

Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama

AT A GLANCE

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SUMMARY

Formed: 1991

Disbanded: Group is politically, but not violently, active.

First Attack: December 2008: ASWJ unsuccessfully attempted to take control of the Somali town of Guriel from the militant group Al Shabaab. (15 killed, unknown wounded).¹

Last Attack: February 10, 2015: ASWJ militants attacked government bases in Guriel. (12+ killed, unknown wounded).²

OVERVIEW

Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama (ASWJ) formed in 1991 to protect Sufi Muslims in Somalia. ASWJ was established in response to such groups as Al Ittihad Al Islamiya (AIAI), whose radical Islamist ideology violently opposed Sufism. The group was not primarily a militant organization prior to 2008, instead focusing its activities on community religious affairs. ASWJ began fighting Al Shabaab in 2008 after that organization conducted several anti-Sufi attacks. ASWJ is loosely allied with Somalia’s Transitional Federal Government (TFG) and cooperates with it against Al Shabaab. In 2017, ASWJ entered into a power-sharing agreement with the state of Galmudug, located in central Somalia, and has since participated in the administration of the region.

NARRATIVE SUMMARY

Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama (ASWJ) formed in 1991 to protect Sufi Muslims in Somalia.³ ASWJ formed in response to anti-Sufi groups like Al Ittihad Al Islamiya (AIAI), whose radical Islamist ideology violently opposed Sufism. Initially, ASWJ’s opposition to these groups relied on non-violent tactics, such as clerical preaching for the revitalization of Sufi sects and the unification of Sufi religious orders. Little information is available about ASWJ’s activities in the late 1990s

and early 2000s. However, the group was not a primarily militant organization prior to 2008, focusing its activities on community religious affairs.⁴

In 2008, ASWJ gained prominence as the main resistance force to the militant organization Al Shabaab, which was conducting many anti-Sufi attacks and destroying sacred Sufi tombs. In response to those attacks, ASWJ organized itself as a cohesive militant force for the first time, taking its fighters from clan militias. In March 2009, after Al Shabaab killed multiple Sufi clerics, ASWJ declared jihad against it. ASWJ and Al Shabaab battled each other for control of various areas in central Somalia during 2008 and 2009. Although ASWJ's main rival was Al Shabaab, it also fought anti-Sufi groups like Hizbul Islam.⁵

ASWJ allied itself loosely with Somalia's Transitional Federal Government (TFG), with which the group signed a power-sharing agreement in early 2010. ASWJ promised to cooperate in the fight against Al Shabaab in exchange for cabinet positions for its members. However, discord emerged when ASWJ members claimed that the TFG failed to meet its promises. ASWJ contended that the government did not allocate enough cabinet positions to its members.⁶

Despite its conflicts with the TFG, ASWJ remained an important actor in the fight against Al Shabaab and was viewed by the international community as a legitimate partner of Somalia's government. Consequently, ASWJ received several international delegations in early 2011, including officials from Norway and Ethiopia. The group was also invited in April 2011 to attend a U.N.-organized consultation meeting on Somalia's political future. However, ASWJ joined the TFG in formally declining the invitation, decrying the gathering as "meaningless." Some ASWJ leaders attended the meeting anyway, causing discord within the group.⁷

ASWJ and the TFG have continued to share an uncertain relationship. They are nominal allies cooperating against Al Shabaab, and ASWJ participates in governance structures established by the TFG as well as the international community. However, ASWJ has also taken control of key towns in Somalia by force, and despite international and domestic outcry, the group has refused to withdraw. In February 2015, ASWJ militants attacked government bases in Guriel, an operation in which at least twelve people were killed.⁸ In 2017, following an "existential" conflict with the government of the central Somali state of Galmudug,⁹ ASWJ signed a power-sharing agreement, integrating its military and political infrastructure into that of the state.¹⁰

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

A. LEADERSHIP

ASWJ's central leadership structure is unclear and not much is known about the leaders. The group seems to lack a unified leadership and instead relies on multiple regional leaders. Multiple individuals have been simultaneously identified as the group's top leader.¹¹

Sheikh Muhammad Sheikh Hassan (Unknown to Unknown): On behalf of ASWJ, Hassan signed a power-sharing agreement with the TFG on March 15, 2010. In mid-April 2012, ASWJ released a statement calling Hassan the leader of the organization.¹²

