



# Governance Brief 16

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## Summary

Galmudug State of Somalia (GSS) became embroiled in a bloody conflict after Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama'a's (ASWJ) leadership returned to Galmudug in October 2021 under the pretext of attending an annual religious festival in Huurshe. ASWJ had previously been defeated in March 2020, and on their return became engaged in fierce fighting with joint Galmudug and Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) forces in Bohol on 30 September 2021 and in Guri-el on 23 October 2021. Following four days of ferocious armed conflict, which caused significant human and material damage, ASWJ withdrew from Guri-el to Bohol as a result of informal mediation. The group is still in Bohol and its leaders have snubbed efforts and calls by Sheikh Shakir's sub-clan kinsmen to disband the militia and seek their goals through peaceful means. The group's return occurred at the same time as Galmudug was nearing the completion of the election of its 8-member Upper House representatives and the start of the House of the People elections. This brief examines the triggers of ASWJ's resurgence, missed opportunities to forestall conflict with the group, and the significance of Guri-el. It also puts forward policy considerations for the future including the establishment of inclusive Darawish forces, devolution of power, the formation of effective local government, and genuine reconciliation.

## About Somali Public Agenda

Somali Public Agenda is a non-profit public policy and administration research organization based in Mogadishu. Its aim is to advance understanding and improvement of public administration and public services in Somalia through evidence-based research and analysis.

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# Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama'a's resurgence: factors, missed opportunities and the way forward

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## ASWJ from the margins to the corridors of power: A brief background

Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama'a (ASWJ) rose to prominence in late 2008 when it fought al-Shabaab in Guri-el and emerged victoriously. Its profile was raised following another victory in Dhusamareb in January 2009 (Hassan, 2009). Although it was not well organized or institutionalized, it used its Sufi background as a rallying point in the face of its adversary. It expanded its territorial control beyond Guri-el and Dhusamareb and came to control Matabaan in the Hiiraan region, Xeraale, Huurshe, and Cabudwaaq in Galmudug, and has drawn militia and top brass leadership from these districts and towns.

During its *de facto* reign spanning roughly twelve years (2008 to early 2020), mainly in Matabaan, Guri-el, and Dhusamareb, it provided some measure of physical security to the people under its writ. However, as its critics argue, development in these areas was limited due to its reclusive approach. In the meantime, ASWJ was an ally to FGS until the formation of Galmudug State in 2015 and was engaged in fora discussing Somalia's issues.

Cracks started to appear among its ranks in the early course of Galmudug state formation processes in 2015. Owing to this, while certain ASWJ members participated in the process in the Adaado district and then became members of Galmudug administration, the group's top leadership, including Moallim Mohamud Sheikh Hassan and Sheikh Mohamed Shakir Ali Hassan, spurned this engagement.

This led to ASWJ recovering the control of Dhusamareb from FGS forces, which the then FGS president, Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, and Galmudug clan elders agreed to designate as the capital of the new administration. ASWJ's recapture of Dhusamareb culminated in maintaining the Adaado district, which hosted the state formation conference as the provisional seat of the state. It also created a polarized nascent administration.

This situation continued until the then president of Galmudug Abdikarim Hussein Guled resigned from his post due to health reasons. The resignation heralded a new dawn for Galmudug. Ahmed Du'ale Gelle "Haaf" took the helm and shared the administration with ASWJ through an IGAD brokered agreement in Djibouti in December 2017 (IGAD, 2018). ASWJ was accorded, among others, the position of chief minister in Galmudug's state government, a post that is neither part of Somalia's FMS structure nor a hitherto traditionally recognized post. Rather, it was an arrangement intended to co-opt the recalcitrant ASWJ into the fold of the Galmudug administration and overcome the division. Unfortunately, this ultimately derailed the functioning of the state.

A few months before the expiry of Haaf's tenure, the FGS announced that it was organizing the process to form a new government for Galmudug. The Galmudug president at the time rebuked this maneuver and issued orders of not allowing anyone from the FGS in Dhusamareb. However, ASWJ did not agree with him on this point and facilitated FGS officials to land in Dhusamareb airport, which the ASWJ militia was securing.

After a long and complicated reconciliation and electoral processes, the FGS allocated 20 MPs for ASWJ in the new Galmudug state legislature. This followed tough haggling around the integration of their militia into the FGS army structure. However, this share from the pie did not satisfy the ASWJ leadership. It proclaimed a parallel legislature and Sheikh Mohamed Shakir Ali Hassan as the president of Galmudug in the Inji compound in Dhusamareb in January 2020. Consequently, the FGS used force in March 2020 to finish off ASWJ's challenge after efforts to settle the issue by elders and politicians from the sub-clan of the two ASWJ leaders ended in vain. ASWJ was outgunned and Sheikh Mohamed Shakir Ali Hassan and Moallim Mohamud left Dhusamareb for Galkacyo under the cover of night and then flew to Nairobi.

