

Inside Look at the Fighting Between Al-Shabab and Ahlu-Sunna wal-Jama

By Abdulahi Hassan

SINCE THE FIRST WEEK of November 2008, Somalia's hard line Islamist militant group, al-Shabab, has engaged in fierce fighting with a rival armed group, known as Ahlu-Sunna wal-Jama (ASWJ). The recent fighting occurred when the ASWJ, a Sufi group, reacted violently after al-Shabab challenged their form of worship and assassinated approximately 40 prominent personalities who had questioned the way they were ruling the region.¹ While forces loyal to al-Shabab have received support from the population due to their prior resistance to the Ethiopian occupation, there are signs that Somalis—at least in Galgaduud region and in Mogadishu—have grown weary of their presence. This was manifest in the decision of Galgaduud's clans and traditional Sufi shaykhs to throw their support behind the ASWJ.

The fighting between these two groups is significant because ASWJ defeated al-Shabab in two strategically important towns, causing the radical group to lose its foothold in one of the main arteries connecting southern and northern Somalia. This article provides background on the rivalry between al-Shabab and the ASWJ, chronicles the recent fighting between the two groups, and explains why al-Shabab is in danger of losing some of its power and control in Somalia.

The Rivalry Between Shabab and ASWJ

Al-Shabab is a hard line Islamist militant group that was established as early as 2004.² It has some ties to al-Qaeda operatives and is considered the most jihadist-oriented out of Somalia's armed groups.³ Its fighters

1 Insurgents affiliated with al-Shabab allegedly destroyed the graves of individuals revered by Sufis. This played a role in Ahlu Sunna's violent reaction to al-Shabab. For more, see "Sufi Group Accuses al-Shabab of Using Foreigners to Destroy Graves," Garowe Online, December 26, 2008.

2 David H. Shinn, "Al-Qaeda in East Africa and the Horn," *Journal of Conflict Studies* 27:1 (2007): pp. 56-58.

3 For detailed background information on al-Shabab, see the following two articles: David H. Shinn, "Soma-

are considered well-trained militarily, as many of them were taught by jihadist leaders who had trained in Afghanistan. Al-Shabab received support from the local population in Somalia when Ethiopian forces occupied the country, as many Somalis saw al-Shabab as a genuine resistance force regardless of its strict jihadist leanings. According to one respected journalist, "The Shabab are not wildly popular, but they are formidable; for the time being they have motivated, disciplined militia with hundreds of hard-core fighters."⁴

Recently, however, the Sufi organization ASWJ picked up arms and began to combat al-Shabab.⁵ Sufism has been in Somalia's religious landscape since Islam first came to sub-Saharan Africa centuries ago. Organized Sufi groups in Somalia have rarely been involved in politics, except for the anti-colonial wars of the 19th century where they played a major role. In modern Somalia, Sufi religious organizations—such

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as the ASWJ—have been most active carrying out religious affairs within their communities. Only in mid-2008 did the ASWJ begin to constitute as a fighting force. In terms of numbers, ASWJ can call on more armed fighters than al-Shabab, but they are not as disciplined or well-trained. The ASWJ's poor training is a result of its fighters being drawn from clan militias, whose

lia's New Government and the Challenge of Al-Shabab," *CTC Sentinel* 2:3 (2009) and Anonymous, "Somalia's Al-Shabab Reconstitutes Fighting Force," *CTC Sentinel* 1:3 (2008).

4 Jeffrey Gettleman, "The Most Dangerous Place in the World," *Foreign Policy*, March/April 2009.

5 Galgaduud's clans and traditional Sufi shaykhs have put their support behind the ASWJ. It is thought that one contributing factor for this action was al-Shabab's disregard of Sufi customs.

members usually do not have formal military training.⁶ ASWJ has come out in support of Shaykh Sharif Shaykh Ahmad's new unity government.⁷ Shaykh Mohamed Moalin Shaykh Amiir, chairman of the ASWJ in Nairobi, told reporters that

we are congratulating president Sheik Sharif and we are welcoming him to be the head of the unity government of Somalia. We also bless him to be the Somali president and solve the problems between the Somali people to reach peace and stability.⁸

There are reports that ASWJ forces in central Somalia have received financial support from Shaykh Sharif's new government.

