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Responses to Information Requests

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24 November 2014

SOM104995.E

Somalia: Situation of practitioners of Sufism in Mogadishu; incidents of violence involving al Shabaab [Al-Shabaab] and practitioners of Sufism; security situation and availability of state protection in Mogadishu (2013-November 2014)

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1. Background

A 2010 Human Rights Watch report titled *Harsh War, Harsh Peace: Abuses by al Shabaab, the Transitional Federal Government, and AMISOM in Somalia*, describes Sufism as a "mystical strain of Islam to which Somalis traditionally adhered" (29 Apr. 2010, 26). The Somalia Report, a "privately funded, non-partisan" Somali news website that employs Western editors "to work with over 140 Somali journalists inside the country" (n.d.), describes Sufism as a

mystical Islamic sect with a considerable number of adherents in Somalia. Adherents seek to distance themselves from the material world and in that manner connect with their creator. In Somalia, the sect's presence goes as far back as the 15th century.

The Sufi sect gained respect in Somalia because they were solely devoted to the teaching and spreading of Islam in the country. (Somalia Report 3 Mar. 2012)

Sources indicate that the majority of Somalis are Sufi Muslims (BBC 8 June 2009; US 30 July 2012, 2), specifically "Sunni Muslims of a Sufi tradition" (ibid.).

Human Rights Watch notes that Sufism "includes practices such as the worship of clerics' tombs that are considered idolatry under Wahhabism [1], the austere form of Islam that al Shabaab embraces" (29 Apr. 2010, 26). Similarly, the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) *Annual Report 2011* notes that al Shabaab views Sufis as "apostates" and views their religious activities as "idolatrous" (US 28 Apr. 2011, 303-304). According to BBC, Sufi followers "do not share the strict Saudi Arabian-inspired Wahhabi interpretation of Islam [of] the hardline al-Shabab group" (8 June 2009). A policy briefing published in 2014 by the International Crisis Group states that al Shabaab is "heavily influenced by the Wahhabist interpretations, and their emphasis on strict scriptural authority (the Quran and Sunna) as the instructions - theological roadmap - for the organization and structure by which to build ... a righteous state" (26 June 2014, 7).

For further information on al- Shabaab, including areas of control, recruitment, and affiliated groups please refer to Response to Information Request SOM104662.

2. Treatment of Sufi Practitioners by al Shabaab, Including Incidents of Violence

In 2009, Reuters reported that al Shabaab "has targeted Sufi holy sites and religious leaders in the past, saying their practices go against the insurgents' strict interpretation of Islamic law" (19 Oct. 2009). The 2010 Human Rights Watch report states that in 2008 and 2009, al Shabaab members "frequently committed violence against Sufism," (Human Rights Watch 29 Apr. 2010, 26). Sources report the following incidents of violence committed by al Shabaab against Sufism since 2008:

- In 2008 and 2009, the group desecrated Sufi tombs in southern communities like the port city of Kismayo, raided mosques during Sufi rituals and killed Sufi clerics, government officials, and militiamen (ibid.);
- In 2009 and 2010, al Shabaab engaged in a campaign of desecration of Sufi shrines (which are the graves of Somali Sufi saints), including an incident in March 2010 when seven graves in Mogadishu were destroyed (US 28 Apr. 2011, 304);
- In May and August of 2010, al Shabaab "arrested Sufi clerics in Mogadishu and prevented them from conducting classes or attending mosques" (ibid. 303-304);
- In 2011, the group arrested a "Sufi sheikh and eight students ... as they planned to celebrate the birth of the prophet Mohammed, a practice deemed 'un-Islamic' by al Shabaab" (ibid., 304).
- In 2011, al Shabaab reportedly "killed Sufi clerics who did not subscribe to its brand of violent Islam, maimed and killed those who failed to adhere to its edicts, and destroyed or desecrated Sufi graves and mosques" (ibid. 30 July 2012, 1).
- Deutsche Presse-Agentur (DPA), a German news agency, reports that the group has "burned Sufi shrines which did not follow its Wahhabist doctrine" (DPA 8 May 2014).

