

Al Ittihad Al Islamiya

AT A GLANCE

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SUMMARY

Formed: 1984

Disbanded: 1997

First Attack: January 1992: AIAI members killed a female UNICEF doctor in the Somali city of Bosasso as she was drinking tea at an outdoor café. (1 killed, 0 wounded)¹

Last Attack: December 24, 1996: AIAI clashed with Ethiopian forces in the border region between Somalia and Ethiopia. The Ethiopian Defense Ministry accused AIAI of attacking across Somalia's border into Ethiopia, while AIAI accused Ethiopia of occupying a Somali town. (unknown killed, unknown wounded)²

OVERVIEW

Al Ittihad Al Islamiya (AIAI) was formed in Somalia in 1984 with the goal of establishing an Islamic state in East Africa. In the late 1980s, AIAI began to focus on armed resistance against Somalia's dictator, Siad Barre. AIAI initially concentrated its attacks in Somalia. After the fall of Barre's regime in 1991, AIAI allied with the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), a separatist movement of ethnic Somalis living in Ethiopia's Ogaden region, to refocus on Ethiopia as its primary target. AIAI's cooperation with the ONLF and attacks in Ethiopia provoked the Ethiopian government to invade Somalia in 1996 with the goal of eradicating AIAI. On January 4, 1997, AIAI announced its transition to become a political party, signaling the organization's effective end as a militant group. AIAI has sometimes been blamed for attacks after 1997, but these attacks were generally conducted by former AIAI members rather than a centralized organization.

NARRATIVE SUMMARY

Al Ittihad Al Islamiya (AIAI) formed in 1984 from the merger of two Salafi organizations, Al Jama'a Al Islamiya and Wahdat Al Shabaab Al Islam. However, AIAI did not formally announce its formation or begin conducting attacks until years later. AIAI's constituent groups, which had been active since the

1960s, were religious organizations founded by Islamic leaders whose aim was to combat Western influence and support the creation of an Islamic state in the Horn of Africa. Upon AIAI's formation, Sheikh Ali Warsame—the leader of Wahdat Al Shabaab Al Islam—assumed control of the new group. AIAI's initial goal was to establish an Islamic state, originally through peaceful means, but in the late 1980s, the group began to focus on armed resistance against Somalia's dictator, Siad Barre. Not long after the fall of Barre's regime in the early 1990s, a Somali named Hassan Dahir Aweys assumed leadership of AIAI's militant wing.³ During AIAI's early years, before the group formally announced its formation, Al Jama'a Al Islamiya and Wahdat Al Shabaab Al Islam initially operated somewhat independently.⁴

AIAI's nationalist appeals and opposition to Barre drew wide support from Somalis. After Barre's fall from power in the face of widespread opposition in 1991, AIAI officially announced its formation and explicitly stated its primary goal as the establishment of a new state ruled by Shariah law in the region. AIAI shifted focus to Ethiopia as its main enemy, beginning attacks across Somalia's border into Ethiopia. Sometime in the early 1990s, AIAI allied with the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), a separatist group comprised of ethnic Somalis living in Ethiopia's Ogaden region; the two organizations frequently collaborated in attacking Ethiopian targets, especially Ethiopian soldiers, with the goal of controlling Ogaden. AIAI successfully staged attacks throughout Ethiopia, including in the capital of Addis Ababa, although the group's low capacity constrained its ability to conduct highly destructive or violent attacks on Ethiopian targets. On August 9, 1996, after AIAI relocated its headquarters to a region of Somalia bordering Ethiopia, Ethiopian forces began an extensive military campaign against the group. The Ethiopian army entered Somalia, attacked AIAI's strongholds, and ultimately destroyed the organization.⁵

On January 4, 1997, Aweys announced that AIAI would transition to a political party, signaling the organization's effective end as a militant group. However, there is little public information on AIAI as a political party after Aweys' announcement. AIAI has sometimes been blamed for attacks after 1997, but these attacks were generally conducted by former AIAI members rather than the formal group itself. AIAI as a cohesive militant group ceased to exist after 1997, although it may have continued for some time as a loose political front with vestigial militant factions. AIAI members often continued their militant activity through other groups, which were sometimes referred to as AIAI because of the high concentration of former members. In particular, many AIAI militants joined the predecessor of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), which emerged in the late 1990s. Aweys, for example, became a leader of the ICU and its armed wing, which would become the militant group Al Shabaab. These groups shared AIAI's goal of establishing an Islamic state.⁶