Sheikh Hassan Sheikh Ahmed (Unknown to 2011): Also known by the name Qoryoley, Ahmed served as the chairman of ASWJ in Somalia's Gedo region. He was killed by Al Shabaab militants in 2011.¹³

Sheikh Omar Sheikh Muhammad Farah (Unknown to 2012): Farah was one of ASWJ's top leaders before his death in a car crash in 2012. He has been described as the group's first leader and chairman.¹⁴

Sheikh Mohamed Yusuf Hefow (1991 to 2013): Hefow was a founder of ASWJ and was elected chairman of the group's executive committee in August 2011. He was also described as ASWJ's operational chief.¹⁵

Sheikh Abdiqadir Muhammad Somow (Unknown to Unknown): Somow has been described as the spokesman for ASWJ's supreme council.¹⁶

Sheikh Mohamed Shakir Ali Hassan (August 2015? to Present): Also known as Mohamed Ali Hassan, Hassan has been identified in the news media as the leader of ASWJ. The earliest documented evidence of his leadership is August 2015, but he may have been serving in this capacity earlier.¹⁷ Under his leadership, ASWJ signed a power-sharing agreement with the authorities of Galmudug State. As a result of this deal, Hassan has served since December 2017 as the chief minister of the state government.¹⁸

B. NAME CHANGES

There are no recorded name changes for this group.

The Somali ASWJ should not be confused with a militant organization of the same name, Ahlu Sunna Wal Jamaa, founded in 2014 and active since 2017, that operates in the northern Cabo Delgado province of Mozambique.¹⁹

C. SIZE ESTIMATES

- 2011: 4,500 (Global Security)²⁰

D. RESOURCES

ASWJ has received funding and goods from local Somalis in exchange for protective services. In June 2010, for example, tribal elders of the Galgudud region urged their populations to hand over weapons to the group. In return, ASWJ promised to secure the Galgudud region.²¹

ASWJ also possesses many types of weapons and military equipment, including AK-47s, machine guns, armored personnel carriers, and anti-tank weapons. It received some of this equipment from the Somali army and the Ethiopian government.²²

E. GEOGRAPHIC LOCATIONS

Disclaimer: This is a partial list of where the militant organization has bases and where it operates. This does not include information on where the group conducts major attacks or has external influences.

ASWJ primarily operates in the central Somali regions of Galgadud, Gedo, and Mudug as well as parts of Mogadishu. The group's main area of operation is the Galgadud province, where the group has formed an administrative center called the Administration of Central Somalia.²³ Until its power-sharing agreement with the state of Galmudug (a combination of the names of the Galgadud and Mudug regions) in December 2017, ASWJ held control of the state capital, Dhusamareb.²⁴ Under the terms of that deal, ASWJ returned control of its territory to the government in exchange for being granted power within that government.²⁵

STRATEGY

A. IDEOLOGY & GOALS

ASWJ adheres to a mystical sect of Sufi Islam that appeared in the Horn of Africa in the 15th century. It is generally considered a moderate group because it cooperates with Somalia's Transitional Federal Government (TFG). ASWJ's original ideology was non-violent and worked to unite three "tariqas," or "paths," of Sufi Islam: the Qadiriyya, Salihyya, and Ahmadiyya. ASWJ used non-violent tactics to counter anti-Sufi militant groups like Al Ittihad Al Islamiya (AIAI) and Al Shabaab. For example, the group engaged in clerical preaching for the revitalization of Sufi sects and the unification of Sufi religious orders. However, attacks by AIAI and Al Shabaab ultimately led ASWJ to take up arms. ASWJ believes that the interpretation of Islam espoused by other groups is corrupt and illegitimate. ASWJ seeks to defeat Al Shabaab and similar groups as well as protect its own form of Sufism in Somalia.²⁶

B. POLITICAL ACTIVITIES

ASWJ cooperates with Somalia's Transitional Federal Government (TFG), with which it signed a power-sharing agreement in 2010. This agreement allocated ministerial posts and other government positions to ASWJ.²⁷

The closeness of the relationship between ASWJ and the TFG is unclear. Abdiwali Mohamed Ali, the TFG's minister of planning and international cooperation, referred to the name "Ahlu Sunna wal Jama" as just a label for the government militia. However, conflict has occasionally arisen between ASWJ and the TFG, with the former accusing the latter of reneging on the power-sharing agreement. While some ASWJ members have served in the TFG, the group has contended that its members were not given the promised number of government positions.²⁸