The 2012 USCIRF report notes that there were no reports of attacks by al Shabaab against Sufi practitioners in 2012 (US 20 Mar. 2012, 322).

Further information on the recent treatment of Sufi practitioners by al Shabaab could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

3. Recent Attacks by Al Shabaab in Mogadishu

Sources report that al Shabaab withdrew from Mogadishu in 2011 (US 27 Feb. 2014, 11; UN 9 Apr. 2014; International Crisis Group 26 June 2014, 2, 9). Recent reports indicate that al Shabaab is being driven out of towns in south and central Somalia by African and Somali military offensive operations (Reuters 15 Oct. 2014; International Crisis Group 26 June 2014, 2), notably the joint African Union Mission to Somalia (AMISOM) and Somali National Army 'Eagle' operation which began in March 2014 (ibid.). In May 2014, DPA reported that al Shabaab, consisting of an estimated 5,000 fighters, was "rapidly losing ground to Somali government and African Union forces," which number at least 8,000 soldiers and 24,000 peacekeepers respectively, and was then "confined largely to the countryside" (DPA 8 May 2014).

DPA reports that since losing the war against the government, al Shabaab "has increasingly turned to terrorist tactics such as suicide attacks, car bombings, and targeted assassinations" (ibid.). A 2014 report published by the Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS), a bipartisan, non-profit organization headquartered in Washington, D.C. (CSIS n.d.), titled *The Reinvention of Al-Shabaab: A Strategy of Choice or Necessity?* similarly explains:

With its infantry forces operating mainly in rural areas and generally avoiding major engagements with AMISOM and SFG [Somali Federal Government] forces, Al-Shabaab has come to rely heavily on the *Amniyaad* [the intelligence wing of al Shabaab] to maintain a presence in Mogadishu and other major towns, and to demonstrate the organization's continuing ability to fight. The *Amniyaad's* most common tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) include targeted killings, lobbing of grenades, and use of improvised explosive devices. (CSIS Feb. 2014, 7)

The US Department of State's *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2013* for Somalia describes al Shabaab's recent terrorist activities as follows:

Al-Shabaab continued to kill civilians, including politically motivated killings that targeted civilians affiliated with the government, and attacks on humanitarians, NGO employees, the UN, and diplomatic missions. They often used suicide attacks, mortar attacks, and improvised explosive devices. Al-Shabaab also killed prominent peace activists, community leaders, clan elders and their family members for their roles in peace building, and beheaded persons it accused of spying for and collaborating with Somali national forces and affiliated militias. (US 27 February 2014, 12)

Information on recent targeted attacks by al Shabaab against Sufi practitioners in Mogadishu could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response. However, the following information may be useful.

Sources report the following attacks committed by al Shabaab in Mogadishu in 2014:

- Several car bombings in October 2014; sources report the attacks killed at least 5 (Reuters 15 Oct. 2014) to 6 (Al Jazeera 12 Oct. 2014) to 15 people (*The New York Times* 13 Oct. 2014). There were several others wounded in the attacks (ibid.; Reuters 15 Oct. 2014; Al Jazeera 12 Oct. 2014);
- An attack on the National Intelligence and Security Agency (NISA) prison in August 2014, which killed three NISA personnel (African Union 16 Oct. 2014, para. 17);
- Two attacks on Villa Somalia, the presidential palace, the most recent of which took place in July 2014 (AI 23 Oct. 2014; UN 12 July 2014; African Union 16 Oct. 2014, para. 17) and killed three people and injured two AMISOM soldiers (ibid.). Another attack on the palace took place in February 2014 which killed government officials (ibid.; UN 9 Apr. 2014).

For information on recent attacks by al Shabaab against non-Muslim religious groups, please refer to Response to Information Request SOM104854.

4. Security Situation in Mogadishu and Availability of State Protection

According to an October 2014 report by the African Union's Chairperson of the Commission on the Situation in Somalia, AMISOM is working closely with the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) in Mogadishu, and has two police units deployed in the city to carry out joint police operations with the Somali Police Force (SPF) (African Union 16 Oct. 2014, para. 18). *Country Reports 2013* noted that during the 2013 reporting period, the AMISOM police contingent in Mogadishu comprised 363 officers (US 27 Feb. 2014, 7).