Inside Look at the Fighting

From November 1 until December 16, 2008, fighting broke out in the Galgaduud region of central Somalia. In the town of Guraceel, 263 miles north of Mogadishu, al-Shabab engaged in fierce fighting with the ASWJ. After two battles, al-Shabab lost control of the town. On January 25, 2009, the same two groups fought again, this time in the strategic regional capital of Dusa Mareb, about 310 miles north of Mogadishu. Al-Shabab was again defeated in short fighting that lasted a couple of hours. It also lost control of the town.

During the fighting, both groups used small-arms such as AK-47s, PKM machine-guns, RPGs, anti-tank weapons, and 60mm mortars.⁹ In addition to the use of "technicals,"¹⁰ the ASWJ also utilized armored personnel carriers (APC) during the fight in Dusa Mareb, which it acquired from the Somali national army after it collapsed.¹¹

6 This also explains, however, why the ASWJ was able to pick up arms so quickly.

7 "Islamist Group Supports President Sharif," Shabelle Media Network, February 13, 2009.

8 Ibid.

9 This information is based on the author's first-hand reporting and research in Guraceel and Dusa Mareb in February 2009.

10 "Technicals" is a term that refers to battlewagons, and they are used by all sides in Somalia's ongoing conflicts. These battlewagons are basically pick-up trucks with mounted anti-aircraft guns.

11 "Ahlu Sunna Takes Control of Provincial Town," Shabelle Media Network, January 29, 2009.

Al-Shabab had more PKMs and 60mm mortars at its disposal, but the group lacked mobility and resiliency, which contributed to its losses. Furthermore, relying on the use of mortars in populated areas in both Dusa Mareb and in Guraceel had a negative effect on popular support.

In addition to the use of APCs, ASWJ was able to defeat the better trained and numbered al-Shabab forces through more effective military tactics. During the battle of Guraceel, a force of 140 from ASWJ attacked al-Shabab's estimated 500 men from three different fronts with groups numbering 30 men each.¹² According to sources in Guraceel, former Somali army officers helped advise and lead the ASWJ forces, which contributed to their victory.¹³

Signs of the fighting are still visible in both towns. One elder in Guraceel, who witnessed the fighting, said that "if al-Shabab had not intervened in people's freedom, their way of worshipping and not exterminated elders who disagree with them...then they would have been here for quite a long time. I hope they never come back."¹⁴ In Dusa Mareb, a resident echoed the comments made by the elder in Guraceel: "Al-Shabab brought law and order to our town, but took all our freedoms and basic rights away...if they left people alone without imposing so many restrictions, they would still be ruling this town."¹⁵ In both towns, however, residents are concerned that al-Shabab will return. Many towns in Somalia frequently change hands from one armed group to another. This time, however, it may be difficult for al-Shabab to return to Galgaduud since the major clans and sub-clans in the province—Habir Gedir, Dir, and Marehan¹⁶—have thrown their support behind the ASWJ.¹⁷ An additional factor that may prevent

al-Shabab from gaining power in Galgaduud is that the militant group is putting most of its energy in fighting Somali government and African Union troops in Mogadishu.

Shabab's Growing Weaknesses

Despite having better trained forces, al-Shabab was defeated by the ASWJ in Galgaduud. These battles have revealed two weaknesses affecting al-Shabab. The first weakness resulted from the Ethiopian withdrawal from Somalia. Once the unwelcome Ethiopian force largely withdrew from Somalia, al-Shabab has had difficulty securing support across clan lines. When the Ethiopians occupied the country, many

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civilians threw their support behind the hard line al-Shabab because it was a major part of the resistance. Ethiopia, which is considered a rival country by most Somalis, was welcomed by very few. In fact, al-Shabab has tried to tie ASWJ to the Ethiopians, alleging that the Sufi group has been armed and supported by Ethiopia to fight a proxy war on its behalf; there is some evidence of this support.¹⁸

The second weakness is that it appears the general population in Somalia has grown tired of al-Shabab's indiscriminate violence that has caused

many civilian deaths. As stated by one man in Mogadishu's airport, "Al-Shabab brought peace to Kismayo...They banned all sorts of music, and no radio can play music. At night they carry foot patrol in the neighborhoods, and if they hear any music coming out of your house you will disappear." The man continued, "I like the fact that they have brought peace back to Kismayo, but I do not like them when they destroy our national flag,"¹⁹ demonstrating why many in Somalia disagree with al-Shabab's attempts to eradicate Somali nationalism. Al-Shabab's ban on stimulants such as Qat, smoking cigarettes and public entertainment will likely continue to further erode their support in some parts of Somalia.