ASWJ received several international delegations in early 2011, including officials from Norway and Ethiopia. Additionally, the group was invited in April 2011 to attend a U.N.-organized consultation meeting on Somalia's political future. However, ASWJ joined the TFG in formally declining the invitation, decrying the gathering as "meaningless." Some ASWJ leaders attended the meeting anyway, causing discord within the group.²⁹

In December 2017, ASWJ signed a power-sharing agreement with the government of Galmudug State, formalized by Galmudug State President Ahmed Duale Ghelle “Xaaf” and ASWJ leader Sheikh Mohamed Shakir Ali Hassan.³⁰ Under the terms of the deal, ASWJ will be entitled to representation in the state’s parliament and cabinet, and its military forces will be integrated with those of the Galmudug government.³¹ Hassan will be granted the position of Chief of Ministers in the state’s government, and ASWJ will be able to select officeholders for other posts including Chief Justice of the High Court in Galmudug. As part of the agreement, ASWJ recognized the authority of the Galmudug state government over the territory the group formerly held and ceded it to the government.³²

C. TARGETS & TACTICS

ASWJ formed to protect Sufi Muslims from anti-Sufi militant groups like Al Ittihad Al Islamiya (AIAI) and Al Shabaab. Initially, ASWJ’s opposition to these groups relied on non-violent tactics, such as clerical preaching for the revitalization of Sufi sects and the unification of Sufi religious orders. In 2008, ASWJ began using force against Al Shabaab in response to the group’s anti-Sufi attacks.³³

ASWJ uses a variety of weapons and military equipment—including AK-47s, machine guns, armored personnel carriers, and anti-tank weapons—primarily against Al Shabaab and other groups, which it battles for territorial control. However, ASWJ has also attacked government targets.³⁴

MAJOR ATTACKS

Disclaimer: These are some selected major attacks in the militant organization's history. It is not a comprehensive listing but captures some of the most famous attacks or turning points during the campaign.

December 2008: ASWJ unsuccessfully attempted to take control of the Somali town Guriel from Al Shabaab. (15 killed, unknown wounded).³⁵

February 2009: ASWJ captured the Al Shabaab-controlled towns of Guriel, Caabud Waaq, Dhusa Mareeb, Masagawa, and Cadaado in retaliation for the group’s desecration of Sufi shrines. (unknown killed, unknown wounded).³⁶

March 16, 2009: ASWJ forces launched an attack to expel Al Shabaab from the Dusamareb area, displacing 300,000 people. (146 killed, 231 wounded).³⁷

June 5, 2009: Fighters from ASWJ clashed with Al Shabaab militants in Webho, in central Somalia. 120 combatants were killed, along with three civilians. (123 killed, unknown wounded).³⁸

January 2, 2010: ASWJ fought Al Shabaab near Dusamareb, a town north of Mogadishu. This battle was the first clash between the two groups in Dusamareb since ASWJ ousted Al Shabaab from the town in 2008. (10 killed, unknown wounded).³⁹

April 5, 2010: ASWJ claimed to have attacked Al Shabaab in the Rage Ele area in Middle Shabelle, expelling its forces from the region. (17 killed, 20 wounded).⁴⁰

March 11, 2011: Ethiopian troops and ASWJ forces attacked several Al Shabaab strongholds, such as Galgudud, in central Somalia. (15 killed, unknown wounded).⁴¹

April 24, 2011: ASWJ retook the town of Dusamareb, the group's stronghold in central Somalia, from the Al Shabaab forces that had occupied the town the day before. (11 killed, 18 wounded).⁴²

April 27, 2011: Together with the TFG, ASWJ launched a surprise attack on Al Shabaab in the village of Tulo Barqaqo. ASWJ seized a large amount of Al Shabaab's weapons, including assault rifles, pistols, and explosive devices. (20 killed, unknown wounded).⁴³

June 15, 2011: ASWJ attacked and gained control over Al Shabaab's bases in Dhirimaadie. Two ASWJ members died, while all other casualties were Al Shabaab fighters. (9 killed, 11 wounded).⁴⁴

February 10, 2015: ASWJ militants attacked government bases in Guriel. (12+ killed, unknown wounded).⁴⁵

INTERACTIONS

A. DESIGNATED/LISTED

ASWJ has not been designated or listed by the U.S. Department of State or the European Union.

