

# Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

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## Responses to Information Requests

Responses to Information Requests (RIR) respond to focused Requests for Information that are submitted to the Research Directorate in the course of the refugee protection determination process. The database contains a seven-year archive of English and French RIRs. Earlier RIRs may be found on the UNHCR's [Refworld](#) website. Please note that some RIRs have attachments which are not electronically accessible. To obtain a PDF copy of an RIR attachment, please email the [Knowledge and Information Management Unit](#).

27 March 2018

### SOM106055.E

Somalia: Situation of practitioners of Sufism, including treatment by Al-Shabaab [al-Shabab], and role of Ahlu Sunnah Wal Jamaa [Ahlu Sunna Wal-Jamea, Ahlu Sunnah Wal Jama'a, Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama'a, Ahl al-Sunnah Wal-Jamaa, Ahlu Sunna Waljma'a] (ASWJ); availability of state protection (2016-March 2018)  
Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

#### 1. Overview

The US Department of State's *International Religious Freedom Report for 2016* states that, according to the Somali Federal Ministry of Religious Affairs,

more than 99 percent of the Somali population is Sunni Muslim. Members of other religious groups combined constitute less than 1 percent of the population, and include a small Christian community, a small Sufi community, and an unknown number of Shia Muslims. (US 15 Aug. 2017, 2)

According to Al Jazeera, Somalia

was once majority Sufi but all that changed in the past two and a half decades. Sufis were almost wiped out from Somalia: in the early 1990s, by warlords and their marauding militias, and, in the last decade, by the hardline al-Qaeda-linked group al-Shabab. (Al Jazeera 29 Mar. 2016)

In a 2017 report on Al-Shabaab, the BBC reports that "most Somalis are Sufi" (BBC 22 Dec. 2017). Similarly, other sources indicate that most Somalis "are at least nominal members of a Sufi order" (The Religious Literacy Project n.d.a) or "identify" with Sufism (Lang 3 Dec. 2017). According to a 2016 report commissioned by the UNHCR, the practice of Islam has traditionally been influenced by Sufism in Somalia, particularly in the countryside, and "within the central areas of Somalia[,] Sufi Islam is still strong" (Cavallera et al. 2016, 15). Sources indicate that Sufism is experiencing a revival across Somalia (Al Jazeera 29 Mar. 2016; CGTN 17 May 2015). However, Al Jazeera characterizes the revival as "slow" and "precarious" (Al Jazeera 29 Mar. 2016).

According to sources, two of the main Sufi orders in Somalia are the Axmadiyah [or Ahmadiyyah] and the Qaadiriyah [or Qadiriyyah] (The Religious Literacy Project n.d.a; Abdullahi Baadiyow 2015, 41), which each have their "local offshoots" (Abdullahi Baadiyow 2015, 41). In a book titled *The Islamic Movement in Somalia*, Doctor Abdurahman Abdullahi Baadiyow, a professor of Islamic Studies at Mogadishu University, states that the Axmadiyah has three offshoots in Somalia: "Raxmaaniyah, Saalixiyah, and Dandaraawiyah" (Abdullahi Baadiyow 2015, 41-42). According to the same source, the Qaadiriyah has two offshoots: "Zayli'iyah and Uweysiyah" (Abdullahi Baadiyow 2015, 41). According to The Religious Literacy Project [1] of the Harvard Divinity School, "members of the same Sufi order may come from opposing-even warring-clans" (The Religious Literacy Project n.d.a).

According to Doctor Abdullahi Baadiyow, Sufi orders in Somalia

are affiliated with the wider networks of Sufi brotherhoods in the Muslim World. Their leadership is absolute and authoritative, and succession is not necessarily based on heredity; however, the Khaliif (Sufi master) designates his successor in his lifetime. (Abdullahi Baadiyow 2015, 41)

According to Doctor Abdullahi Baadiyow, "[i]n general, Sufi brotherhoods are moderate and use peaceful means of propagating Islam that offer due consideration to the norms and customs of the people" (Abdullahi Baadiyow 2015, 66). According to The Religious Literacy Project, "Sufi orders are typically apolitical" (The Religious Literacy Project n.d.a).

According to The Religious Literacy Project, common practices of Sufis in Somalia include "visitations to saints' tombs, veneration of the Prophet Muhammed and members of his family, and the recitation of litanies (*dhikr*)" (The Religious Literacy Project n.d.a).

