

Hizbul Islam

AT A GLANCE

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HOW TO CITE

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SUMMARY

Formed: February 4, 2009.

Disbanded: 2013.

First Attack: February 22, 2009: Hizbul Islam and Al Shabaab conducted a joint attack on African Union (AU) peacekeepers, using two suicide bombers against an AU base in Mogadishu. (11 killed, 15 wounded).¹

Last Attack: December 13, 2010: Suspected Hizbul Islam fighters kidnapped a group of Al Shabaab fighters in Afgooye, Somalia. (0 killed, 0 wounded).²

OVERVIEW

Hizbul Islam was an Islamist militant organization based in Somalia. It formed in opposition to the Somali Transitional Federal Government (TFG) on February 4, 2009, through the merger of four Somali Islamist groups: the Alliance for the Re-liberation of Somalia (ARS), the Ras Kamboni Brigade, Jabhatul Islamiya (Islamic Front), and Anole. Together with Al Shabaab, another Somali Islamist militant organization, Hizbul Islam gained control of all of southern Somalia, various other provinces, and most of Mogadishu in 2009. However, Hizbul Islam and Al Shabaab eventually became rivals, and in 2010, after sustained fighting, Al Shabaab absorbed a weakened Hizbul Islam. Hizbul Islam broke away from Al Shabaab in 2012, and in 2013, the group renounced militant activity.

NARRATIVE SUMMARY

Hizbul Islam was an Islamist militant organization based in Somalia. It formed on February 4, 2009, through the merger of four Somali Islamist groups: the Alliance for the Re-liberation of Somalia (ARS), the Ras Kamboni Brigade, Jabhatul Islamiya (Islamic Front), and Anole, also called the Anole Forces. Hizbul Islam was reportedly founded by Ali Yassin Mohamed, a Somali-Swedish financier affiliated with various militant organizations in Somalia; however, little is known about him, and he does not seem to have played any other role in the group.³ The group's establishment was precipitated by an agreement concluded between Somalia's Transitional Federal Government (TFG) and Islamist militants who favored

negotiations over continued fighting with the government. In January 2009, a former ARS leader named Sharif Sheikh Ahmed assumed the TFG presidency. Shortly thereafter in February 2009, Islamist militants opposed to cooperation with the government formed Hizbul Islam. Omar Iman Abu Bakar served as the organization's first leader; however, he was replaced in April or May 2009 by Hassan Dahir Aweys. Aweys, had acted as a leader of ARS (one of the constituent groups of Hizbul Islam) and had returned to Somalia from Eritrea to assume leadership of Hizbul Islam.⁴ Early internal divisions within Hizbul Islam caused the defection of a faction under Yusuf Mohammed Siad, also known as "Inda'adde," with Siad joining Somali government forces soon afterward.⁵

Hizbul Islam criticized President Ahmed for participating in negotiations with the Somali government rather than continuing to fight against it, and, despite Ahmed's entreaties, Hizbul Islam refused to join the TFG. The group denounced the creation of a secular constitution, vowing to continue fighting until it gained control of Somalia and instituted Shariah law. Hizbul Islam consistently opposed the TFG, even when—in an attempt to neutralize opposition—President Sharif Sheikh Ahmed announced the implementation of Shariah law in Somalia in 2009.⁶ Together with Al Shabaab, another Somali Islamist militant organization, Hizbul Islam launched attacks in May 2009 against TFG targets in Mogadishu and gained control of several towns near the city. By July of the same year, Hizbul Islam and Al Shabaab held all of southern Somalia, a number of other provinces, and most of the capital city, Mogadishu. Particularly heavy fighting in Mogadishu between the allied militant groups and TFG forces continued for several months, killing and displacing tens of thousands of civilians.⁷

Although Hizbul Islam and Al Shabaab cooperated in the lengthy campaign against government targets in Mogadishu, the two groups also came into ideological and physical conflict with each other. The groups disagreed, for example, on the appropriate role of Al Qaeda in Somalia; Hizbul Islam leadership believed that Al Qaeda should not interfere in Somali affairs, while Al Shabaab's leadership was more amenable to Al Qaeda's support. In the fall of 2009, tensions between Hizbul Islam and Al Shabaab intensified because of territorial disputes. The two groups struggled for control of Kismayo, a major port city in southern Somalia, and Al Shabaab ultimately declared war on Hizbul Islam. Al Shabaab gained full control of Kismayo by October, and the following month, it also captured Hizbul Islam's final major stronghold in the town of Afmadow. Throughout December, Hizbul Islam fighters continued to battle Al Shabaab for territory.⁸

