

# Somalia: The New Frontline in the Islamic State's Global Expansion

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Brief Analysis

## In its latest propaganda campaign, the Islamic State is underscoring the strategic significance of Somalia in its expansionist agenda.

An editorial in the most recent issue of its official publication *Al-Naba*, released on December 12, 2024, elaborates on the group's ambitions in East Africa. Titled *Al Suwmal Ard Al Hijra wa Al Madad* (Somalia: The Land of Migration and Support), the article not only promotes migration to the region but also highlights the group's intent to establish Somalia as a pivotal base for its global jihadist network.

The editorial boasts about a [recent attack \(https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/islamic-state-claims-responsibility-attack-somalias-puntland-military-base-2025-01-01/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/islamic-state-claims-responsibility-attack-somalias-puntland-military-base-2025-01-01/) on a military base in Puntland, Somalia, which resulted in the deaths of twenty-two soldiers and nine attackers, described as *inghimasi* (suicidal infiltrators) in Islamic State (IS) rhetoric. It emphasizes the diverse nationalities of the attackers, including Arabs from Gulf states and other countries and showcases the group's extensive recruitment network. This, according to the article, positions Somalia as the new land of *tamkin* (empowerment) for IS.

The attack, far from being a random act of violence, is part of the calculated strategy of expansion that IS has been advancing since its territorial defeats in Iraq and Syria. *Al-Naba* portrays these fighters as *muhajirun* and *ansar* (migrants and supporters), echoing the historical narratives it once used to frame previous expansions in Iraq and Syria.

### Why Somalia? A Critical Hub for IS Expansion

Somalia's [fragile governance \(https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2024/11/22/rebuilding-a-fragile-state-amidst-revenue-challenges\)](https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2024/11/22/rebuilding-a-fragile-state-amidst-revenue-challenges), entrenched [tribal divisions \(https://www.voanews.com/a/somalia-s-new-president-faces-familiar-political-security-challenges/6584571.html\)](https://www.voanews.com/a/somalia-s-new-president-faces-familiar-political-security-challenges/6584571.html), and strategic location make it a prime candidate for the IS expansionist agenda. The country's instability and proximity to Yemen and the Red Sea amplify its strategic importance, offering logistical advantages for smuggling networks and maritime operations. With weak central control and economic hardships

exacerbating local grievances, Somalia presents an ideal environment for recruitment and consolidation.

By leveraging these vulnerabilities, IS is reshaping the region as a key operational theater. The group aims to embed itself within local militant factions, providing financial support and strategic direction while simultaneously projecting its influence across East Africa. Neighboring countries such as Kenya and Ethiopia are **directly affected** (<https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/somalia/islamic-state-somalia-responding-evolving-threat>), as jihadist expansion threatens regional stability and maritime security.

Since its founding in 2015, ISIS-Somalia has actively sought to establish itself as an important *wilaya* (province) within the global ISIS structure. Initially facing internal competition from al-Shabaab, the group's survival was facilitated by its strongholds in Puntland's Al-Madow Mountains, where it continues to train fighters and establish operational bases (Weiss and Webber, CTC 2024) (<https://ctc.westpoint.edu/islamic-state-somalia-a-growing-global-terror-concern/>). The group has also developed **recruitment networks** (<https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/somalia/islamic-state-somalia-responding-evolving-threat>) across the Horn of Africa, attracting foreign fighters from Ethiopia, Sudan, and Tanzania. Its ideological outreach now spans multiple languages, including Amharic and Swahili, suggesting a deliberate effort to expand beyond Somalia into East Africa (Webber and Garofalo, CTC 2023) (<https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-islamic-state-somalia-propaganda-coalitions-regional-language-push/>).

As ISIS-Somalia expands its influence, the international response to extremist threats in Somalia is evolving. In December 2024, the United Nations authorized the African Union Support and Stabilization Mission in Somalia (AUSSOM), replacing the **African Union Transition Mission** (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/dec/28/un-authorises-new-mission-against-al-shabaab-in-somalia>) in Somalia (ATMIS). This mission was planned to deploy up to 12,626 personnel to support Somali forces in countering both ISIS-Somalia and al-Shabaab, while also working to stabilize liberated areas and strengthen governance. However, persistent security gaps, weak governance, and regional instability continue to provide opportunities for ISIS-Somalia to expand its operations.

IS-Somalia has also escalated its external operations, with growing linkages to international terrorist plots. The group was implicated in a May 2024 attack on the Israeli embassy in Sweden, underscoring its evolving role in IS's transnational network (Weiss and Webber, CTC 2024). Additionally, its propaganda efforts have shifted from a localized insurgency model to an international recruitment campaign, **mirroring the strategies** (<https://ctc.westpoint.edu/islamic-state-somalia-a-growing-global-terror-concern>) employed by IS-Khorasan (ISK) in Afghanistan. This globalization push suggests that IS-Somalia is actively working to project influence beyond Somalia's borders.

Despite ongoing military operations and UN-backed stabilization efforts, IS-Somalia remains resilient, leveraging Somalia's weak security landscape to sustain itself. The effectiveness of AUSSOM in countering both al-Shabaab and IS will largely depend on international coordination, sustainable funding, and the Somali government's ability to consolidate territorial gains.

At the same time, IS-Somalia continues to exploit local grievances and security vacuums, further entrenching itself within East Africa's extremist ecosystem and complicating regional counterterrorism efforts. Given its expanding global connections and operational ambitions, IS-Somalia is no longer just a localized insurgency but a key node in IS's broader strategy of decentralized jihadism.

