

# Islamic Courts Union

## AT A GLANCE

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## HOW TO CITE

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## SUMMARY

**Formed:** 2000

**Disbanded:** 2007

**First Attack:** April 2006: The Islamic Courts Union (ICU) gained control of much of Mogadishu from a group of warlords that had ruled the city for fifteen years. On June 5, 2006, the ICU fully subdued the warlords and secured complete control of the city (unknown killed, unknown wounded).<sup>1</sup>

**Last Attack:** December 31, 2006: ICU fighters clashed with Ethiopian and Somali government forces in the Battle of Jilib. The government forces defeated the ICU, which abandoned its stronghold in the port city of Kismayo and retreated toward Kenya (unknown killed, unknown wounded).<sup>2</sup>

## OVERVIEW

The Islamic Courts Union (ICU) originated as a loose association of Islamic courts in Somalia, which provided security and managed crime after the fall of Siad Barre's authoritarian regime in 1991. Around 2000, the courts first united to form what would be called the ICU. It later evolved from a judicial system to a governing apparatus, eventually providing social services and implementing Shariah law in the territories under its control. The ICU maintained a powerful militia, which included the group that would later become known as Al Shabaab, and conquered Mogadishu and much of Somalia in June 2006. After ruling for several months, the ICU was defeated in December 2006 by troops from Somalia's Transitional Federal Government (TFG) and Ethiopia, and the group was disbanded.

## NARRATIVE SUMMARY

The date of the official formation of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) is unclear; however, the system of courts that would become known as the ICU first united around 2000 in southern Mogadishu, Somalia, after the merger of several previously autonomous Islamic courts. These Islamic courts had themselves

emerged in the early 1990s as a response to the lawlessness and chaos that followed the removal of Somali dictator Siad Barre from office in 1991. Sheikh Ali Dheere established the first Islamic court in Mogadishu in 1993, and several more courts emerged after early successes in managing crime. The various Islamic courts initially were not officially linked to each other. Instead, they existed as part of the same informal movement, which originally thrived only in northern Mogadishu. When new courts opened in southern Mogadishu, they were heavily influenced by former members of Al Ittihad Al Islamiya (AIAI), a Somali militant group that disbanded in 1997 and had fought the Barre regime. Former members of AIAI—such as Hassan Dahir Aweys, who would become an ICU leader—were much more militant than other court members.<sup>3</sup>

Before 2000, the various Islamic courts originally only controlled limited areas, and they relied on recruited local clan militias to enforce their rulings. When the courts first united to form what would later be called the ICU, they also united their militias and consequently created the first significant Somali militant organization not controlled by warlords or limited to a single clan.<sup>4</sup> After its formation in 2000, the courts began to extend their power beyond Mogadishu, and the organization gained popularity for its provision of security and other government services. For example, the ICU managed schools and hospitals in Mogadishu, and ICU-controlled areas had a reputation for being much safer than regions controlled by warlords.<sup>5</sup>

Later in 2000, the establishment of Somalia's Transitional National Government (TNG) reduced the ICU's burgeoning influence. However, the TNG proved ineffective at providing security and declined in power, and the Islamic Courts reemerged as a potent force. In 2004, after reviving the Islamic courts in Mogadishu, a teacher named Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed was elected as chairman of the Islamic courts throughout the city. By 2005, Mogadishu contained eleven Islamic courts.<sup>6</sup>

In the same year, the courts lost several members in mysterious assassinations and disappearances, which some members blamed on covert action by the United States. By that time, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) had become involved in attempting to capture Al Qaeda-linked individuals inside Somalia, which the CIA feared was becoming a haven for radical Islamists and terrorists. In its efforts to prevent Somalia from becoming such a haven, the United States supported the formation of a group called the Alliance for the Restoration of Peace and Counter-Terrorism (ARPCT) in early 2006. The ARPCT was composed of a coalition of warlords in Mogadishu charged with helping find the CIA's targets in the country. However, U.S. backing for a set of locally infamous warlords with the unpopular objective of apprehending individuals inside Somalia stirred resentment and ultimately increased support for the ICU. Tensions between the ICU and the ARPCT quickly erupted into violence. The ICU defeated the ARPCT in June 2006 and gained control of all of Mogadishu. Around the same time, the ICU's militant wing—Al Shabaab—first rose to prominence following its pivotal role in taking over Mogadishu and driving out the warlords.<sup>7</sup> After conquering Mogadishu, the ICU governed the city for several months. The organization implemented urban improvement projects and reopened the airport and seaport that had been closed for ten years.<sup>8</sup> By October 2006, the ICU also controlled most of southern central Somalia.<sup>9</sup>

