



## RESPONSES TO INFORMATION REQUESTS (RIRs)

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23 November 2010

### **SOM103613.E**

Somalia: Information on the Ashraf clan, including the location of their traditional homeland, affiliated clans, risks they face from other tribes; whether the name Sharif is given to a male at birth

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

The Ashraf are believed to be descended from the Prophet Mohamed's daughter Fatima, and are accorded religious status on that basis (ACCORD-Austrian Red Cross Dec. 2008, 19-20; Independent Scholar 23 Oct. 2010). All Ashraf claim descent from one or the other of Fatima's two sons: Hassan and Hussein (Independent Scholar 23 Oct. 2010). An anthropologist working as an independent scholar who has published a number of academic papers and a book on Somalia explained that the Ashraf (or Asheraf) "live scattered all over Somalia (and all over the Muslim world)" (23 Oct. 2010).

### **Subgroups of Ashraf**

The Ashraf are generally classified into various subgroups through Fatima's two sons (Denmark 2000, 41) as follows:

Hussein:

- Reersharif Magbul (or Reesharif Magbull [Denmark 2000, 41])
- Sharif Ahmed
- Sharif Balaaw (or Sharif Baalawi [Denmark 2000, 41])

Hassan:

- Mohamed Sharif (or Mohammed Sharif [Denmark 2000, 41])
- Sharif Ali
- Sharif Ahmed
- Ashraf Sarman (Abbink 2009, 37; Denmark 2000, 41)

However, the Independent Scholar points out that the list is neither "complete" nor "definitive" (23 Oct. 2010). In particular, the Independent Scholar indicates that the Maqbuul are a subgroup of the Hassan group of Ashraf (23 Oct. 2010). The Independent Scholar indicates that the following subgroups have claimed descent from Hussein (or Husayn): Ahmad, Jamal al-Leyl and Bah Alawi (ibid.). The Independent Scholar also notes that the Umar and Abdullah are

subgroups of the previously mentioned Ashraf Sarman, which is a subgroup of the Hassan group (ibid.).

### **Location of subgroups in Somalia**

The Independent Scholar provided further information as follows:

According to my Ashraf informants, the Hussein branch of the Ashraf of Somalia live in the coastal towns such as Mogadishu and are part of the 'Benadiri' minority population. A few have moved to other places in order to trade or because they have bought land. ...

The Ashraf Maqbull are said to originate in Luuq and near the Ethiopian border, but they also live in Mogadishu, and a few of them in Kismayo and perhaps in other places.

The Ashraf of the Hassan branch live mainly in the interior of the country (some of them of course may have gone to live in Mogadishu), and mostly are not Benadiri. However, the Ashraf al-Ahdali in Marka, who are Benadiri, are said to be Hassan.

One of the best known Somali Hassan groups is the Ashraf Sarman; they originate in an area called Sarman or Saraman, near Huddur in Bakool region . ... There they are associated with the Leysan, who are part of the Rahanweyn. Their native dialect is therefore the 'May-May' dialect of the Rahanweyn. Today they are also found in Baydhaba and the Bay region, in Mogadishu, Kismayo, Luuq, Jalalaqsi and Bardhere and in Afgooye.

In Mogadishu they have been acknowledged and to some extent absorbed by the Benadiri Ashraf there. (23 Oct. 2010)

The Independent Scholar explained that the Benadiri are not so much a clan as "an alliance of separate descent groups based on living in the same cities" (30 Oct. 2010). The Benadiri have also been described as a group outside the traditional Somali clans (Abbink 2009, 36) that is made up of people "who share an urban culture and who are of mixed origin (Persian/Portuguese/Arabian/Swahili/Somali)" (Denmark 2000, 38).

### **Affiliated clans and risks from other tribes**

The Independent Scholar said that tribal alliances, affiliated clans or risks from other clans are all specific to the particular subgroup of Ashraf and the location of the subgroup in the country (26 Oct. 2010). She clarified that the Ashraf tend to form alliances with whichever clan they are living among (26 Oct. 2010). This information is corroborated by a report produced by the Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research and Documentation (ACCORD) with the Austrian Red Cross (Dec. 2009, 20). The ACCORD-Austrian Red Cross report states that Ashraf live integrated with the various Somali groups or clans with whom they have settled (Dec. 2009, 20). A Northern Arizona University associate professor of history whose research focus is Islamic Africa stated, in a telephone interview with the Research Directorate, that alliances between clans and tribal groups in Somalia are fluid and contextual, and added his opinion that available knowledge of clan alliances is not comprehensive (Associate Professor

27 Oct. 2010).

According to the ACCORD-Austrian Red Cross report, the Ashraf's religious status means that they are "usually protected" by those among whom they live (Dec. 2009, 20). The Associate Professor similarly stated that, when doing fieldwork in Somalia in the 1990s, he found the Ashraf to be "quite respected, at least in principle" (27 Oct. 2010). He added that, although people in urban centres might privately complain about an individual Ashraf, from a religious point of view, the Ashraf were considered to be morally superior by virtue of their descent (27 Oct. 2010). The Independent Scholar also said that the Ashraf who live with the Benadiri are "traditionally respected for religious reasons by their fellow citizens" (23 Oct. 2010).