Hizbul Islam began to suffer organizationally in late 2009 and early 2010 as divisions emerged among its constituent organizations—ARS, the Ras Kamboni Brigade, Jabhatul Islamiya, and Anole. For example, the Ras Kamboni Brigade attempted to force Al Shabaab from Kismayo, but the ARS and Jabhatul Islamiya refused to support the effort. In February 2010, a faction of the Ras Kamboni Brigade left Hizbul Islam and joined Al Shabaab. The other faction of the Ras Kamboni Brigade also left Hizbul Islam, forming its own independent group called the Ras Kamboni Movement. After these developments, Hizbul Islam steadily declined in influence and strength, continuing to lose territory to Al Shabaab throughout 2010.⁹ On December 13, Al Shabaab captured the city of Burhakaba in southern Somalia, allegedly threatening to execute twenty Hizbul Islam commanders. The following day, Hizbul Islam fighters fled several other areas in southern Somalia.¹⁰

Around the same time, rumors emerged that Hizbul Islam planned to merge with Al Shabaab, and a Hizbul Islam spokesman announced that "the name Hizbul Islam no longer exists."¹¹ The move was generally considered a takeover of the severely weakened Hizbul Islam by Al Shabaab. At a December 23 press conference, Aweys officially announced the merger.¹²

Since December 2010, no attacks have been attributed to Hizbul Islam as an independent organization. From December 2010 onward, Hizbul Islam operated as part of Al Shabaab, but conflicts continued between Aweys and Ahmed Abdi Godane, Al Shabaab's leader at the time. In September 2012, Hizbul Islam broke away from Al Shabaab, although Hizbul Islam has been reportedly inactive since the break. In June 2013, fearing retribution from Al Shabaab, Aweys turned himself in to Somali government authorities. Aweys was allegedly guaranteed amnesty before his surrender, but he was imprisoned and later transferred to house arrest.¹³

Hizbul Islam officially renounced militant activity in 2013 and expressed a desire for talks with the Somali government. In June 2014, Mohamed Moalim—a spokesman for the organization—announced that Hizbul Islam had changed its name to “Istiqlaal” and would function as a political party, fully joining the Somali political system.¹⁴ Information about this party and its activities is not available, which may suggest that Hizbul Islam did not successfully transition to politics, or that Istiqlaal as an actor in Somalian politics has not been widely covered by the news media.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

A. LEADERSHIP

Ali Yassin Mohamed (February 4, 2009 to Unknown): Mohamed reportedly founded Hizbul Islam as well as conducted fundraising and rallied support for the group; however, little is known about him, and he does not seem to have played any other role in the group.¹⁵

Omar Iman Abu Bakar (February 4, 2009 to April 2009): Hizbul Islam's first leader, usually referred to as Omar Iman or Dr. Omar Iman, was originally a senior figure in the Alliance for the Re-liberation of Somalia, based in Eritrea. He led Hizbul Islam until April or May 2009, when he allegedly resigned so that Hassan Dahir Aweys could assume leadership of the group.¹⁶ Bakar may have been deposed in favor of Aweys for being too moderate.¹⁷

Hassan Dahir Aweys (April 2009 to 2013): Aweys served as Hizbul Islam's leader for most of the group's existence. Previously, Aweys had served as a top leader for another Somali Islamist group, the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), and reportedly appointed the leader of the ICU's militant wing, which would become Al Shabaab. Aweys has been described as the spiritual leader of Al Shabaab, but his exact relationship with the group is unclear. He fled Somalia after the Ethiopians invaded in 2006, after which he became a leader of the Alliance for the Re-liberation of Somalia (ARS), opposed by Al Shabaab. Aweys returned to Somalia in April 2009 to lead Hizbul Islam, which was later absorbed into Al Shabaab. Aweys and Hizbul Islam reportedly split with Al Shabaab in September 2012. Aweys was arrested by the Somalian government in June 2013, and in 2014, he was transferred from prison to house arrest.¹⁸

