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THE DUAL LEGACY OF FAITH: RELIGION AS A SOURCE OF SOCIAL COHESION AND CONFLICT IN SOMALILAND

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ABSTRACT: Religion functions as a dual-edged social force capable of both uniting and dividing societies. This study explores how Islam serves as both a resource for peace and a potential source of conflict in Somaliland, the self-declared state in the Horn of Africa. Through historical, sociopolitical, and theological analysis, the study examines Islam's role in governance, social cohesion, and peacebuilding. Religious leaders have successfully utilized Islamic values and customary law (xeer) to resolve conflicts, broker reconciliations, and conduct humanitarian activities. However, when politicized or influenced by external ideologies such as Salafism and Wahhabism, religion becomes a catalyst for conflict. Ideological divergences, gender exclusion, and the instrumentalization of religious authority for political purposes challenge social harmony. The study findings demonstrate that religion's impact whether promoting peace or escalating conflict depends critically on actor intentions, interpretive frameworks, and broader sociopolitical contexts. In Somaliland, Islam contributes substantially to stability and social cohesion when applied ethically, inclusively, and insulated from political and extremist manipulation. These findings have significant implications for understanding religion's role in conflict-affected societies and for designing effective peacebuilding interventions that engage religious actors and institutions.

Keywords: *Somaliland, Islam, peacebuilding, conflict resolution, religious authority, social cohesion*

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the study

Religion constitutes a powerful force in human society, profoundly shaping values, collective identities, governance systems, and interpersonal relationships throughout history. It has served as both a mechanism for uniting communities through shared moral codes and as a source of division when interpreted or instrumentalized for partisan purposes. While most religions espouse ideals of peace, compassion, and coexistence, they have also been manipulated to legitimize violence, justify exclusion, and consolidate political power at the expense of marginalized groups. Whether religion functions as an instrument of peace or conflict depends largely on the temporal, contextual, and spatial circumstances within which religious doctrines are interpreted, institutionalized, and mobilized (Appleby, 2000; Juergensmeyer, 2017).

From a global perspective, religion has played pivotal roles in both peacemaking and conflict escalation. In France, debates over secularism and the visibility of religious symbols particularly concerning the hijab illustrate the tensions between religious expression and state identity (Bowen, 2007). In Pakistan, religion has shaped national identity since independence but has also fueled sectarian violence and political radicalization (Nasr, 2001). Conversely, faith-based initiatives have been instrumental in peacebuilding, such as the role of the churches in South Africa's anti-apartheid struggle and the contribution of Christian and Catholic groups in mediating the Northern Ireland peace process (Philpott, 2013). These contrasting experiences highlight that religion's capacity to unify or divide depends greatly on the intentions, interpretations, and actions of religious leaders and institutions.

Within the African context, religion occupies a central place in political, cultural, and social life. Islam and Christianity dominate much of the continent, coexisting alongside diverse indigenous belief systems. Historically, religious institutions provided moral guidance and organizational strength during anti-colonial movements, when liberation leaders often drew upon religious symbolism and teachings to mobilize populations (Falola, 2022). However, religion has also been implicated in violent conflicts. The Rwandan genocide of 1994 revealed the complicity of certain religious figures and institutions, while Nigeria's Boko Haram insurgency demonstrates how extremist religious ideologies can devastate communities and economies (Agbiboa, 2013). Similarly, in Mozambique, the rise of Islamist insurgents in Cabo Delgado illustrates how religious narratives can be weaponized in contexts of social marginalization and political exclusion (Morier-Genoud, 2020). These realities affirm the dual capacity of religion in Africa to stabilize societies or to destabilize them when manipulated for violent ends.