Further and corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

## 2. Treatment of Practitioners of Sufism by Al-Shabaab

Information on the treatment of practitioners of Sufism by Al-Shabaab was scarce among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

According to sources, Al-Shabaab is against the practice of Sufism (Abdullahi Baadiyow 8 Mar. 2018; Political Advisor 12 Mar. 2018). Al Jazeera adds that Al-Shabaab regards Sufis "as non-believers and legitimate targets for attacks" (Al Jazeera 29 Mar. 2016). In correspondence with the Research Directorate, the UN Independent Expert on the situation of human rights in Somalia stated, based on his personal assessment and independent analysis, that

Somalia is a country whose population is predominantly Muslim, probably around 99.99%. Therefore, one can safely hypothesize that victims of Al-Shabaab are likely to be Somali people who in any case are Muslims, and this would include Sufi practitioners, as long as they do not subscribe to the Al-Shabaab ideology or are believed by Al-Shabaab to be sympathizers with the Federal Government of Somalia. (Independent Expert 15 Mar. 2018)

In correspondence with the Research Directorate, the Political Advisor to the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) stated, based on his own views and understanding of the situation in Somalia, that "Al-Shabaab [does] not recognise [a] Sufi practitioner as a true Muslim, and consider[s] the Sufi practice as non-Muslim. When the group take[s] over ... Sufi mosques, it makes sure [to] nominate their own Imams" (Political Advisor 12 Mar. 2018). According to the US Department of State's *International Religious Freedom Report for 2016*, "Al-Shabaab reportedly threatened to close mosques in areas it controlled if the mosques' teachings did not conform to the group's interpretation of Islam" (US 15 Aug. 2017, 5).

According to the US Department of State's *International Religious Freedom Report for 2016*, "[f]ear of reprisals from Al-Shabaab often prevented religious groups from operating freely" (US 15 Aug. 2017, 5). According to sources consulted by the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) and the Danish Immigration Service (DIS) in a report on South and Central Somalia, "people under al-Shabaab rule [in general] must follow the al-Shabaab way of life" or "be at risk" (DRC and Denmark Mar. 2017, 23). According to information obtained by the same source, "[s]evere sanctions can be carried out against civilians who do not obey the rules and ideology of al-Shabaab. For instance, not dressing or behaving in accordance with al-Shabaab rules can lead to arrest and corporal punishment" (DRC and Denmark Mar. 2017, 23).

According to the Political Advisor,

Sufi practitioners in Somalia cannot freely practice their religion in Al-Shabaab-controlled districts and localities such as: Lego, Buale Saakow, Jilib, Jamaame, Sablaale, Kurtunwaarey, Bay, Tayeeglow, Eldeer, and Haardere ... People living in such areas may be attacked, punished or even killed, if they are found conducting the Sufi worship. (Political Advisor 12 Mar. 2018)

According to a joint report by the Human Rights and Protection Group (HRPG) of the UN Assistance Mission in Somalia (UNSOM) and the Office of the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), which covers the period from 1 January 2016 to 14 October 2017, Al-Shabaab has "de facto control" over the "districts of Bua'le, Sakow, and Jilib" (UN Dec. 2017, 44).

According to Al Jazeera, Al-Shabaab has "desecrated more than a thousand Sufi graves in Southern Somalia since 2016" (Al Jazeera 29 Mar. 2016). In correspondence with the Research Directorate, Doctor Abdurahman Abdullahi Baadiyow stated that Al-Shabaab has "destroyed tombs of prominent Sufi sheiks" (Abdullahi Baadiyow 8 Mar. 2018).

### 3. Protection Services

Information on the availability of protection services for practitioners of Sufism who are victims of Al-Shabaab attacks was scarce among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

According to the Political Advisor to AMISOM, "there are no[t] any protection programs or services available to Sufi practitioners" (Political Advisor 12 Mar. 2018). According to the same source,

Al-Shabaab controls less than 20 percent of the country, and so people can move to areas that are not under Al-Shabaab control, including Mogadishu, where [they] can freely practise their religion. Over the years, many Sufi practitioners have fled from Al-Shabaab-controlled areas to government-controlled areas. (Political Advisor 12 Mar. 2018)

According to the same source, "in some areas, the population has not resigned [themselves] to [their] fate as passive victims. In fact, they have sometimes resisted [Al-Shabaab] to protect their own form of Sufism" (Political Advisor 12 Mar. 2018).