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

A. LEADERSHIP

Sheikh Ali Warsame (1984 to 1997): Warsame was a founding member of AIAI and served as the group's top leader. Warsame had previously led Wahdat Al Shabaab Al Islam, one of the two Salafi organizations that merged to form AIAI. As AIAI's leader, Warsame was the group's major ideological influence and reportedly demonstrated reluctance for militant activity even while leading AIAI. Despite this reluctance, he may have recruited Hassan Dahir Aweys, who would become AIAI's military commander.⁷

Hassan Dahir Aweys (Unknown to 1997): Aweys served as AIAI's top military commander. He was allegedly recruited into AIAI by Warsame in the late 1980s or early 1990s, around the time of Barre's overthrow. In 1997, Aweys announced that AIAI would cease to function as a militant organization and instead become a political party. After the effective collapse of AIAI as a militant group, Aweys assumed a leading role in the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) and its armed wing, which would become the militant group Al Shabaab. Aweys later held leadership positions in other militant organizations, including the Alliance for the Reliberation of Somalia (ARS) and Hizbul Islam.⁸

Hassan Abdullah Hersi al-Turki (Unknown to 1997): Turki reportedly led a faction within AIAI. He had close links to Al Qaeda, which he allegedly assisted in its attack on the U.S. embassy in Nairobi in 1998. Like Aweys, Turki also served as a prominent leader in the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) after AIAI's collapse. Sometime after the ICU disbanded in the mid-2000s, Turki founded a Somali militant group known as the Ras Kamboni Brigade. He died of illness in May 2015.⁹

Al Afghani (Unknown to Unknown): Also known as Ibrahim Hajj Jama and Abubakar al-Seyli'I, Afghani was described as a military commander of AIAI. Previously, Afghani had fought in Afghanistan, thus gaining his nom de guerre. He reportedly had strong links to Al Qaeda and the Taliban.¹⁰

B. NAME CHANGES

There are no recorded name changes for this group.

C. SIZE ESTIMATES

There are no available size estimates for the time that AIAI was an active militant group. The U.S. State Department and other organizations have estimated AIAI membership at around 2,000, but those estimates occurred after 1997, when the group had largely disintegrated. These numbers likely reflected AIAI's vestiges rather than AIAI as a centralized group.¹¹

D. RESOURCES

AIAI received funds, training, and logistical support from Al Qaeda. Osama bin Laden himself allegedly contributed up to \$3 million. The government of Sudan also supported AIAI with funds, training, and weapons. Additionally, AIAI received donations from diaspora communities in Europe, North America, and the Arabian Peninsula; from private financiers in Saudi Arabia and throughout the Middle East; and from organizations such as the Muslim World League, the International Islamic Relief Organization, and Al-Haramain Islamic Foundation. These contributions from overseas sources comprised the largest portion of AIAI's financing.¹²

AIAI also financed itself through criminal and business activities, which included imposing taxes on the Somali port of Bosasso and demanding protection fees in some regions of the country. AIAI provided security escorts for the United Nations Operation in Somalia (UNOSOM) in return for large payments.¹³

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.

AIAI mainly operated within Somalia. After the fall of the Barre regime in 1991, AIAI took control of the country's northeast region, including the port city of Bosaso. AIAI established several strategic facilities at Bosaso as well as a large base near Qaw, to Bosaso's west. In the mid 1990s, conflict with other militants forced AIAI to move its operational base to Gedo, a region close to the Ethiopian border.