Moallim Hashi Mohamed Farah (Unknown to 2013): Farah served as Hizbul Islam's top official in Banadir province, which includes the Somali capital of Mogadishu. As the Hizbul Islam-appointed governor of Mogadishu, Farah issued such orders as one in 2010 demanding that all men grow beards within thirty days.¹⁹

Mohamed Moalim (Unknown to 2013): Moalim served as Hizbul Islam's main spokesman and may also have served as the group's foreign affairs secretary. In June 2014, he announced that Hizbul

Islam had changed its name to “Istiqlaal” and would function as a political party, fully joining the Somali political system. Moalim became Istiqlaal’s chairman.²⁰

B. NAME CHANGES

Hizbul Islam did not undergo any name changes as an independent militant organization. However, it merged with and operated as part of Al Shabaab from December 2010 to September 2012, after which it was again distinctly identified as Hizbul Islam. After renouncing violence in 2013 and becoming a political party in June 2014, Hizbul Islam changed its name to Istiqlaal.²¹

C. SIZE ESTIMATES

There are no publicly available size estimates for this group.

D. RESOURCES

In 2009, Hizbul Islam gained large territories in southern and central Somalia; the group likely obtained resources from those territories, especially from port cities that could provide tariff revenues. In addition, Hizbul Islam likely extracted money from the populations under its control; however, in April 2010, Hassan Dahir Aweys issued a warning to the organization to stop extorting money from civilians.²²

Hizbul Islam financially benefited to some degree from piracy along the Somali coast. Somali pirates, who collected tens of millions of dollars in ransom payments in 2009, provided a lucrative opportunity for Hizbul Islam. In the port town of Haradhere, for example, elder pirates agreed to split their ransom funds with Hizbul Islam and Al Shabaab. However, significant increases in piracy discouraged ships from carrying profitable imports, and Hizbul Islam and other Islamist groups lost the tariff revenues that they obtained when those ships arrived at port. Consequently, Hizbul Islam attempted to capture and control the pirates’ strongholds. On May 2, 2010, Hizbul Islam gained the port of Haradhere, driving the pirates out of the area.²³

Additionally, Hizbul Islam received resources from abroad, including military and financial support from the Eritrean government. Eritrea has likewise supported Al Shabaab and other Somali militant groups. Hizbul Islam may have received training, weapons, and monthly payments of at least \$40,000 to \$50,000 from Eritrea. Hizbul Islam also reportedly conducted fundraising efforts in Europe in June 2009, raising over 25,000 euros.²⁴

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.

Hizbul Islam operated completely inside Somalia. In 2009, Hizbul Islam—in cooperation with Al Shabaab—gained control of southern and much of central Somalia. However, in the fall of 2009, tensions between Hizbul Islam and Al Shabaab intensified because of territorial disputes; at the end of 2009 and throughout 2010, Al Shabaab captured most of Hizbul Islam’s territories.²⁵

STRATEGY

A. IDEOLOGY & GOALS

Hizbul Islam espoused a Salafist Islamist ideology. Unlike Al Shabaab, the group focused almost exclusively on jihad in Somalia rather than assuming an international jihadist orientation. Hizbul Islam’s principal goals were to oust Somalia’s Transitional Federal Government (TFG), implement its own

interpretation of Shariah law, and expel African Union (AU) troops from the country.²⁶ Hizbul Islam consistently opposed the TFG, even when—in an attempt to neutralize opposition—President Sharif Sheikh Ahmed announced the implementation of Shariah law in Somalia in 2009. Hizbul Islam rejected the move and vowed to continue fighting to topple the government.²⁷

In the areas under its control, Hizbul Islam instituted a strict version of Shariah law, which banned music and required men to grow beards. The group attacked radio and other media stations, forcing the broadcast of exclusively Islamic messages. Additionally, Hizbul Islam executed people charged with adultery and murder. In June 2010, group members killed two Somalis for watching the World Cup while arresting forty others, demanding that the people stop wasting time and focus on jihad. Hizbul Islam considered music, soccer, and other activities to be un-Islamic.²⁸

B. POLITICAL ACTIVITIES

Hizbul Islam originally condemned any cooperation or negotiations with Somalia's Transitional Federal Government (TFG), although the group may have agreed to a short-lived ceasefire with the TFG after intense fighting in late February 2009. President Sharif Sheikh Ahmed of the TFG attempted to negotiate with Hizbul Islam in an attempt to convince it to join his government, but the group rejected his appeals. Throughout its existence as a militant organization, Hizbul Islam generally refused to engage in peaceful political activity.²⁹