This duality is particularly evident in Somaliland, a self-declared independent state in the Horn of Africa that, despite its lack of international recognition, has maintained notable peace, security, and political stability since the 1990s. In contrast to the prolonged instability in neighboring

Somalia, Somaliland has relied heavily on religious and clan-based institutions to sustain order and reconciliation. Islam, the dominant faith, provides a shared identity that transcends clan divisions and offers a moral foundation for governance and dispute resolution. Religious leaders (ulama) have frequently acted as mediators in clan conflicts, advocates of tolerance, and promoters of peace education. However, religion has also been implicated in ideological contestations, particularly between Sufi and Salafi groups, and in the influence of transnational extremist ideologies emanating from Somalia (Bradbury, 2008; Menkhaus, 2015). Therefore, this study critically examines the proposition that religion operates as a dual force capable of fostering both social cohesion and conflict within the context of Somaliland.

2. Religion as an Instrument of Peace

Religion possesses significant capacity to foster peace, reconciliation, and social order. In Somaliland, Islam has functioned as an essential peacemaker, providing the moral, institutional, and social capital necessary for post-civil war recovery and ongoing stability. This section explores how religion acts as a force for peace through three primary mechanisms: providing ethical frameworks for coexistence, facilitating post-conflict reconstruction and state formation, and promoting social justice and humanitarian action.

2.1 Moral and Ethical Framework for Coexistence

World religions typically emphasize peaceful coexistence and social harmony. In Somaliland, where Islam predominates, Islamic principles serve as the primary guide for personal conduct and social interaction. Core Islamic teachings including salaam (peace), 'adl (justice), and rahma (compassion) help maintain social order and cohesion. The Qur'an advocates addressing grievances through patience, forgiveness, and dialogue rather than retribution (Qur'an 41:34), counsel particularly valuable in post-conflict contexts. Religious scholars (ulama) and the council of elders (guurti) have leveraged Islamic teachings to encourage reconciliation and unity following Somaliland's civil war (Hansen, 2019). Grounding community conflict resolution in Islamic values enhances the legitimacy and moral authority of peace processes, enabling conflicting parties to discover common ground based on shared religiosity and spiritual obligation.

Religious doctrines in Somaliland are deeply intertwined with customary law (xeer), creating complementary systems that promote restorative rather than retributive justice. The xeer system emphasizes tawba (repentance), diya (compensation), and forgiveness, closely aligning with Islamic principles of mercy and healing (Bradbury, 2008). This integration of Islamic and indigenous legal principles has enabled Somaliland to maintain considerable peace and social order since its 1991 declaration of independence. The distinctive combination of religious and traditional institutions has empowered local leaders to resolve conflicts expeditiously with minimal reliance on formal state apparatus (Walls, 2018). Religious norms thereby strengthen moral obligations to community welfare, fostering cohesion across clan divisions and legitimizing peace initiatives as matters of faith rather than mere political compromise.

Beyond providing conflict resolution mechanisms, Islam offers a unifying identity transcending clan affiliations. Islamic doctrines emphasize unity and fraternity within the ummah (global

Muslim community), providing crucial common ground for post-war reconstruction. Religious leaders utilize Qur'anic teachings on justice, humility, and respect in sermons, public discourse, and community peace forums, reinforcing moral standards for peaceful coexistence (Menkhaus, 2015). Faith-based approaches have substantially supported Somaliland's peacebuilding framework by employing persuasive rather than coercive means to achieve consensus. Islam in Somaliland thus functions dynamically to guide behavior, resolve disputes, and unite communities within deeply rooted moral and spiritual consciousness.

2.2 Religion in Post-Conflict Reconstruction and State Formation

Following Somalia's civil conflict in 1991, Somaliland embarked on remarkable locally-owned post-war reconstruction through dialogue and religious leader engagement. In the absence of international recognition and formal institutions, Islamic principles and religious authorities provided moral and institutional frameworks for governance restoration and social order renewal. Religion functioned as a unifying ideology that legitimized peace efforts amid clan warfare. Incorporating Islamic ethics into reconciliation processes fostered collective responsibility and obligation toward peace, enabling previously combative clans to dialogue under shared ethical frameworks (Walls, 2018). Islamic scholars and elder councils became mediators, applying Islamic principles of forgiveness (maghfirah), justice ('adl), and reconciliation (sulh) to broker ceasefires and peace settlements. Religion thereby provided not only moral foundations but also filled governance vacuums left by state collapse.