AIAI's major activities beyond Somalia occurred in Ethiopia, although the group may have also conducted attacks in Kenya and Djibouti. AIAI launched attacks throughout Ethiopia, including in the country's capital city. The group was especially active in Ethiopia's Ogaden region, where it supported a separatist movement of ethnic Somalis.¹⁴

STRATEGY

A. IDEOLOGY & GOALS

From its beginnings, AIAI espoused a Salafi ideology and pursued as its main goal the creation of an Islamic state in East Africa. The group advocated the institution of Shariah law as a solution to all of Somalia's problems, and the group also condemned traditional Sufi practices. In the late 1980s, AIAI began to focus on forcibly ousting Somalia's dictator, Siad Barre. Barre was ultimately overthrown in 1991 through the efforts of several opposition groups.¹⁵ Several months after the ousting of Barre, AIAI released a document entitled, "The Manifesto of an Islamic Party," in which it explicitly indicated the creation of an Islamic state as its primary goal and condemned the formation of political alliances with non-Islamist organizations. AIAI shifted focus to Ethiopia as its main enemy, launching attacks in support of a separatist movement in Ethiopia's Ogaden region, where many ethnic Somalis resided. AIAI collaborated with an Ogaden separatist group in attacking Ethiopian targets with the goal of controlling the Ogaden region.¹⁶

B. POLITICAL ACTIVITIES

On September 22, 1991, AIAI formally declared its existence and stated its goals by releasing a document entitled, "The Manifesto of an Islamic Party." However, AIAI operated as a militant organization rather than a political party from its founding to 1997, and it never engaged in negotiations with Somalia's government. On January 4, 1997, AIAI military commander Hassan Dahir Aweys announced that the group would begin to operate as a political party, thereby ending the organization's centrally directed militant activity. However, information about AIAI as a political party and its activities is not available, which may suggest that AIAI did not successfully transition to politics.¹⁷

C. TARGETS & TACTICS

During AIAI's early years, the group's leaders did not agree on armed jihad as the primary activity for AIAI. Warsame, for example, demonstrated reluctance for militant activity and favored advocating the creation of an Islamic state through other means. However, AIAI soon turned to armed struggle against the Barre government, which was deposed in 1991. Using firearms and explosives, AIAI also conducted attacks on international aid organizations as well as other militants in Somalia.¹⁸

After the fall of Barre's regime, AIAI turned its focus to Ethiopia, supporting a separatist movement of ethnic Somalis living in Ethiopia's Ogaden region. AIAI collaborated with the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) to conduct attacks on Ethiopian targets, especially soldiers. Although it focused its militant activity on the Ogaden region, AIAI also launched attacks throughout Ethiopia, including several bombings of public places in Addis Ababa in the late 1990s.¹⁹

In areas of Somalia under its control, AIAI imposed its harsh interpretation of Shariah law. It also established Islamic social programs, including orphanages and schools.²⁰

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.

January 1992: AIAI members killed a female UNICEF doctor in the Somali city of Bosasso as she was drinking tea at an outdoor café. (1 killed, 0 wounded)²¹

July 1992: AIAI members targeted the offices of an international relief organization in the city of Marka with a rocket-propelled grenade. (0 killed, 0 wounded)²²

1993: AIAI and Al Qaeda allegedly cooperated in an attack on U.S. soldiers in Somalia. (18 killed, unknown wounded)²³

May 1995: AIAI conducted a grenade attack on a market in Dire Dawa, Ethiopia. (15 killed, unknown wounded)²⁴

January 1996: AIAI claimed responsibility for a hotel bombing in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. (6 killed, 20 wounded)²⁵

February 1996: AIAI claimed responsibility for a hotel bombing in Dire Dawa, Ethiopia. (1 killed, 3 wounded)²⁶

February 1996: AIAI claimed responsibility for the assassination of General Hayelom Araya, the head of Operations in the Ethiopian Ministry of Defence, although the Ethiopian government accused Eritrean agents of perpetrating the attack. (1 killed, 0 wounded)²⁷

July 1996: AIAI attempted to assassinate Ethiopia's Minister of Transport, Abdul-Mejid Hussein. (0 killed, 1 wounded)²⁸

August 5, 1996: The Wabe Shebelle Hotel in Addis Ababa suffered a bombing attack. The Ethiopian government accused AIAI of perpetrating the bombing. (2 killed, 11 injured)²⁹

August 11, 1996: Suspected members of AIAI shot and killed two Ethiopian businessmen in the Somali city of Beledweyne, reportedly in retaliation for Ethiopia's military actions in Somalia earlier that month. (2 killed, 0 wounded)³⁰

December 24, 1996: AIAI clashed with Ethiopian forces in the border region between Somalia and Ethiopia. The Ethiopian Defense Ministry accused AIAI of attacking across Somalia's border into Ethiopia, while AIAI accused Ethiopia of occupying a Somali town. (unknown killed, unknown wounded)³¹

INTERACTIONS

A. DESIGNATED/LISTED

The United States, United Kingdom, and United Nations designated AIAI as a terrorist organization after 1997.