The ICU's rise caused concern in the international community and drew attention to the state of Somalia's Transitional Federal Government (TFG), which had been formed in Kenya to replace the TNG in 2004. Since entering Somalia in early 2006, the TNG had unsuccessfully attempted to consolidate its power in the country; however, the fact that Mogadishu was controlled by Somali warlords—and, later, the ICU—had forced the TNG to establish bases outside the capital city. Between June and September 2006, the ICU and the TNG engaged in negotiations regarding power-sharing governance structures. However, the Ethiopian government increased its support for the TFG and began military preparations against the ICU,

which likewise continued to strengthen its armed forces and expand its territory even during the peace talks. On September 18, the attempted assassination of TFG president Abdullahi Yusuf strained further talks between the TFG and the ICU, although the latter denied having conducted the attack. Increased tensions eventually ended negotiations in October 2006.<sup>10</sup>

Throughout November and December 2006, the ICU and the TFG—supported by Ethiopia—continued their military preparations. On December 6, the United Nations Security Council passed a resolution to authorize a regional military intervention in Somalia, in the form of a deployment of African Union peacekeepers. Fighting between TFG and Ethiopian troops on one side and the ICU on the other began in earnest toward the end of December 2006. TFG and Ethiopian forces soon expelled the ICU from Mogadishu and other urban strongholds. The ICU effectively disintegrated soon after the TFG-Ethiopian offensive. The ICU's leaders left Mogadishu on December 26 and formally resigned their leadership on December 27. Although the ICU had been effectively demolished as an organization, its military wing—Al Shabaab—broke away at this time to become an independent militant group.<sup>11</sup>

Pro-TFG forces continued to clash with remaining ICU fighters and supporters in late 2006 and early 2007. In January 2007, the ICU's former leaders attempted to revive resistance to the regional intervention through a short-lived insurgent group called the Popular Resistance Movement in the Land of the Two Migrations (PRMLTM). In September 2007, ICU and other resistance leaders formed the Alliance for the Re-liberation of Somalia (ARS) as another resistance movement to the Ethiopian occupation.<sup>12</sup>

## ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

### A. LEADERSHIP

**Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed** (2004 to December 27, 2006): In 2003, Ahmed, a former schoolteacher, revived the Islamic courts movement in Mogadishu after it had been declining due to the influence of Somalia's Transitional National Government (TNG). The following year, Ahmed was elected as chairman of all the courts in the capital city and effectively became the ICU's leader. In 2006, more radical members gained control of key ICU posts and Ahmed was demoted to chairman of the ICU's executive committee, which implemented rather than made decisions. On December 27, 2006, shortly after the Ethiopian invasion, Ahmed and other ICU leaders formally resigned their posts and fled Somalia. Ahmed helped establish the Alliance for the Re-Liberation of Somalia (ARS) in 2007 to resist Ethiopian forces.<sup>13</sup>

**Aden Hashi Ayro** (Unknown to 2006): Ayro led the ICU's militant wing, Al Shabaab, since its beginnings in the early 2000s. He directed brutal attacks that drew condemnation from local and international communities as well as much of the ICU leadership. Ayro advocated connecting the Somali fight to the global jihad movement, but ICU leaders rejected this idea in favor of focusing on a nationalist struggle. Al Shabaab became an independent armed group in December 2006 after the disintegration of the ICU.<sup>14</sup>

**Sheikh Ali Dheere** (Unknown to Unknown): Also known as Ali Mohamed Rage, Dheere established Somalia's first Islamic court in Mogadishu in 1993. This court's early successes in managing crime inspired the founding of several other courts. Dheere held various positions within the ICU, including chairman of the Islamic courts in north Mogadishu, chairman of the ICU's Shariah Implementation Council, and head spokesman. Following the ICU's collapse, Dheere became a spokesman for Al Shabaab.<sup>15</sup>