While southern Somalia experienced religious radicalization through groups like Al-Shabaab, religious authorities in Somaliland promoted wasatiyyah (moderation) and coexistence. This strategy proved crucial for preventing violent extremism (Hoehne, 2011) and maintaining inter-clan cohesion. Somaliland's religious leaders collaborated with clan elders to produce peace charters integrating Islamic principles of justice and community solidarity with traditional governance. The merger of Sharia law and xeer created hybrid governance combining religious and cultural legitimacy. This approach ensured that peacebuilding processes remained locally grounded and spiritually authentic rather than externally imposed (Renders & Terlinden, 2010). The effectiveness of this approach demonstrates how properly contextualized religion can serve as a consolidating force in state formation.

Furthermore, religion has legitimized Somaliland's formal institutions and strengthened national identity. Religious leaders have mobilized citizens for civic engagement and community accountability, enhancing governance through moral persuasion rather than coercion. Islamic organizations have helped citizens develop trust in local government, particularly in areas where formal state presence remains weak (Menkhaus, 2015). The embedding of Islam within education, justice, and community development has created more cohesive and resilient political structures. By presenting peace as both religious duty and civic virtue, Islam has contributed to a relatively stable political environment in an otherwise volatile region. In post-conflict Somaliland, religion has thus functioned as both spiritual and political asset, supporting state-building, legitimizing governance, and promoting peace as a form of religious and community obligation.

2.3 Promotion of Social Justice and Humanitarianism

Religious institutions have been at the forefront of promoting social justice and community welfare in Somaliland. Following conflict and government collapse, these institutions provided essential humanitarian assistance. Mosques, charities, and faith-based organizations constituted critical social safety nets, compensating for absent formal welfare systems. Islamic practices of zakat (obligatory charity) and sadaqah (voluntary charity) embody social responsibility principles that redistribute wealth and alleviate socioeconomic inequalities that might otherwise fuel resentment and conflict (Lewis, 2010). These faith-based mechanisms fulfill core religious obligations while bolstering community resilience by supporting vulnerable populations—including orphans, widows, and internally displaced persons—within frameworks of Islamic compassion and solidarity. Religion thus organizes the moral economy of communities, promoting accountability and social harmony through charitable service.

Beyond humanitarian activities, religious leaders and entities in Somaliland have cultivated cultures of peace and civic responsibility. Mosques serve as venues for both spiritual contemplation and community dialogue, where imams and ulama teach tolerance, justice, and peace. These messages, rooted in Qur'anic principles of equality and compassion, promote inter-clan respect and discourage revenge-based violence (Menkhaus, 2015). Religious organizations frequently partner with local NGOs and international agencies on peace education, trauma healing, and community development initiatives. Through public sermons (khutbahs), workshops, and radio broadcasts, religious leaders promote peaceful cooperation, constructive conflict resolution, and human dignity, effecting positive change beyond strictly religious domains.

The role of religion in Somaliland demonstrates how faith-based initiatives can complement governmental and international peacebuilding efforts. Numerous faith-based organizations in Somaliland, including Islamic Relief and the Ministry of Religious Affairs, collaborate with humanitarian agencies to reduce poverty, improve education, and empower marginalized populations, particularly women and youth. These initiatives reflect contemporary Islamic values as vital contributors to global development goals. Faith-based programs, particularly those operating at grassroots levels, often prove more credible and effective because they resonate with community moral values and spiritual perspectives. When humanitarian assistance aligns with religious obligation, local communities develop stronger senses of ownership and responsibility. In Somaliland, religion thus extends beyond private spirituality to serve as an instrument for social justice, equality, and peace benefiting diverse communities.