Hizbul Islam showed greater willingness for peaceful political activity after breaking away from Al Shabaab in September 2012. In June 2013, fearing retribution from Al Shabaab, Aweys turned himself in to Somali government authorities. Aweys was allegedly guaranteed amnesty before his surrender, but he was imprisoned and later transferred to house arrest.³⁰ In the same year, Hizbul Islam officially renounced militant activity and expressed a desire for talks with the Somali government. In June 2014, Mohamed Moalim—a spokesman for the organization—announced that Hizbul Islam had changed its name to “Istiqlaal” and would function as a political party, fully joining the Somali political system.³¹ The lack of publicly available information on this party and its activities may suggest that the group's transition to politics was not successful, or that Istiqlaal as an actor in Somalian politics has not been widely covered by the news media.

C. TARGETS & TACTICS

Hizbul Islam mainly targeted Somalia's Transitional Federal Government (TFG) as well as foreign troops operating in Somalia. Hizbul Islam's leader, Hassan Dahir Aweys, stated that the presence of foreign troops in Somalia was obstructing peace in the country.³² Together with Al Shabaab, Hizbul Islam launched attacks in May 2009 against TFG targets in Mogadishu. Like Al Shabaab and other militant groups, Hizbul Islam used mortar attacks on the capital city and admitted to using civilians as human shields. The group also used suicide bombings against African Union (AU) peacekeepers.³³

In 2009, with Al Shabaab, Hizbul Islam captured southern and much of central Somalia. In the areas under its control, Hizbul Islam instituted a harsh interpretation of Shariah law, which banned music and required men to grow beards. Additionally, the group specially targeted radio and other media stations in its attacks, forcing the broadcast of exclusively Islamic messages. Hizbul Islam similarly targeted nongovernmental organizations that did not meet its supposedly Islamic standards; in May 2010, for example, the group attacked and closed down a Doctors Without Borders facility near Mogadishu.³⁴

Hizbul Islam, which espoused a Salafist Islamist ideology, also explicitly targeted Sufi Muslims in Somalia.³⁵ Additionally, Hizbul Islam later targeted and fought against its former ally, Al Shabaab.³⁶

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.

February 22, 2009: Hizbul Islam and Al Shabaab conducted a joint attack on African Union (AU) peacekeepers, using two suicide bombers against an AU base in Mogadishu. (11 killed, 15 wounded).³⁷

February 24, 2009: Hizbul Islam and Al Shabab engaged in a two-day battle with African Union (AU) peacekeepers in Mogadishu, which ended in nearly 50 deaths and 300 injuries. (~50 killed, 300 wounded).³⁸

February 18, 2010: Hizbul Islam fighters attacked the Somali border town of Dhobley, successfully ousting Al Shabaab fighters and gaining control of the town. (15 killed, 25 wounded).³⁹

May 1, 2010: Two bombs exploded at a mosque in Mogadishu's Bakara market. The attack killed at least forty people, mostly Al Shabaab members and supporters. Among the attack's injured was an Al Shabaab commander named Sheik Fuad Mohammed Khalaf. Hizbul Islam was suspected of conducting the bombings. (40+ killed, unknown wounded).⁴⁰

May 2, 2010: Hizbul Islam captured the port of Haradhere, formerly controlled by Somali pirates, and expelled the pirates from the city. Haradhere's residents had allegedly asked Hizbul Islam for protection, fearing an attack from Al Shabaab. (unknown killed, unknown wounded).⁴¹

May 5, 2010: 750 Hizbul Islam fighters attacked a refugee camp run by Dr. Hawa Abdi in Afgooye, a few miles from Mogadishu. The camp, which supplied food, health care, and protection for thousands of Somali families, may have been targeted either because its director was a woman or because it refused to pay off Hizbul Islam. Hizbul Islam destroyed the camp and detained some of its staff, including Dr. Abdi, but the group later retreated from the camp and issued an apology to Dr. Abdi. (2 killed, unknown wounded).⁴²

December 13, 2010: Suspected Hizbul Islam fighters kidnapped a group of Al Shabaab fighters in Afgooye, Somalia. (0 killed, 0 wounded).⁴³

INTERACTIONS

A. DESIGNATED/LISTED

Hizbul Islam has not been designated as a terrorist organization by the United States or the European Union.⁴⁴