**Yusuf Mohammed Siad** (Unknown to Unknown): Also known as Inda'adde, Siad served as the ICU's defense minister. Along with other ICU leaders, he fled Somalia after the Ethiopian invasion in 2006. He vowed to continue resisting the Somali and Ethiopian governments, but in 2009, Siad joined the Somali government as defense minister. He resigned that post in 2010 after judging that the government had not effectively restored order.<sup>16</sup>

**Hassan Abdullah Hersi Al-Turki** (Unknown to Unknown): Al-Turki led an ICU militia near Somalia's southern border with Kenya. After the ICU's collapse, Al-Turki founded the Ras Kamboni Brigade and also served as a leader of Hizbul Islam.<sup>17</sup>

**Hassan Dahir Aweys** (Unknown to December 27, 2006): Aweys served a leading role within the ICU since its earliest days. He was a religious authority as well as a key armed forces leader, serving for a time as a senior figure of the ICU's main militant wing, Al Shabaab. On December 27, 2006, shortly after the Ethiopian invasion, Aweys and other ICU leaders formally resigned their posts and fled Somalia. After the ICU collapsed, Aweys helped found the Alliance for the Re-Liberation of Somalia (ARS) and later served as a leader in Hizbul Islam and Al Shabaab.<sup>18</sup>

**Abdirahman Janaqow** (Unknown to December 27, 2006): Janaqow served as a spokesman as well as the deputy leader of the ICU's executive council. On December 27, 2006, shortly after the Ethiopian invasion, Janaqow and other ICU leaders formally resigned their posts and fled Somalia.<sup>19</sup>

## **B. NAME CHANGES**

Because the Islamic Courts Union originated as a loose association of courts, it was sometimes known by several different names, such as the Joint Islamic Courts Council. However, the ICU never experienced official name changes after its formal establishment.<sup>20</sup>

## **C. SIZE ESTIMATES**

There are no publicly available size estimates for the Islamic Courts Union. However, in 2004, the ten Islamic courts that comprised the ICU each contributed eighty fighters to a shared militia. When conquering the city of Kismayo in September 2006, six hundred fighters participated in the ICU's offensive.<sup>21</sup> Additionally, an estimated 3,000 foreign fighters bolstered the ICU's ranks throughout 2006.<sup>22</sup>

## **D. RESOURCES**

When the ICU was established, local businessmen provided funds for the organization, which spent the funds on weapons to use against Somali warlords. Business communities served as an important financial source for the ICU throughout its lifetime.<sup>23</sup>

The ICU boasted significant military and personnel resources because the various courts comprising the organization donated to its shared resource pool. In 2004, for example, the ten courts that comprised the ICU each contributed eighty fighters as well as three to five armored pick-up trucks. After conquering Mogadishu in June 2006, the ICU took weapons from the warlords who had previously ruled the city and integrated some of the warlords' fighters into ICU forces. Additionally, an estimated 3,000 foreign fighters bolstered the ICU's ranks throughout 2006.<sup>24</sup>

The ICU also focused on obtaining outside resources, particularly funding from the Somali diaspora. Representatives of the ICU traveled to Britain in 2006 to seek donations from Britain's Somali

community; the ICU delegation emphasized its community projects in Somalia, such as fixing roads, for which it received dozens of donations.<sup>25</sup> Also in 2006, the United Nations released a report accusing various foreign actors of providing military assistance and training to the ICU, including Iran, Syria, Libya, Eritrea, and Hezbollah. Because of these supporters, the ICU was well supplied and possessed a range of weapons, including rockets as well as anti-aircraft and anti-tank weapons.<sup>26</sup> In addition to foreign actors, the ICU received support from local militants and militant groups. For example, Sheikh Ali Warsame—founder of the Somali militant group Al Ittihad Al Islamiyya (AIAI), which dissolved in 1997—allegedly donated \$250,000 to the ICU in 2006. The ICU’s membership also included many former AIAI fighters.<sup>27</sup>