3. Religion as an Instrument of Conflict Escalation

While religion primarily functions as a unifying force in Somaliland, it can generate conflict when politicized or instrumentalized for power. Political leaders have periodically employed Islamic identity to legitimize themselves or discredit opponents, portraying themselves as "true champions of Islam" while characterizing rivals as secular or foreign-influenced. Such instrumentalization of religion seriously impedes reconciliation processes and exacerbates underlying sectarian tensions. Constitutional debates in the early 2000s became battlegrounds over the extent to which Sharia

law should influence legal structures. Some religious scholars and political elites advocated purely Islamic constitutional frameworks, while others favored hybrid systems accommodating both Islamic law and democratic governance (Renders & Terlinden, 2010). These conflicts reveal how political exploitation of faith blurs boundaries between sacred and secular domains, generating distrust and weakening fragile political institutions (Walls, 2018).

Although Somaliland remains more stable than southern Somalia, extremist ideologies and militant religious groups pose persistent threats. Groups such as Al-Shabaab have attempted to penetrate Somaliland through recruitment, online propaganda, and ideological infiltration. Movements that misinterpret Islam to justify violence and social control particularly through concepts like takfir (excommunication of Muslims deemed apostate) and militant jihad contradict moderate Islamic teachings. In 2008, multiple explosions in Hargeisa targeted government institutions and UN offices, highlighting the potential threat of Islamic extremism to Somaliland's domestic stability (International Crisis Group, 2015). While state security agencies and religious leaders successfully countered these threats, the incidents exposed vulnerabilities when religion becomes a mobilization tool. Somaliland's continued peace depends on sustained moderation of religious discourse and community resilience against radicalization (Eubank, 2020).

Rigid interpretations of religion can also perpetuate gender inequality and social exclusion, creating societal friction. Women's participation in politics, education, and peacebuilding in Somaliland faces restrictions due to strict interpretations of Islamic law, often intertwined with patriarchal cultural norms. This marginalization violates Islamic principles of justice and equality, demonstrating how religion can be manipulated to serve entrenched power interests (Abdi, 2021; Kapteijns, 2013). Excluding women and youth from decision-making undermines inclusive governance and deepens structural inequities that fuel resentment and obstruct sustainable peace. Debates surrounding women's rights, modern education, and Western influence often unfold in moralistic or religious terms, widening rifts between conservatives and reformers. When religion is misused to justify discrimination or impede social progress, it generates discord rather than promoting peace.

4. The Dual Role of Religion in Somaliland: A Contextual Analysis

Somaliland's experience illustrates the fundamental duality of religion its capacity to either mitigate or escalate conflict depending on interpretation and application. Islam accommodates both reconciliation and mobilization, with the same texts, leaders, and institutions capable of invoking forgiveness and unity or, conversely, exclusion and rigidity. Understanding this paradox requires examining the interaction of faith with its sociopolitical milieu rather than treating religion as inherently good or bad. Several contextual factors explain this duality: the historical and cultural integration of Islam, the critical role of religious leaders, and the influence of transnational Islamic discourses.

4.1 Historical and Cultural Integration of Religion

Islam has constituted a foundational pillar of Somali culture since the 10th century, profoundly influencing cultural values, social practices, and political structures. In Somaliland, shared Islamic

identity unifies diverse populations, minimizing ethnic and sectarian differences within a clan-based society. Religion provides common moral and ethical frameworks facilitating governance, legitimizing authority, and resolving disputes. Islamic teachings integrated with local traditions have historically guided community life, conflict resolution, and accountability systems, strengthening social cohesion across Somaliland's various clans (Lewis, 2010). In daily life, deeply embedded faith provides both social adhesive and cultural repository.