B. COMMUNITY RELATIONS

ASWJ formed to protect Sufi Muslims from anti-Sufi militant groups like Al Ittihad Al Islamiya (AIAI) and Al Shabaab. The group was not a primarily militant organization prior to 2008 and instead engaged in community religious affairs.⁴⁶ Initially, ASWJ's opposition to these groups relied on non-violent tactics, such as clerical preaching for the revitalization of Sufi sects and the unification of Sufi religious orders. In 2008, ASWJ began using force against Al Shabaab in response to the group's anti-Sufi attacks. Since then, ASWJ has fought Al Shabaab for control of territory throughout Somalia.⁴⁷

ASWJ has set up governance structures in the center of Somalia, which is perceived by some as a potential threat to Somalia's Transitional Federal Government (TFG). Specifically, the group established an administration for Somalia's central region independent of the TFG.⁴⁸ However, in a meeting on June 13, 2009, ASWJ commander Sheikh Omar Sheikh Mohammed Farah explained that the group had "no political interest or agendas" and that its primary goal was to "help the government restore national security after eighteen years of war."⁴⁹

In the areas under its control, ASWJ has attempted to stem the rise of Islamic extremism. The group closed several mosques after accusing their clerics of being too extreme. In addition, ASWJ shut down Koranic schools in the Galgudud region, a controversial move in the local

community. The decision was made after ASWJ's head of education, Sheikh Hassan, deemed that the schools' curriculum contained Al Qaeda ideology and thus contradicted proper Islamic beliefs.⁵⁰

ASWJ has also monitored militia checkpoints and attempted to stop abuse of civilians at the hands of extremists, especially Al Shabaab fighters. An ASWJ cleric of the Hiran region accused Al Shabaab of committing crimes against women, children, and elders in the town of Beledweyn.⁵¹ ASWJ has also criticized Al Shabaab for planting land mines and explosives in the Gedo region. Though the mines are meant to target ASWJ and government forces, ASWJ has stated that the explosives could hurt many innocent people and their domestic animals.⁵²

Some community leaders view ASWJ as necessary to protect their areas from Islamic extremists like Al Shabaab. Consequently, those leaders have supplied ASWJ with weapons. The group is also viewed as a mediator between rival clans in Somalia.⁵³

However, like other militant groups in the country, ASWJ has banned several radio stations from operating in the areas under its control. These stations were usually banned for broadcasting anti-ASWJ reports. Radio Abudwak and Radio Badbado were banned in November 2010, and Shabelle Radio was banned in February 2011.⁵⁴

C. RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER GROUPS

ASWJ formed to protect Sufis from anti-Sufi organizations like Al Ittihad Al Islamiya (AIAI), Hizbul Islam, and Al Shabaab. ASWJ has fought these organizations for control of territory throughout Somalia. Al Shabaab is the main rival of ASWJ, and the groups have battled nearly constantly since 2008.⁵⁵

ASWJ has also fought the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), a separatist organization of ethnic Somalis in Ethiopia. For example, in January 2012, clashes erupted between ONLF and ASWJ forces. According to an ASWJ official, tension with the ONLF has been continuous because "any time the ONLF crosses the border they carry out brutal attacks and torture the residents accusing them of spying for ASWJ and the Ethiopian government."⁵⁶

D. STATE SPONSORS AND EXTERNAL INFLUENCES

ASWJ loosely allied itself with Somalia's Transitional Federal Government (TFG), with which it cooperates against Al Shabaab. The TFG has provided ASWJ with weapons and positions in the government. However, ASWJ's relationship with the Somali government has sometimes been strained. In early 2015, tensions about the establishment of a regional government in central Somalia led to clashes between TFG soldiers and ASWJ militants.⁵⁷ By 2017, however, ASWJ accepted a power-sharing agreement with the government of Galmudug, a state in central Somalia, and integrated its militant force and leadership with those of the state.⁵⁸ As of 2018, ASWJ is considered to operate on the side of the Somali federal government and the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM).⁵⁹

Additionally, ASWJ has received support from Ethiopia in the form of training and weapons since December 2008. An estimated 1,000 fighters have trained in Ethiopia for four months at a time.⁶⁰

MAPS

- Somalia

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