This brief now explores the abrupt resurgence of ASWJ in Galmudug, the triggers for its comeback, missed opportunities to forestall conflict, the significance of Guri-el, and the promotion of that town to district status. The brief draws on primary and secondary sources to appreciate and elucidate the current situation. SPA conducted a review of secondary sources, primarily news media reports, and key informant interviews with journalists, officials from the Galmudug administration, business persons, and members from the civil society between late October and earlier November 2021.

### Galmudug caught off guard

After more than about a year and a half of self-imposed exile, senior leaders of ASWJ returned to Galmudug from Turkey where they had reportedly been staying for a year. The leaders of the group – Sheikh Mohamed Shakir Ali Hassan and Moallim Mohamud Sheikh Hassan – landed respectively at Guri-el and north Galkacyo airports on the 11th September 2021 (Mustaqbal Media, 2021).

After their arrival, each traveled to Huurshe, about 70km north of Dhusamareb, by road. They explained the intention of their return to Galmudug and particularly to Huurshe as attending an annual festival to commemorate a revered sheikh, Sheikh Yusuf Direed, whose tomb lies in Huurshe. At Huurshe, where the memorialization was held, former ASWJ militias attended who had been integrated into the different sectors of the FGS forces. The ASWJ leadership, particularly Sheikh Shakir, started mobilizing and restoring relations with his former militias. Within a few days in Huurshe, he managed to mobilize a force mainly drawn from his sub-clan and defectors from FGS and Galmudug forces to rally behind their former bosses.

The militia moved from Huurshe to Bohol after the elders told them not to orchestrate violent conflict against Galmudug from their town. Bohol is about 20km north of Dhusamareb and home for Sheikh Shakir – ASWJ leader – and his sub-clan. On 30 September 2021, fighting between ASWJ and Galmudug forces and SNA broke out in Bohol where at least 20 people were killed and 10 people wounded among the combatants (VOA Somali, 2021).

The joint federal government and Galmudug Darawish forces attacked Bohol. However, it could not overrun the armed ASWJ militia and withdrew to Dhusamareb with casualties sustained to its members. After this unsuccessful offensive, ASWJ moved to Guri-el, a town it coveted. It captured the town from a few police officers without a fight on 1 October 2021 (VOA Somali, 2021). Losing this town to ASWJ represented a heavy blow to the

Galmudug administration because of its multifaceted significance as a symbol of the state.

The Galmudug state planned a decisive offensive to wrestle the town back from the control of ASWJ with the help of the FGS forces. After four days of heavy fighting, which killed at least 120 fighters among the warring parties and wounded more than 600 people, ASWJ withdrew from Guri-el to Bohol. This was achieved through informal mediation brokered by a businessman belonging to the same sub-clan as Sheikh Shakir.

### Triggers of AWSJ's resurgence

With the worrisome developments in Galmudug, it is of great importance to look into the factors that may provide a reasonable explanation for the unexpected comeback of ASWJ to the state. Multiple factors have contributed to the group's comeback. They include, among others:

**Unaddressed ASWJ vendetta:** when the FGS overpowered the ASWJ militia in March 2020 in Dhusamareb, the latter surrendered to FGS forces in Galmudug. At the behest of the sub-clan of two leaders of ASWJ, the leaders were freed and let go. The two sheikhs left Dhusamareb ignominiously to the north of Galkacyo where they took a flight to Kenya. Although it can't be illustrated whether it was by design or fault, the Galmudug president did not make meaningful efforts to engage with former leaders of ASWJ to reconcile with them, redress their grievances, or accommodate their interests in his government in the interests of keeping Galmudug safe from the potential threat that might come from the defeated group. Consequently, the vanquished had their feelings suppressed and hid from the limelight waiting for the right moment to exploit. Hence, if the Galmudug State initiated efforts to engage with the group's leaders, its resurgence could have been minimized.

**Grievances by ex-ASWJ officers in FGS army structure in Galmudug:** as part of the Galmudug state formation process in 2019, FGS integrated former militias of ASWJ into Somalia's different types of forces, such as military, police, and intelligence. According to sources in Galmudug, there were growing grievances held by the ex-ASWJ officers in the FGS forces in Galmudug mainly over lack of promotion and unfulfilled promises. The officers who were reported to have complained defected back to ASWJ when their former bosses, returned to Galmudug.