However, the ACCORD-Austrian Red Cross report indicates that the Ashraf may be subject to the "same problems as their 'host clans'" (Dec. 2009, 20). In particular, the report states that the Ashraf who live with the Benadiri may have been "targeted" along with the Benadiri people in the early days of the civil war (ACCORD-Austrian Red Cross Dec. 2009, 20). According to the Independent Scholar, the Ashraf living with the Benadiri have, like the Benadiri, "been subject to brutality and persecution by the militias since the breakdown of government" (23 Oct. 2010). The Independent Scholar further clarified that, while the "situation of the Benadiri is certainly not as bad as it was, relative to the rest of the population ... they are still especially vulnerable" (26 Oct. 2010).

The ACCORD-Austrian Red Cross report maintains that the Ashraf are "not targeted as a minority as such" (Dec. 2009, 20). The Associate Professor stated that, in the early 2000s, the Ashraf were not specifically "targeted" as a group (Associate Professor 27 Oct. 2010). However, he added that the conflict in Somalia has since evolved with the emergence of various Islamic groups, such as Al Shabaab (ibid.). Al Shabaab has been listed as a "terrorist" group by the government of Canada (Canada 7 Mar. 2010).

The Associate Professor stated that Al Shabaab "targets" the Ashraf for ideological reasons (27 Oct. 2010). In particular, he stated that Al Shabaab denies any kind of moral hierarchy based on descent (Associate Professor 27 Oct. 2010). He indicated that Al Shabaab considers the Ashraf to be *bid'ah* or an "unlawful innovation" with respect to Islam. The Associate Professor stated that the Ashraf are at risk of being killed or "persecuted" by Al Shabaab (ibid.).

Similarly, the ACCORD-Austrian Red Cross report states that the Ashraf who live among the Digil-Mirifle "may be targeted" by Al Shabaab (Dec. 2009). The report states that this is partly because Al Shabaab denies the religious status of the Ashraf and partly because Al Shabaab is politically opposed to Shariff Hassan (ACCORD-Austrian Red Cross Dec. 2009, 20). Shariff Hassan is a high-ranking political figure who is an Ashraf and who played a role in the 2008 Djibouti peace agreement between the Transitional Federal Government and the opposition group Alliance for Re-liberation of Somalia (ACCORD-Austrian Red Cross Dec. 2009, 6 and 20).

The Digil-Mirifle are a mainly "agro-pastoralist people living in the area between the Juba and Shabelle rivers in Southern Somalia" (ACCORD-Austrian Red Cross Dec. 2009, 11).

Further or corroborating information regarding Al Shabaab's treatment of the Ashraf could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research

Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

## Sharif

On the subject of the name Sharif, the Independent Scholar states:

Sharif (the word of which Ashraf is the superlative) is a title, rather like 'Father' addressed to a priest. It is an Arabic word meaning 'noble' or 'respected'. It can be attached to one of a person's names or to more than one, and an individual may use it at one time but not at another. It can be used by all Ashraf, but is not necessarily and many nowadays prefer to omit it. It is not generally a personal name, and hence will not necessarily appear on documents such as identity card or passport. (It is sometimes used as a personal name, not only among the Ashraf.) (23 Oct. 2010)

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.

### References

Abbink, J. 2009. *The Total Somali Clan Genealogy (Second Editon)*. Working Paper 84/2009. Leiden, The Netherlands: African Studies Centre (ASC). <<http://hdl.handle.net/1887/14007>> [Accessed 3 Nov. 2010]

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Independent scholar. United Kingdom. 30 October 2010. Correspondence.

\_\_\_\_\_. 26 October 2010. Telephone interview.

\_\_\_\_\_. 23 October 2010. Correspondence.

#### Additional Sources Consulted

**Oral sources:** Researchers from Columbia University, Indiana University, the University of London, the University of Pennsylvania, the University of South Africa and an expert from the Brookings Institute were unable to provide information within the time constraints of this Response.

**Publications:** *Africa Research Bulletin, Africa Security Review, Current History, Ethnopolitics, Forced Migration Online, Human Rights Quarterly, Journal of Eastern African Studies, Journal of Peace Research, The Muslim World, Refugee Survey Quarterly.*

**Internet sites, including:** Academy for Peace and Development (APD), Chatham House, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), Centre for Research and Dialogue (CRD), Geneva Peacebuilding Platform (GPP), GlobalSecurity.org, Human Rights Watch, Institute for Security Studies (ISS), International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research, International Crisis Group, International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), IHS Jane's, Middle East Forum, *The Middle East Quarterly, The New York Times*, openDemocracy, Oxford House, Social Research and Development Institute (SORADI), Social Science Research Council (SSRC), Office of the United Nations (UN) High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), University of Cambridge, University of London, Voice of America (VOA), World Bank, Yale University.

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