

Taming the Clans: Al-Shabab's Clan Politics

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Hiraal Institute

Mogadishu, Somalia

www.hiraalinstitute.org

info@hiraalinstitute.org

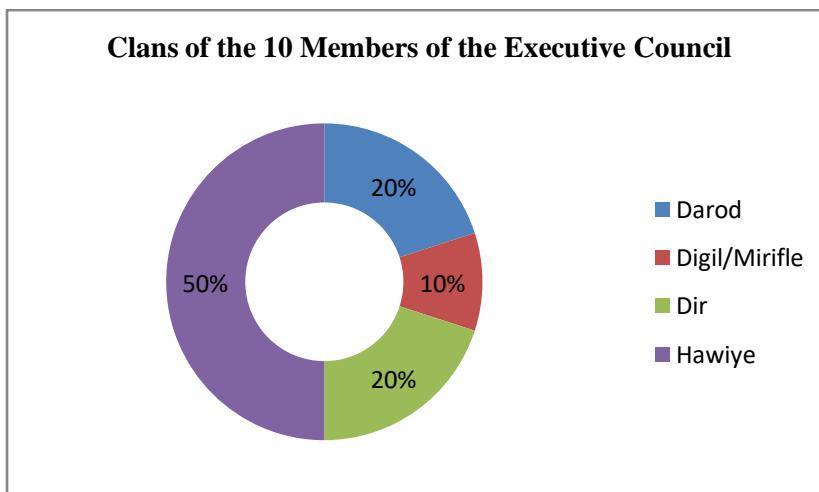
Cover image: Clan elders from the Hubeer clan at a ceremony in which they pledged allegiance to Al-Shabab in 2012. Courtesy of Isha Baydhaba.

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Introduction

The Al-Shabab (AS) leadership was initially interested in forging an egalitarian organisation that would transform Somali society by sidelining traditional clan leaders.¹ However, the group quickly realised that clan loyalty ran deep; rather than reforming clan society, clan politics transformed the group. From 2009, after facing stiff resistance from clan militias in Hiran and Galgaduud regions, AS started taking pledges of allegiance from clan elders. The process was initially meant as a pacification and rapport-building exercise, but ended up being an integral part of the administration and recruitment strategy of the group.

The group skilfully uses clan elders to manage and control local populations, collect taxes, raise armies, and settle disputes. The department that manages the elders is so important that, while it comes under the *Wilayat* Office (the interior ministry), it is headed by Hussein Ali Fidow, who has a seat on the group's exclusive Executive Council. AS's manipulation of the clan system to its advantage has however not resulted in its organisational structure becoming more egalitarian. Still reflecting the clan make-up of the original founders, only a select number of clans are represented in the group's top leadership. Likewise, some sub-clans dominate entire departments and are perceived by AS defectors to be the 'owners' of entire branches of the group.



AS does not treat clans in an equal fashion; for instance, while it forces most clans to pay for the formation of the Islamic Institutes² which it uses for recruitment, it has fully paid for the Institute of one clan in Mudug region, the Habargidir/Hawiye.³ It also conducts fewer *Amniyaat* (secret police/intelligence) operations in that region. This appears to be a pragmatic approach: AS has a

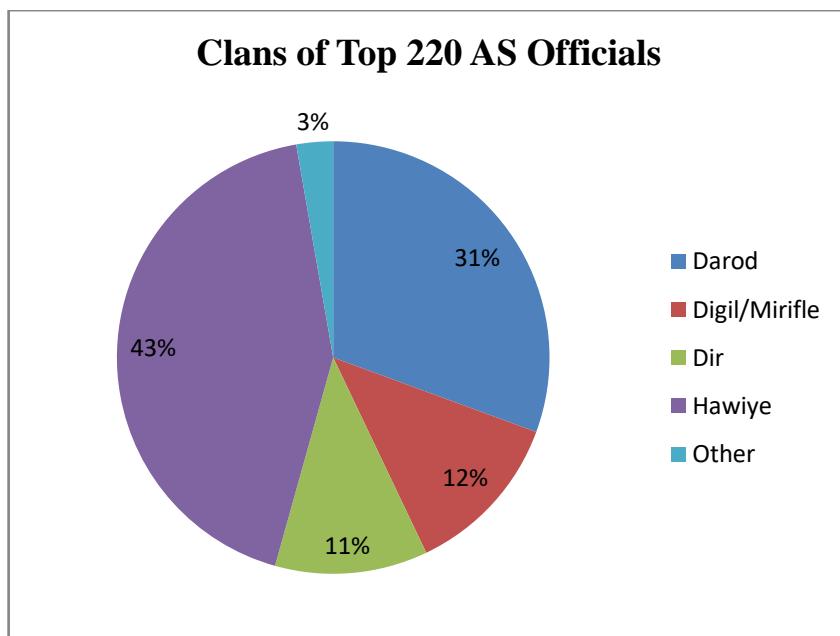
¹ Interview with a former Al-Shabab executive member, May 2016.