However, Islam's centrality to Somali identity means that competing interpretations vie for legitimacy, particularly concerning social and political questions. In Somaliland, traditional Sufi orders emphasizing mysticism and local religious authority coexist with Salafi organizations promoting puritanical, literalist interpretations. This ideological tension surfaces in debates about civic morality, legal systems, and governance institutions. Salafi critiques of Sufi traditions have occasionally created tensions among religious organizations, particularly when interpretations challenge established community standards (Marchal, 2013). While generally non-violent, these internal disputes demonstrate how religious pluralism can polarize society when used to delegitimize rival interpretations.

The deep integration of religion into Somali political and social life presents both opportunities and risks for peacebuilding. Historically, Islam's moral authority has enabled reconciliation, ethical governance, and dispute resolution. However, it has also created frameworks through which competing religious ideas can impact political legitimacy. Somaliland has remained relatively stable due to the moderate and inclusive nature of its religious institutions (Eubank, 2020). When employed inclusively, religious authority enhances social cohesion and community resilience. When monopolized or politicized, it can exacerbate friction and exclusion. Islam's deep cultural and historical integration in Somaliland thus reveals its dual nature as both powerful unifier and potential source of division when doctrinal and ideological disputes are exploited for sociopolitical ends.

4.2 Role of Religious Leaders in Governance and Peacebuilding

Religious leaders in Somaliland have functioned as moral authorities and mediators throughout history, significantly influencing governance and peacebuilding. Leveraging their religious authority and social respect, imams and ulama have frequently served as neutral arbitrators in disputes, mediating clan disagreements and facilitating agreements in local assemblies. Their participation in the Guurti (House of Elders) proves instrumental in legitimizing political decisions and ensuring governance remains within boundaries of legal, customary, ethical, and religious acceptability (Walls, 2018). Following conflict in Somaliland, religious leaders have employed Islamic principles emphasizing forgiveness and unity rather than revenge.

However, religious authority's neutrality becomes compromised when religious leaders align with political parties, clan interests, or partisan agendas. Such alignment blurs boundaries between spiritual guidance and partisan politics, potentially dividing communities along religious or ideological lines. Constitutional debates and governance reforms in Somaliland have occasionally featured religious leaders issuing statements aligned with particular political positions (Renders &

Terlinden, 2010). These dynamics underscore the importance of faith-based organization independence for effective peacebuilding.

Somaliland's experience demonstrates how religious leaders can serve as either peacebuilders or sources of division depending on how they exercise authority. When religious leaders maintain neutrality, communities develop greater confidence in dispute resolution, governance systems gain legitimacy, and society's ethical foundations strengthen, all contributing to sustained peace (Menkhaus, 2015). Conversely, partisan alignment can exacerbate societal conflicts even within relatively homogeneous populations. Effective religious peacebuilding requires that leaders remain impartial, prioritize community welfare over factional interests, and employ their positions for mediation rather than instigation. The consistent commitment of Somaliland's religious leaders to moderation and ethical governance has significantly contributed to the region's relative stability, offering valuable lessons for similarly precarious contexts in the Horn of Africa.

4.3 External Influences and the Global Islamic Discourse

Somaliland's religious landscape reflects both indigenous traditions and influences from global Islamic discourse. Gulf countries, particularly Saudi Arabia and Qatar, have invested substantially in Somaliland's educational institutions, mosques, and charitable organizations, often promoting Salafist and Wahhabist interpretations of Islam. These movements emphasize scriptural literalism, personal piety, and moral discipline, contrasting with traditional Somali Sufism, which emphasizes tolerance, mysticism, and integration with local cultural practices (Hansen, 2019). The emergence of these ideologies has generated widespread debates over Islamic authenticity and religion's proper role in governance and daily life.

While external support often advances religious education and moral development, it can also generate ideological conflicts within Somaliland's traditionally moderate Islamic community. Puritanical teachings sometimes challenge local Sufi traditions that historically favored tolerance, social unity, and synthesis between Islam and Somali cultural practices. Conflicts arise through disputes over mosque leadership, religious curricula, and scriptural interpretation (Marchal, 2013). Though rarely resulting in violence, these tensions demonstrate Somaliland's religious unity vulnerability to external influences and illustrate how tensions escalate when foreign religious discourse intersects with local politics and identity.