Country Reports 2013 states that there are two police forces in the capital: one controlled by the federal [central] government and the other controlled by the Benadir regional administration, both of which work with the AMISOM police contingent in the city (ibid.). The same source reports that in 2013, the federal police force "expanded its presence from seven districts to all 16 districts of Mogadishu" (ibid.).

According to the 2014 African Union report,

These [police] operations have contributed to reducing significantly the asymmetric threat levels in Mogadishu through search and cordon, random checkpoints, community policing initiatives and community outreach programmes, which have resulted in the recovery of weapons, Explosive Ordinances (EODs) and IEDs, as well as the arrest of many suspected Al-Shabaab insurgents. (African Union 16 Oct. 2014, para. 18)

According to an April 2014 UN Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN) article, "three years after Al-Shabaab insurgents withdrew from the city, security in Mogadishu remains a serious problem for residents and aid workers, with threats from Al-Shabaab incursions, criminals and militia" (UN 9 Apr. 2014). The article further states that terrorist attacks "attributed to Al Shabaab or its sympathizers" occur with "great frequency" in the capital and notes that the risk of further attacks "remains high" (ibid.). An October 2014 article by Reuters similarly notes that al Shabaab "promised more attacks" after losing control of a major coastal stronghold this month (15 Oct. 2014).

According to Amnesty International (AI), "Al-Shabab retains the ability to stage lethal attacks even in the most heavily guarded parts of the city" and that a

[l]ack of discipline and command control within Somalia's armed forces and allied armed groups means that they not only fail to provide civilian protection, but are actually contributing to the overall insecurity. State security forces continue to be infiltrated by criminal, radical or insurgent elements. (AI 4 Mar. 2014)

AI also reported in October 2014 that "fragile security gains in Mogadishu [against al Shabaab] are short-lived" (23 Oct. 2014, 2).

The February 2014 CSIS report notes the following on the security situation in urban areas such as Mogadishu:

In urban areas, Al-Shabaab should be expected to maintain support networks and operational cells in order to retain the capacity to undertake targeted killings and terrorist attacks. Some of these networks enjoy the tacit support of government officials and members of parliament, making it extremely difficult for the government to ensure security.

Moreover, the persistence of insecurity in Mogadishu and other major towns not only serves a strategic military purpose for Al-Shabaab; it also permits the group to continue to extort payments from the Somali business community in exchange for protection. Unless and until the SFG and its allies are able to provide genuine security, Al-Shabaab "taxation" is likely to remain a major source of revenue for the militants, even in areas nominally under government control. (CSIS Feb. 2014, 12)

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.

Note

[1] Wahhabism originated in Saudi Arabia, developed in Somalia in the 1970s and 1980s, and was adopted by militia-backed groups in the country (Human Rights Watch 29 Apr. 2010, 26).

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Additional Sources Consulted

Oral Sources: Attempts to contact the following individuals and organizations were unsuccessful within the time constraints of this Response: President of the Canadian Somali Congress; professor of political science at Davidson College, North Carolina; professor of sociology at Iowa State University; professor of political science at McGill University; professor of political and social inquiry at Monash University, Melbourne, Australia; professor of African Studies at North Western University, Illinois; professor of history at Wellesley College, Massachusetts; representative at the Heritage Institute for Policy Studies; representative at International Sufi Movement.

Internet sites, including: Africa Confidential; *Africa Research Bulletin*; AllAfrica; AllSomali24; Associated Press; Brookings Institution; Canadian Somali Congress; Combating Terrorism Center; Danish Immigration Service; Diplomat News Network; ecoi.net; Freedom House; Horseed Media; *Human Rights Quarterly*; Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre; International Federation for Human Rights; Jane's Terrorism Watch Report; *Middle East Quarterly*; Mogadishu Online; Newstime Africa; *Political Handbook of the World*; Reporters Without Borders; Sabahi Online; Somali Current; UN – ReliefWeb; US – Woodrow Wilson Centre for Scholars; US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants.

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