² For more on the AS education system, see The Fighters Factory: Inside Al-Shabab's Education System, *Hiraal Institute*, May 2018.

³ Interview with a former Al-Shabab regional-level education director, February 2018.

weak presence in that region and is therefore inclined to seek good relations with the locals. Nevertheless, this has resulted in resentment from AS members from other clans. A former AS district governor in Middle Jubba lamented to *Hiraal Institute* that the group fills its prisons with members of the Darod clan, describing a secret prison in Kunyabarow that had 16 Darod prisoners out of a total of 19.⁴ Another defector who worked in the *Amniyaat* went on to claim that the group's intelligence wing had become a Murusade, Habargidir, and Duduble project.⁵ This is confirmed by *Hiraal's* database of AS leaders.

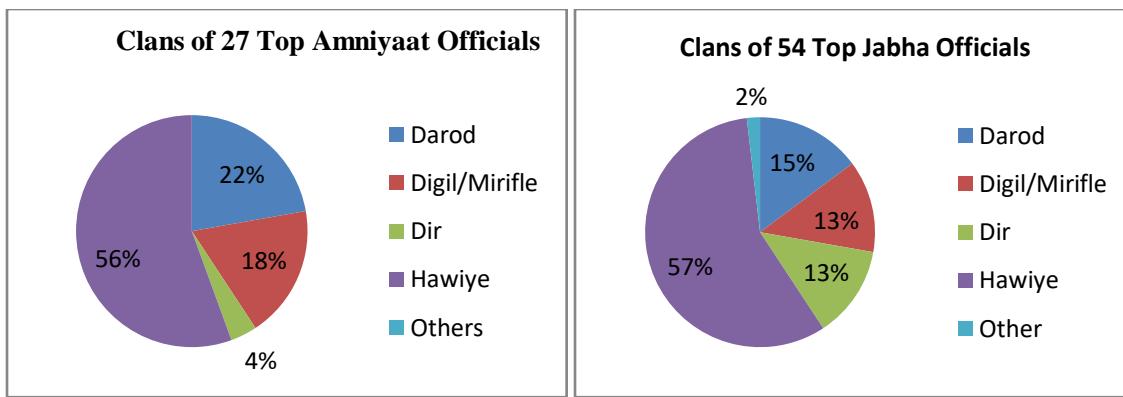
Based on a list of 220 AS officials holding positions in every department and at every administrative level -- district, regional, and national -- the group generally represents all Somali clans, including those in eastern Ethiopia and northeast Kenya. However, the security organs are tightly controlled by Hawiye members, with some leadership positions given to members of other clans in order to maintain a pan-Somali image.



The clan make-up of the *Jabha* (military wing) and *Amniyaat* officials illustrates this fact. There is a disproportionate number of Hawiye officials, reinforcing the perception held by defectors.

⁴ Interview with a former Al-Shabab district governor, May 2018.

⁵ Interview with a former Al-Shabab *Amniyaat* official, May 2018.



The Elders

While many of these elders are AS-appointed, some of them are genuine elders as recognised by the clans. Genuine elders are given more lavish treatment and higher salaries than the elders appointed by AS. Elders appointed by AS receive \$5000 and a gun upon taking the job, and salaries starting at \$150 per month. They also receive a camel when *Zakah* is collected annually, and also a share of the *Infiaaq* money (neither *Zakah* nor tax; it is used to raise emergency funds, and is hated by locals). They also receive \$500 during the indoctrination sessions.⁶

Clan elders are employed at the district or regional levels; each clan has representatives at both administrative levels. AS governors summon clan elders when it needs them to collect *Zakawaat* or *Infiaaq*. Elders sometimes initiate the meeting with regional AS officials if they want someone released from AS jails or to complain about mistreatment. The elders mostly succeed in their intercession except when people are arrested for rebellion or alleged spying.

Likewise, elders are used to mobilise adult clansmen to attend the religious seminars (*dawrah*), which is essentially a recruitment and indoctrination drive. And related to this, elders are tasked with collecting children to attend the AS schools.