## **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.

At its peak in mid- to late 2006, the ICU controlled most of Somalia's strategically important areas, such as the port city of Kismayo and the capital city of Mogadishu; at that time, the organization was able to transport supplies easily throughout much of the country. The ICU also controlled the entire region surrounding the Transitional Federal Government’s (TFG) base in Baidoa, which was protected by Ethiopian soldiers and recognized by the United Nations as the Somali government’s headquarters.<sup>28</sup>

## **STRATEGY**

### **A. IDEOLOGY & GOALS**

The original aim of the Islamic courts was to manage petty crime, which pervaded Somalia after the ouster of Somali dictator Siad Barre in 1991. Later, as the Islamic courts movement solidified into the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), the courts sought to address murder and other serious crimes, especially through such punishments as amputation and execution.<sup>29</sup> The ICU’s main goals were to establish Shariah law in Somalia and to defeat the warlords that were ravaging the country. Some ICU members, including Hassan Dahir Aweys, also espoused nationalist goals and sought to unite the various regions in which Somalis resided—even beyond the borders of Somalia itself.<sup>30</sup>

The ICU overall expressed anti-Western tendencies, but its various members advocated a range of different ideologies, including Qutbism and Wahhabism. The ICU’s ideology was not monolithic; instead, two major ideological camps existed in the group. Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed led a wing generally considered moderate, while Hassan Dahir Aweys led the ICU’s more radical elements. In some regions of Somalia, Aweys and other radical members espoused a strict social conservatism that had not been sanctioned by the general ICU leadership and proved to be unpopular.<sup>31</sup>

### **B. POLITICAL ACTIVITIES**

In 2006, the ICU’s growing power caused concern in the international community, leading to negotiations between the ICU and Somalia’s Transitional Federal Government (TFG). During various talks hosted by Sudan and the Arab League between June and September 2006, the ICU and the TFG discussed power-sharing governance structures. However, on September 18, the attempted assassination of TFG president Abdullahi Yusuf strained talks between the TFG and the ICU, although the latter denied having conducted the attack. Increased tensions eventually ended negotiations in October 2006. The ICU did not engage in any other peace talks.<sup>32</sup>

### C. TARGETS & TACTICS

The ICU's main enemies were Somali warlords, Somalia's Transitional Federal Government (TFG), and Ethiopian troops. The organization also espoused violence against other international actors, such as aid workers and various Western targets. The ICU sought to destroy or expel the Somali warlords, TFG, Ethiopian forces, and international actors from Somalia in order to establish its own state based on Shariah law. ICU militants fought warlords and government forces and conducted brutal attacks through its main armed wing, Al Shabaab. Al Shabaab attacks included multiple killings of international workers in Somaliland between 2003 and 2005. Additionally, the ICU used suicide car bomb attacks against the TFG.<sup>33</sup>

In the areas under its control, the ICU instituted a harsh interpretation of Shariah law, including meting out such punishments as amputation for thieves. The group also imposed other strict measures on the communities it ruled, such as banning live music at weddings and executing several people for watching soccer.<sup>34</sup>

### 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.

**June 2006:** Under the leadership of Hassan Dahir Aweys and Aden Hashi Ayro, the ICU conducted military operations against warlords in Mogadishu, eventually capturing the city. ICU offensives against the city had been ongoing since early 2006. (unknown killed, unknown wounded).<sup>35</sup>

**September 18, 2006:** A suicide car bomber targeted the convoy of Abdullahi Yusuf, president of Somalia's Transitional Federal Government (TFG). The president was unharmed, but his brother was killed. The ICU is sometimes blamed for this attack, although it denied responsibility. (6 killed, unknown wounded).<sup>36</sup>

**September 25, 2006:** Six hundred ICU fighters captured the strategically important port city of Kismayo. (unknown killed, unknown wounded).<sup>37</sup>

**November 20, 2006:** The ICU claimed responsibility for ambushing an Ethiopian military convoy of eighty vehicles in the Bardale region, using roadside bombs and small arms. (6 killed, 20 wounded).<sup>38</sup>

**November 30, 2006:** The ICU detonated a car suicide bomb at a checkpoint outside the city of Baidoa, headquarters of the TFG. (9 killed, unknown wounded).<sup>39</sup>

**December 31, 2006:** ICU fighters clashed with Ethiopian and Somali government forces in the Battle of Jilib. The government forces defeated the ICU, which abandoned its stronghold in the port city of Kismayo and retreated toward Kenya. (unknown killed, unknown wounded).<sup>40</sup>

### INTERACTIONS

#### A. DESIGNATED/LISTED

This group has not been designated as a terrorist organization by any major national government or international body.