### ***Hijra* and *Tamkin*: Continuity in IS Rhetoric**

The Islamic State's use of *hijra* (<https://www.jstor.org/stable/26351451?seq=1>) (migration) and *tamkin* ([https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict\\_resolution/countering-](https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict_resolution/countering-)

[isis/counteringdaeshpropaganda-feb2016.pdf](#)) as central themes in its rhetoric is not new. Since its inception, the group has relied on these concepts to justify territorial expansion and attract foreign fighters. At the height of the so-called IS caliphate, the group used the term “[land of empowerment](#)” ([https://diyaruna.com/en\\_GB/articles/cnmi\\_di/features/2017/08/07/feature-01](https://diyaruna.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_di/features/2017/08/07/feature-01)) to refer to Iraq and Syria. After losing territory there, it began applying the term to new areas, first in West Africa and the Sahel, and now in Somalia. IS presents Somalia as a sanctuary where foreign fighters can fulfill their religious duty of *hijra* and contribute to the group’s expansion (*tamkin*). The ideological justification hinges on the promise of divine favor, framing territorial gains as part of a predestined Islamic struggle. This adaptation of propaganda ensures continuity in its global recruitment efforts, even as operational landscapes shift.

### **The Role of *Hijra*, *Madad* (Support), and *Tamkin***

Throughout its recruitment efforts, IS has systematically employed the intertwined narratives of *hijra*, *madaa*, and *tamkin* to attract foreign fighters and consolidate influence. These concepts frame jihad as a holistic endeavor encompassing migration, logistical support, and the ultimate establishment of territorial control.

The recent *Al-Naba* editorial explores *hijra* as a religious and strategic necessity. Drawing upon Islamic tradition—particularly the Prophet Muhammad’s *hijra* from Mecca to Medina—to justify military operations, it frames *hijra* as both a physical and spiritual journey toward fulfilling religious objectives while positioning *madaa* as a duty for those unable to join the fight directly.

IS also promotes the *tamkin* narrative, portraying Somalia as the ideal location for consolidating a jihadist stronghold. As in previous [expansion strategies deployed in Iraq, Syria, and elsewhere \(\)](#), IS seeks to build a power base by embedding itself within existing insurgent movements, exploiting security gaps, and recruiting foreign fighters willing to take part in its ideological mission.

### **Military Operations as Religious Achievements**

The latest IS messaging portrays military operations in Somalia as divinely sanctioned achievements. It calls the attack on a Puntland military camp in the Bari region with *inghimasi* fighters and two car bombs a “blessed annual strike,” reinforcing the idea that jihadist actions are divinely guided.

*Al-Naba* claims that despite international counterterrorism efforts, IS is resilient, showcasing its ability to maintain a presence despite military setbacks. The IS portrayal of attacks as religious commandments serves to elevate their ideological significance and solidify the group’s narrative that it remains on the path of divine favor.

### **The Call for Sacrifice and Martyrdom**

A key theme in the article is sacrifice (*tadhiyah*), with IS glorifying the contributions of foreign fighters willing to die for the cause and honoring suicide attackers as heroes, linking their actions to the historical heroism of the Prophet’s companions (*sahaba*). The narrative fosters a culture of allegiance, reinforcing the idea that martyrdom is the highest form of devotion.

Additionally, IS highlights its efforts at *da’wa* (proselytizing) as being a strategy complementary to military operations. By positioning itself as both a militant and missionary movement, it seeks to broaden its ideological appeal. The article cites the conversion of 150 people in Eastern Congo as evidence of its growing religious influence, reinforcing the notion that its mission extends beyond the battlefield.

### **Implications for Regional and Global Security**

The latest issue of *Al-Naba* marks a significant shift in the operational focus of IS, underscoring its intent to establish Somalia as a new strategic hub. The group’s expansion threatens maritime security, regional stability, and

international counterterrorism efforts. The African Union Transition Mission in Somalia faces mounting challenges, and the withdrawal of [international forces \(https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2025/02/01/frances-bitter-retreat-from-west-africa\)](https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2025/02/01/frances-bitter-retreat-from-west-africa) further complicates the situation.

Despite ongoing counterterrorism operations, including AFRICOM's precision strikes on ISIS and Al-Shabaab leaders, these efforts remain constrained without broader regional cooperation. ISIS's messaging in Al-Naba Issue No. 476 reflects a clear pivot toward East Africa, reinforcing the need for a coordinated international response to prevent Somalia from becoming the next major ISIS stronghold. Unlike its past territorial strongholds in Iraq and Syria, Somalia's fragile governance, local grievances, and access to key maritime routes make it an ideal base for sustained insurgency.

As such, ISIS-Somalia's rise also presents a renewed global challenge beyond a military response. Its ability to sustain operations, finance external attacks, and attract foreign fighters highlights the urgency of a comprehensive response. Military action alone will not suffice, regional governments and international coalitions must also address the socio-political voids that allow extremist ideologies to thrive.

If left unchecked, Somalia could follow the same trajectory as ISIS's former strongholds. The battle for Somalia is not just a local conflict, it is a test of the world's ability to combat decentralized jihadism before it becomes an entrenched global threat. ❖

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March 6, 2025, starting at 12:00 noon EDT (1700 GMT)

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### IN-DEPTH REPORTS

#### [Statecraft 2.0](#)

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March 5, 2025



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