In order to renew the pledges of allegiance, once a year or so, 245 elders from the 10 Somali regions in which AS has an administrative presence are summoned to attend a religious seminar which can last several months. This nationwide get-together is usually preceded by a regional one in which elders from individual regions are convened by the regional governor. During these meetings, the ideological positions of the elders are assessed, and those not in line with AS are removed.

The elders are organised at a regional level, with one elder being the head of all elders in each region, and one elder being the head of all regional elders. General meetings are arranged from

⁶ Interview with a former Al-Shabab elder, April 2018.

the top: the top elder informs the regional elders to tell all elders to come to a particular place. From there, they are taken to the meeting venue; their phones are taken away. The current head of the AS elders is a Rahanweyn man called Sheikh Ibrahim 'Shaa'irul Islam' (the Islamic poet).⁷

Fighting the Clans

Al-Shabab has not shied away from punishing entire clans for opposing its policies. In 2008-9, it was in open warfare with a coalition of clans from central Somalia. While some had foreign backing through their membership of *Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama'a* (ASWJ)⁸, at least one clan, the Hawadle, was fighting a vendetta war against AS, which had killed some of its clansmen. With constant ambushes, the clan made it difficult for AS to connect its southern territories with its areas in central Somalia. AS ended up signing peace treaties with the clans, and paying blood money to the Hawadle.⁹

Refusal to pay taxes is the most common form of rebellion that has resulted in clans being punished by AS. In Mudug, AS briefly waged war against the Saleban/Habargidir in late 2016/early 2017, with the *Fursan* (special police) and the *Jabha* (military wing) fighting the clan and bringing in reinforcements from other regions - all this because the clan had refused to pay the *Zakah*. Dumaye village was completely burnt down and hundreds of livestock were shot and slaughtered by AS.¹⁰ The clan lost about 30 men and AS lost 8 men, with 13 wounded. In the end, the clan agreed to continue paying *Zakah* in return for AS stopping its punitive operations.

Likewise, the Awramale clan in Lower Jubba was severely punished by AS in November-December 2016 for refusing to pay the *Zakah*. The *Jabha* was called in, and it started killing clansmen and livestock, setting off a string of defections by officials from that clan. The issue was finally settled when the Awramale surrendered and agreed to pay a fine of 70 AK-47s to AS. The clan did not receive any compensation for its dead members and livestock.

A current dormant war is the years-long conflict between AS and the Biyomaal in Lower Shabelle. This clan has been in conflict with the Habargidir since the 1990s over farmland; and because it continued fighting despite AS directives to the contrary, it was subjected to attacks by AS and forced to accept a truce. As punishment, AS has impounded 1000 camels and about 3000

⁷ The AS system of using elders as administrative enhancements is a worthwhile strategy that could be considered for adoption by Somali authorities, at both local and federal levels. At the very least, it can be utilised to settle local conflicts and reconcile clans.

⁸ ASWJ was an Ethiopian-backed coalition of clans that successfully defeated AS in multiple battles and continues to be a major political force in some towns in central Somalia.

⁹ Abdirahman Dini, "Al-Shabab Spokesman says reached agreement with Hawadle" (translated), *Hiiraan Online*, published on 12 September 2009, URL: https://www.hiiraan.com/news/2009/sept/wararka_maanta12-7483.htm

¹⁰ Interview with a former Al-Shabab commander in Mudug, March 2018.

goats from the clan in the past two years.¹¹ Currently, there is a truce between AS and the Biyomaal; however, the clan has still not been paid back its livestock.

Al-Shabab mistreats the elders of clans that break its laws in the same way it would mistreat any other criminal. For instance, elders from the Dabarre clan have had their teeth and ribs broken in an AS jail; they were accused of shielding individuals who had murdered Elay clansmen.¹² AS does not accept that any other entity exercises violence in its territory, and accordingly reprimands those who do.

Conclusion

AS has successfully managed to manipulate the clan system to its advantage. By relying on a combination of appeasement and brute force, it has bent clans to its will. Clan elders who are against it are discarded and replaced at will. Its harsh policies have created a culture of fear and resentment that has resulted in mass defections by oppressed communities. On the other hand, it is seen as a keeper of peace by some clans; clan conflicts are managed and rarely become violent in areas under AS control.

In the long-term, AS use of alternative clan leaders has the potential to cause friction within clans and hurt their legitimacy.

Internally, AS continues to be dominated by Hawiye individuals who occupy most mid and top-level positions. It is this Hawiye domination of AS that partly explains the rise of ISIS in Somalia, which was formed by mostly non-Hawiye AS defectors.

¹¹ Interview with a former Al-Shabab commander, April 2018.

¹² Interview with a former Al-Shabab commander in Bay and Bakol, February 2018.