Moreover, global Islamic discourse substantially impacts religious, cultural, and political factors affecting peace and conflict dynamics. When external funding and ideological support benefit particular factions or community organizations, they tend to deepen existing divisions or create new ones, particularly where alignment with political or clan interests seeks legitimacy through claims to "true" Islam. Sustainable peace in Somaliland requires moderation and contextualization of religious authority, ensuring that imported ideologies enhance rather than undermine local governance and conflict resolution frameworks (Eubank, 2020). Transnational religious movements can thus simultaneously deepen spiritual life and moral discipline while intensifying conflict through poor alignment with local practices.

5. Balancing Religion's Peace and Conflict Potentials

Ensuring religion exerts positive influence in Somaliland requires making religious education inclusive. Islamic curricula should prioritize tolerance, pluralism, and human rights to empower communities with moral and ethical resources for combating radicalization and sectarian extremism. Emphasizing Qur'anic principles like justice, compassion, and human life sanctity in religious education can cultivate cultures of ethical civic engagement and social accountability. Scholarship and educational programs stressing moderation and civic interpretations of Islam have played essential roles in maintaining Somaliland's stability by enabling citizens to distinguish between acceptable religious ideologies and extremist interpretations threatening social cohesion.

Another vital strategy involves systematically including religious leaders in peacebuilding initiatives. By incorporating ulama and imams into national reconciliation frameworks, their moral authority can endorse conflict resolution initiatives while maintaining neutrality. Neutral religious mediators can bridge clan divisions, promote inclusive governance, and counter extremism seeking to politicize religion. Somaliland's relative stability compared to Somalia results largely from religious leader involvement in mediation, highlighting the need for institutionalized structures channeling religious authority constructively (Eubank, 2020).

Dialogue among diverse Islamic traditions—particularly Sufi and Salafi interpretations—will help maintain peaceful coexistence within Somaliland's Muslim community. While adherents may disagree, they share fundamental common ground. Intra-faith dialogue can increase understanding, reduce suspicion, and create platforms for social consensus formation. Such dialogue allows communities to reconcile conflicting Islamic interpretations, enabling religious plurality to strengthen rather than undermine social cohesion (Marchal, 2013). Formalizing respectful interaction among religious groups can help avert confrontations arising from theological disagreements.

Finally, inclusive religious interpretations promote social equality and peacebuilding. Progressive understandings of Islamic law supporting women's rights to education, societal participation, and leadership can foster social harmony and reduce exclusionary attitudes threatening community stability. Heavy-handed patriarchal interpretations of Islam that marginalize women reinforce inequalities and fuel conflict (Kapteijns, 2013). Increasing women's participation in religious and governance structures could enhance democratic participation, diversify peacebuilding actors, and ensure religion serves as a source of inclusion and justice rather than exclusion. These strategies collectively demonstrate that religion's constructive potential depends on careful, deliberate, contextualized, and inclusive engagement.

6. Conclusion

Somaliland provides a compelling illustration of religion's dual legacy as both a unifying and divisive force. Islam has profoundly shaped the nation's social fabric, fostering moral governance, social cohesion, and reconciliation through principles of justice, compassion, and forgiveness. Religious leaders have played key roles in mediation and peacebuilding, reinforcing trust and legitimacy within communities. However, the politicization of religion and external ideological influences have occasionally fueled division, exclusion, and gender inequality. These contrasting

dynamics reveal that religion's impact depends on interpretation, leadership, and context. When inclusively and ethically applied, faith promotes harmony and justice; when manipulated, it deepens conflict. Somaliland's experience highlights the necessity of accountable religious leadership and continuous dialogue to sustain peace and prevent faith-based polarization.

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