#### B. COMMUNITY RELATIONS

The ICU began as a judicial system in the 1990s, regulating only civil affairs, but later developed a broader governing apparatus. Islamic courts, for example, began managing house and car purchases. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the Islamic courts were able to provide security and rule of law in the territories under their control, gaining popularity from Somalis tired of warlords' rule. Because the courts provided security and stability, it received significant financial backing from the Somali business community.<sup>41</sup>

Beginning especially in the mid-2000s and after conquering Mogadishu in 2006, the ICU provided important social services that increased its support among the population. The ICU managed schools and hospitals in Mogadishu, for example, and conducted urban clean-up activities. It repaired and reopened Mogadishu's airport and seaport, which had been closed for ten years.<sup>42</sup>

The ICU, however, was repressive in its imposition of Shariah law in the areas under its control. The group forbade music, movies, and the viewing of the World Cup, all of which were deemed "Western" and could be punished by public execution. Other punishments included amputations for thievery.<sup>43</sup> Additionally, the ICU instituted an unpopular ban on khat, a leafy drug commonly used in Somalia. The ICU responded to protests in Mogadishu against the ban by shooting into the crowd of protesters, causing several injuries and the death of a teenage boy. Such brutal tactics used by the ICU's militant wing, which would become the independent group called Al Shabaab, sometimes drew criticism from local and international communities as well as the ICU leadership.<sup>44</sup>

### **C. RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER GROUPS**

The ICU fought various Somali warlords and their militias for territorial control, especially in the Mogadishu area. The main formal militant group that opposed the ICU was the Alliance for the Restoration of Peace and Counter-Terrorism (ARPCT), an alliance of secular warlords allegedly supported by the United States to apprehend suspected terrorists in Somalia. The ICU defeated the ARPCT in June 2006, leading to the alliance's collapse.<sup>45</sup>

The ICU shared an occasionally tense relationship with its militia, Al Shabaab, which conducted brutal attacks that triggered backlash against the ICU. After the ICU's disintegration in late 2006, Al Shabaab became an independent militant organization and replaced the ICU as the main resistance force opposing Ethiopian and TFG forces.<sup>46</sup>

The ICU also had links to Al Qaeda. The United States accused the ICU of sheltering three Al Qaeda operatives who were responsible for the 1998 attacks on U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. Some ICU leaders, including Hassan Dahir Aweys, had also received training from or met with Al Qaeda operatives. In mid-2006, Osama bin Laden released a video in which he urged Somalis to support the ICU and build an Islamic state. Besides Al Qaeda, the ICU also received training, funds, and weapons from Hezbollah.<sup>47</sup>

### **D. STATE SPONSORS AND EXTERNAL INFLUENCES**

In 2006, the United Nations alleged that the ICU received support from a variety of foreign states, including Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea, Iran, Libya, Syria, and Saudi Arabia. These states generally provided weapons, money, and military trainers and advisors. No single state appears to have dominated the external relations of the ICU.<sup>48</sup>

## **MAPS**

- Somalia

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<sup>7</sup> Barnes, Cedric, and Harun Hassan. "The Rise and Fall of Mogadishu's Islamic Courts." Chatham House, April 2007. Web. 10 Feb. 2016. "Shell-Shocked: Civilians Under Siege in Mogadishu." Human Rights Watch, Aug. 2007. Web. 9 Feb. 2016. Page, Jacqueline. "Jihadi Arena Report: Somalia - Development of Radical Islamism and Current Implications." International Institute for Counter-Terrorism, 22 Mar. 2010. Web. 10 Feb. 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Barnes, Cedric, and Harun Hassan. "The Rise and Fall of Mogadishu's Islamic Courts." Chatham House, April 2007. Web. 10 Feb. 2016.

<sup>9</sup> "Shell-Shocked: Civilians Under Siege in Mogadishu." Human Rights Watch, Aug. 2007. Web. 9 Feb. 2016.

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