B. COMMUNITY RELATIONS

In 2009, with Al Shabaab, Hizbul Islam captured southern and much of central Somalia. In the areas under its control, Hizbul Islam instituted a harsh interpretation of Shariah law, which forced men to grow beards and banned music and watching soccer.⁴⁵

However, Hizbul Islam was generally considered less brutal than Al Shabaab. In April 2010, Hassan Dahir Aweys issued a warning to Hizbul Islam to stop extorting money from civilians. In May 2010, residents of the port city of Harardhere allegedly asked for Hizbul Islam's protection because they feared an attack by Al Shabaab. Hizbul Islam captured the city and expelled the pirates who had controlled it. However, it is not clear whether the group did this to protect the city's residents or to increase its own financial gains. Piracy had begun to discourage ships carrying profitable imports, resulting in a loss in tariff revenues for Hizbul Islam. Thus, the group also gained from forcing the pirates out of Harardhere.⁴⁶

C. RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER GROUPS

Hizbul Islam had a complex, dynamic relationship with Al Shabaab. Initially, the two groups collaborated to achieve similar ends. In May 2009, Hizbul Islam and Al Shabaab fought jointly against the Somali Transitional Federal Government (TFG). During the next months, the groups conquered all of southern Somalia, a number of other provinces, and most of Mogadishu. Despite this cooperation, the two groups also came into ideological and physical conflict with each other. They disagreed, for example, on the appropriate role of Al Qaeda in Somalia; Hizbul Islam leadership believed that Al Qaeda should not interfere in Somali affairs, while Al Shabaab's leadership was more amenable to Al Qaeda's support. In the fall of 2009, tensions between Hizbul Islam and Al Shabaab intensified because of territorial disputes, ultimately ending cooperation between the groups. Hizbul Islam and Al Shabaab fought each other throughout 2010.⁴⁷

Around December 2010, rumors emerged that Hizbul Islam planned to merge with Al Shabaab. The group had suffered major losses to Al Shabaab and was reportedly on the brink of being absorbed by the stronger organization. In the midst of these rumors, a Hizbul Islam spokesman announced that "the name Hizbul Islam no longer exists," and Aweys officially announced the merger at a December 23 press conference.⁴⁸ From December 2010 onward, Hizbul Islam operated as part of Al Shabaab, but conflicts continued to fester between Hizbul Islam's leader, Hassan Dahir Aweys, and Al Shabaab's leader, Ahmed Abdi Godane. In September 2012, Hizbul Islam broke away from Al Shabaab.⁴⁹

Both Hizbul Islam and Al Shabaab were opposed by Ahlu Sunna Wal Jamaa (ASWJ), a Sufi Islamist militia that controlled several regions in central Somalia. The ASWJ, which is a nominal ally of the TFG, began fighting Hizbul Islam and Al Shabaab after those groups attacked Somali Sufis.⁵⁰ The ASWJ attacked various areas controlled by Hizbul Islam, such as the town of Beledweyne near the Ethiopian border, which the ASWJ took from Hizbul Islam after a two-day battle in late 2010.⁵¹

Hizbul Islam did not have major links to international groups, although it did have an ambiguous relationship with Al Qaeda. Hizbul Islam initially rejected any role of Al Qaeda in Somalia. The group's leader, Aweys, initially stated, "Somalia knows [its] future and who can involve [*sic*], but it is not something for Osama Bin Laden and al-Qaeda."⁵² However, in April 2010, Hizbul Islam pledged allegiance to Al Qaeda and invited Osama bin Laden to Somalia. The reason for the change is unclear. It is also unclear whether Al Qaeda responded to Hizbul Islam's overtures, and Al Qaeda members did not fight alongside Hizbul Islam as they did with Al Shabaab.⁵³

D. STATE SPONSORS AND EXTERNAL INFLUENCES

Hizbul Islam's main external influence was the Eritrean government. In April 2009, the Eritrean government assisted Hassan Dahir Aweys in returning to Somalia from Eritrea so that he could become Hizbul Islam's leader. Aweys brought approximately \$200,000 to Somalia from Eritrea, and those funds

were disbursed to senior figures in Hizbul Islam. Moreover, the Eritrean government may have provided Hizbul Islam with training, weapons, and monthly payments of at least \$40,000 to \$50,000.⁵⁴

MAPS

- Somalia

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