### 4. Ahlu Sunnah Wal Jamaa (ASWJ)

Sources indicate that in order to combat the rising influence of militancy in Somalia, ASWJ was founded in 1991 (The Religious Literacy Project n.d.a; *PHW* 2015, 1329), when representatives from Sufi orders joined together (The Religious Literacy Project n.d.a). Some sources describe ASWJ as a Sufi militia (CGTN 24 July 2017; US 15 Aug. 2017, 5; Human Rights Watch May 2016, 32). Others sources indicate that it is a moderate Islamist group (Radio Dalsan 21 Nov. 2017; Horseed Media 10 June 2015; Reporters Without Borders 20 Jan. 2016).

Sources indicate that ASWJ opposes Al-Shabaab (Reporters Without Borders 20 Jan. 2016; US 15 Aug. 2017, 5; Horseed Media 10 June 2015). Doctor Abdullahi Baadiyow indicated that Al-Shabaab has been "fighting against [ASWJ] in the middle regions of Somalia" (Abdullahi Baadiyow 8 Mar. 2018). Horseed Media [2] similarly reports that ASWJ "became prominent in 2008 when it took up arms against al-Shabaab after the radical group began destroying the tombs of the country's Sufi saints" (Horseed Media 10 June 2015).

According to the Political Advisor, ASWJ has been able to defeat Al-Shabaab in "many localities in South Central Somalia, particularly in Galmudug and Hiraan," for example "in 2007/8, when Al-Shabaab attacked many Sufi practitioners and desecrated Sufi tombs/shrines in many towns across Somalia" (Political Advisor 12 Mar. 2018).

According to sources, ASWJ controls parts of Galgaduud [Galgaduud] region (CGTN 24 July 2017; Human Rights Watch May 2016, 32). Human Rights Watch specifies that ASWJ controls the town of Guri'el and Dhusamareb [Dhuusamarreb] (Human Rights Watch May 2016, 32). According to the US Department of State's *International Religious Freedom Report for 2016*, ASWJ controls "Dhusamareb, a small town in central Somalia" (US 15 Aug. 2017, 5). The joint report by the UNSOM HRPG and OHCHR states that ASWJ "has no specific clan identity," and acts "as a de facto administration in the Galgaduud region – in Guriceel town and Dhuusamarreb district. It claims Hiraan, Galgaduud, and Mudug as its territory, and has been opposing security forces and state authorities in areas under its control" (UN Dec. 2017, para. 50). In contrast, Reporters Without Borders states that ASWJ "supports the national government" (Reporters Without Borders 20 Jan. 2016).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

#### Notes

[1] The Religious Literacy Project, whose website was launched in 2015 (The Religious Literacy Project n.d.b), "provides educational opportunities and resources for *how to recognize, understand, and analyze* religious influences in contemporary life through the overarching theme of conflict and peace and the specific (often intersecting) sub-themes of gender and sexuality, public health, and environmental sustainability" (The Religious Literacy Project 7 Apr. 2015, 1, italics in original).

[2] Horseed Media is Somali media organization, providing information on Somali-related affairs (Horseed Media n.d.).

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## Additional Sources Consulted

**Oral sources:** Academics specializing in Somali studies; Amnesty International; Conflict Dynamics International; Human Rights Watch; The Religious Literacy Project; Rift Valley Institute; Somali Institute for Development Research and Analysis; Somalia – Ministry of Justice and Religious Affairs.

**Internet sites, including:** Africa Confidential; African Union – Mission in Somalia; Al Arabiya; AllAfrica; Associated Press; Banadir; Brookings Institution; Canadian Somali Congress; Center for Strategic and International Studies; *De Volkskrant*; Deutsche Presse-Agentur; Deutsche Welle; *The Diplomat*; ecoi.net; Freedom House; *The Guardian*; Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre; International Crisis Group; International Federation for Human Rights; IRIN; Minority Rights International; *Mogadishu Times*; Newstime Africa; *The New York Times*; Reuters; Somalia Report; UN – News Centre, Reliefweb; US – Commission on International Religious Freedom; US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants; Woodrow Wilson International Centre for Scholars; Xinhua News Agency.

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Date modified: 2016-01-05