Museveni’s government. The group received support from the government of Sudan in the 1990s, which then sheltered al-Qaeda. Members of the ADF traveled to Afghanistan in the mid-1990s to receive weapons and explosives training. Sudan and Uganda signed a peace accord in 1999 after which Sudan’s support of Islamic radicalism reportedly stopped.

The group’s founder and leader was Sheikh Jamil Mukulu, an adherent of Salafist Islamism. In 2002, the government had pushed the ADF into the neighboring Democratic Republic of Congo. The group remains there today in reduced numbers, focusing primarily on resource extraction.
Tablighs were also involved in bombing towns and cities across the country from the mid-1990s to the early 2000s; they also developed ties with Afghan and Sudanese extremists. After 9/11, however, Museveni came down hard on Islamic extremism, resulting in the arrests of hundreds of foreign suspects from Somalia, Asia and the Arab World.

A small number of Salafists are active in the capital, operating through Shaykh Kamoga’s Salaf Foundation. The government heavily surveys the foundation’s activities, however, and they show few signs of emerging as a violent political force. Their main focus appears to be building mosques, preaching, and teaching. They have also worked with the government to counter violent uprisings among disgruntled Muslims.

Saudi money is reportedly gaining influence in Uganda, though exact figures are elusive. Saudis paid to construct King Fahd Plaza in downtown Kampala, home to Ugandan, Arab and South Asian traders, some of whom sell Wahhabist literature. Saudi, as well as Kuwaiti and Egyptian funds, have helped finance Uganda’s Islamic University, which, according to the University’s vice rector Muhammed Mpezamihigo, seeks out lecturers who studied in Medina and Cairo.

Still, Islamic extremism in Uganda appears to have limited appeal. One reason for this may be that so much of Uganda’s post-independence history has been taken up by conflict, and that the last two decades have been generally characterized by relative stability and economic growth. Another reason may be President Museveni’s aggressive surveillance of conservative Muslim groups. (Tabligh activities, for instance, are closely monitored.) After 9/11, he became America’s staunchest regional ally in the War on Terror, and he has been successful in bringing extremists to justice and forcing them to think twice about pursuing their agenda.

Conclusion

With Al-Shabaab’s power in Somalia nearly dissolved, the frontlines of the struggle with radical Islamism have now spilled over into areas beyond Somalia’s borders. Today, it appears that the remnants of Al-Shabaab and its loose regional network of allies and ideological sympathizers are actively looking to exploit local grievances and weak governance to advance their utopian aim of a society ruled by a radical understanding of Islamic law.

The Islamist agenda in East Africa is neither driven by nor does it depend on Al-Shabaab, however. Instead, Islamism in the region is largely the product of domestic
and international charities, local firebrands, and immigrant jihadists. However, the Al-Shabaab attacks against civilian targets like bus terminals and bars in Kenya and beyond could, if left unchecked, deliver a message of impunity to other Islamist elements. This, in turn, could serve as a rallying call to those looking to upset the security of local populations and overthrow local governments. At the same time, unnecessarily harsh and erratic responses to Muslim political activities by corrupt governments also have the potential to unify Islamists and generate more popular sympathy for their cause. Indeed, it was this perception which led foreign fighters, some of them Americans of Somali descent, to join ranks with al-Shabaab in Somalia in the first place. More recently, government crackdowns in Kenya and Tanzania have led to riots, louder calls for independence, and even helped to fuel attacks against Christians.

Meanwhile, local religious leaders have become more adept at communicating their agenda, taking to private gatherings amid greater surveillance, and utilizing social media platforms, while working with international backers to promote their agenda in schools and various social services. Moderate variations of Islam combined with traditional beliefs have helped hinder Islamism’s reach, as has a shortage of popular support for the Islamist conceit that the West is an enemy of Islam. Muslims across the region have been urging governments to be more accommodating to Muslims, and they argue that this is a means of staving the spread of extremism.

Governments have attempted to encourage moderation by designating their own appointees to key positions in the Muslim community, including the chief kadhi judge in Kenya and Uganda’s head mufti and head of the Ugandan Muslim Supreme Council. The governments in Tanzania and Kenya handpick the Supreme Muslim. The Kenyan and Ugandan Muslim populations as a whole, however, largely perceive these figures as corrupt government mouthpieces. Other government actions—such as denying the formation of Islamic NGOs—have lent credence to this view.

Government social control has already produced unintended consequences, including by undermining Muslim resistance to Islamism. Indeed, Islamists are showing greater resolve and organization in places like Zanzibar and Mombasa. Islamism’s spread comes at a time when East Africa has shown a general trend toward moderately strong economic growth from which many Muslims feel they have been excluded. As long as Muslims feel marginalized economically and politically, security and governance remain weak, and cross-border coordination among Islamists continues to improve, Islamism’s influence is likely to grow.
NOTES

2. East Africa consists of Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi though this paper will focus on the three countries with sizable Muslim populations: Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda.
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23. Imam Idi Kasozi, head of the Uganda Muslim Youth Assembly, Interview by the Author.
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29. Christopher Anzalone, “Kenya’s Muslim Youth Center and Al-Shabab’s East African Recruitment,”  
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35. Dr. Azaveli Lwaitama, associate professor philosophy University of Dar es Salaam, Interview by  
the Author.
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47. Author’s interview with former American ambassador to Tanzania.
48. Sheik Haruna Jemba, professor of religion at Makerere University, Uganda, interview by author.
49. Ibid.
52. Haynes, “Islamic Militancy in East Africa.”
53. Sheikh Ibrahim Hassan Kirya, Interim Administrator, Kibuli Mosque, Uganda, interview by  
author.
54. Sheik Haruna Jemba, interview by author.
55. Interview with Muslim activist, Noor Mosque, William Street, Kampala.
56. Haynes, “Islamic Militancy in East Africa.”
Al-Shabaab extremists overran a key military base used by U.S. counterterror forces in Kenya before dawn Sunday, killing three U.S. Department of Defence personnel and destroying several U.S. aircraft and vehicles before they were repelled, U.S. and Kenyan authorities said. After an initial penetration of the perimeter, Kenya Defence Forces and U.S. Africa Command repelled the al-Shabaab attack,” said the Africom statement. Would al-Shabab even be willing to negotiate? Al-Shabab supports the Taliban and calls its leader the Amir al-Mu'minin (Leader of the Faithful). But experts are split on whether the group will follow the Taliban's example and open talks with the African Union, which has troops in Somalia, and AU forces' host, the Somali government. Al-Shabab has never called for a cease-fire in its entire history. The group also seems to be extremely suspicious about having a dialogue. Al-Shabaab attacked Kamuthe, Garissa county, in January killing three teachers and destroying a communications mast. Photograph: AP. Global development is supported by. "I see my students looking after animals every day in the village, it pains me but there is nothing I can do. When I ask the parents they tell me why waste their children’s time in an empty school when they can utilise them to look after their livestock."