- U.S. State Department Foreign Terrorist Organizations: September 23, 2001 to Present³²
- UK Proscribed Terrorist Organisations: October 2005 to Present³³
- United Nations ISIL (Da'esh) & Al-Qaida Sanctions List: October 6, 2001 to Present³⁴

B. COMMUNITY RELATIONS

Between 1984 and 1991, AIAI membership grew substantially among Somalia's disadvantaged populations. AIAI disseminated its ideology through its members, who worked in the civil service as well as military and academic institutions. AIAI also supported the foundation of small businesses, which were established based on AIAI's Wahhabi ideology. Although it was a generally nonviolent organization in its early stages, AIAI members clashed several times with Sufis in the mid-1980s because of the group's opposition to Sufi practices. These clashes, which occurred in Mogadishu, sometimes involved fatalities.³⁵

After the collapse of the Barre government in 1991, AIAI gained control of some areas of Somalia and functioned as a government. In the territory under its control, AIAI strictly enforced Shariah law and provided security. The group also established Islamic social programs, including orphanages and schools, as well as various banks, shopping centers, aid organizations, and other businesses. AIAI established Islamic courts and provided employment to many Somalis. Additionally, the group provided security escorts for the United Nations Operation in Somalia (UNOSOM) in return for large payments.³⁶

Despite AIAI's initial popularity, some Somali citizens disagreed with the group's policies. In the Gedo region on Somalia's border with Ethiopia, for example, residents resented AIAI's strict enforcement of Shariah law, its prohibition on the carrying of weapons by citizens, and its ban against ghat, a popular semi-narcotic herb in Somalia.³⁷

C. RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER GROUPS

AIAI allegedly maintained ties to Al Qaeda. Senior AIAI leaders, including Hassan Dahir Aweys and Hassan Abdullah Hersi al-Turki, were closely linked to Al Qaeda members. AIAI received funds, training, and logistical support from Al Qaeda, with Osama bin Laden himself allegedly contributing up to \$3 million. Bin Laden reportedly dispatched Al Qaeda members to Somalia in the early 1990s to assist AIAI in organizing its fighters and establishing local social services. Additionally, members of AIAI and Al Qaeda cooperated on at least one attack, and AIAI fighters may have assisted Al Qaeda in bombing U.S. embassies in Dar es Salaam and Nairobi in 1998.³⁸

After the collapse of the Barre regime in 1991, AIAI allied with the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) in its fight to control Ethiopia's Ogaden region. The alliance began in the early 1990s when ONLF members fleeing Ethiopia received protection from AIAI in Somalia. The two groups cooperated in launching attacks on Ethiopian targets, especially soldiers, with AIAI providing funding for those attacks. The ONLF and AIAI maintained a close relationship until AIAI's collapse in 1997.

After its collapse in 1997, many of its former members joined and led new militant jihadi organizations. The Islamic Courts Union (ICU), for example, was heavily influenced by AIAI members when it emerged in the early 2000s, and Hassan Dahir Aweys served as a prominent leader of the group. Because several Somali militant groups contained a high concentration of former AIAI members, those groups were sometimes called AIAI, even though AIAI did not exist as a cohesive militant organization after 1997.³⁹

D. STATE SPONSORS AND EXTERNAL INFLUENCES

AIAI's only reported external influence was the Sudanese government, from which the group received funding, training, and weapons. Sudan may have also allowed AIAI members to maintain safe houses and training facilities in Khartoum and surrounding areas. Specific details about the duration and extent of the relationship between AIAI and Sudan are not known.⁴⁰

MAPS

- Somalia

¹ Bryden, Matt. "No Quick Fixes: Coming to Terms with Terrorism, Islam, and Statelessness in Somalia." *The Journal of Conflict Studies* 23, no. 2 (Fall 2003): 24-56. Web. 29 Mar. 2016.

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