Support for al-Shabab is, however, still strong in certain parts of the country, partially due to the fact that they have set up Islamic courts and brought law and order to areas under their control. Despite al-Shabab's recent losses, the group, along with an Islamist coalition of four factions known as Hisbul Islamiyya that has ties to al-Shabab,²⁰ still controls significant land in southern Somalia. Clan loyalties help to secure al-Shabab's control of Bay and Bakool regions in the southwest because the group draws significant numbers of fighters from the Rahanwayn clans, which are predominate in those two regions. Al-Shabab also has significant control of Lower Jubba region. Furthermore, when combined with Hisbul Islamiyya's Harakat Ras Kamboni of Shaykh Hassan Turki—which has a strong Ogadeni clan connection and influence in Lower Shabelle²¹—al-Shabab's influence extends from Kismayo all the way to the Somali-Kenyan border.

Conclusion

Al-Shabab's losses to the ASWJ in Galgaduud demonstrate how clan

¹² This information is based on the author's first-hand reporting in Guraceel in February 2009.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Personal interview, elder in Guraceel, Somalia, February 26, 2009.

¹⁵ Personal interview, resident in Dusa Mareb, Somalia, February 23, 2009.

¹⁶ Marehan's support for al-Shabab is not universal. In Lower Jubba, for example, some Marehan support al-Shabab.

¹⁷ Al-Shabab draws fighters from various clans, including some from Habir Gedir and Dir.

¹⁸ Abdurrahman Warsameh, "Counting the Cost After Ethiopia Withdraws," AllAfrica.com, January 31, 2009.

Based on the author's own research in Galgaduud, in addition to other reporting sources, some of these allegations can be substantiated. There is evidence that Ethiopia provided some support to the ASWJ forces during the battle in Guraceel. When the ASWJ was running low on ammunition, Ethiopian troops allegedly resupplied them. Also during the battle of Guraceel, Ethiopian troops apparently mobilized near the town but the ASWJ requested that they withdraw due to concern that they would be labeled as an Ethiopian proxy.

¹⁹ Personal interview, civilian in Mogadishu airport, February 18, 2009.

²⁰ Hisbul Islamiyya is composed of four factions: the hard-line Asmara wing of the Alliance for the Re-Liberation of Somalia led by Shaykh Hassan Dahir Aweys; Harakat Ras Kamboni, a southern Somali Islamist group affiliated with Shaykh Hassan "Turki," who has had ties with al-Shabab; the Islamic Front of Jabhatul Islamiyya, an insurgent group formed in 2007 to oppose Ethiopian troops in Somalia; and a little-known, Harti clan group called Anole and based in Kismayo.

²¹ The Ogadeni are a sub-clan of the Darod.

loyalties can shift, and why al-Shabab is in danger of losing some of its power and control in Somalia. Furthermore, since January 31, the former chairman of the Islamic Courts Union, Shaykh Sharif Shaykh Ahmad, was chosen as the new president of Somalia. With Shaykh Sharif as the head of the Somali state, it has become possible to weaken the appeal of extreme jihadist ideology in the country. The Shaykh Sharif government's decision to apply Shari`a and his past ties to Somali militias may weaken the appeal of hard liners such as al-Shabab. To consolidate these gains, it will require well thought strategic and material support for the Shaykh Sharif regime. This support must be sensitive of Somali social and cultural mores.²² Whatever help is extended to the new government has to take into account previous shortcomings, such as giving the green light to Somalia's rival, Ethiopia, to invade without considering the possible backlash. Indeed, two years ago, thousands of Ethiopian troops were sent to the Somali capital to both empower the then TFG and eradicate extremist jihadists. That strategy, however, did not cultivate any fruits and produced the opposite effect by creating more jihadists than before. Any future strategy must avoid these previous failures.

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²² For example, when the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency decided to support warlords in Somalia—with the aim of capturing individuals suspected of international terrorism—it had a negative impact because the warlords had a low standing in society. Many in the Somali public interpreted this support as a war on Islam rather than an operation to catch al-Qa`ida operatives.