**Al-Shabaab surge in areas of former ASWJ jurisdiction:** increased al-Shabaab ambushes and mines laying in and around the road linking Guri-el and Dhusamareb provided a justifiable excuse for ASWJ's comeback. People in the formerly Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama'a administered cities felt the brunt of insecurity from the reported al-Shabaab night patrols near Dhusamareb and Guri-el. For that matter, residents in these towns longed for the security they had had under the Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama'a's stint in power. On 7 February 2021, a NISA commander at Dhusamareb Abdirashid Abdinur Qoje and 11 soldiers who were accompanying him were killed after an improvised explosive device (IED) planted in the road between Dhusamareb and Ceel Dheere targeted their vehicle. Al-Shabaab claimed responsibility for this attack (VOA Somali, 2021), and this incident, with other smaller attacks that have followed since then, has made this road impassable for the Galmudug officials.

**Galmudug lacks inclusive state-level security forces:** Galmudug has no security forces – except Darawish forces – that are specifically responsible for providing security to the

areas that fall under its jurisdiction. Since late 2019, FGS has deployed contingents in preparation for the state formation process. These troops have been protecting the seat of the state, Dhusamareb. Galmudug has formed Darawish forces, – state-level security forces. The current forces are drawn only from one sub-clan in Galmudug. This has made Galmudug easy prey to any party that may want to use force to get concessions from this fledgling administration. Former ASWJ militias who were integrated into the FGS army structure are present in Galmudug and their allegiance hasn't yet shifted from ASWJ.

**The Upper House's manipulated elections and concerns over the House of the People elections in Galmudug:** President Qoorqoor excluded many interested and eligible individuals from the list of the Upper House candidates. He is accused of reserving the seats for candidates he preferred, and this generated hostility by these potential candidates and their supposed benefactors. Likewise, there is a concern held by some that the conduct of the House of the People elections will potentially follow the same path. For that reason, some politicians from the state who fell out with President Qoorqoor and those who think he may not side with them and/or not administer justice among the potential contenders, have sympathized with ASWJ's offensive against Galmudug. A joint Somali Public Agenda and Interpeace study published in April 2021 on Galmudug reconciliation warned that Galmudug may descend into violence if President Qoorqoor doesn't manage elections impartially. That warning fell on deaf ears and has come to pass.

### **Missed opportunities: nipping ASWJ in the bud**

After ASWJ leaders arrived in Galmudug and began mobilizing militias, it became apparent to the state government how serious a threat the group posed to the embryonic FMS. The Galmudug leadership did not respond quickly enough to the dangers of the group's efforts to subvert legitimate authority. Galmudug's administration had opportunities to prevent the leaders from organizing deadly violence in the state but did not seize these.

First, Galmudug state failed to reconcile with the group's leaders. President Ahmed Qoorqoor was supposed to extend his hand to ASWJ leaders to settle their grudges. However, this never happened.

Second, the Galmudug state could have prepared carefully selected security forces whose backgrounds were vetted and deployed them to Huurshe where the event was taking place. They could have taken over the security of the event with the coordination and cooperation of elders and clerics from the town. The security forces could have kept a vigilant eye on any behavior and movement beyond the scope of the event and prevented it from occurring. When the event concluded, the security forces could have escorted the leaders of ASWJ to Dhusamareb. The president and members from his cabinet could have accorded them a courtesy visit containing all prospects for political mobilization.

Third, the Galmudug state did not strengthen the bond between the state and district level administrations. The power lies in the capital of the state and rests in the hands of the president. This has created a yawning gap between the two levels of government. This has made some towns susceptible to the ASWJ's appeal as they don't currently derive any tangible benefits from the state.

### **The flashpoint: what does Guri-el mean to Galmudug?**

Guri-el enjoys significance from multiple fronts, which makes it indispensable for any party that wants to exert its authority on Galmudug, whether state government or insurgency groups challenging its authority. Its significance stems from several sources.

**It is a business and financial hub:** Galmudug state has two customs points: one is in south Galkacyo where the administration collects taxes from transport that carries goods from Boosaaso port in Puntland and beyond, whereas the second one is in Guri-el. All the goods transported from Mogadishu to Galmudug pass through Guri-el and livestock to be exported at Boosaaso port are taxed at this customs post in Guri-el. Most of the livestock exported from Boosaaso is also bought from Guri-el and its adjacent villages, along with the Hiiraan region. Further, Guri-el has the largest livestock market in Galmudug. Companies trading in livestock have their main or branch offices in Guri-el. Thus, the Guri-el livestock market is a major source of the meat used in Galmudug and beyond. People with knowledge of bustling business activities in Guri-el and the actual and potential tax generation underline the fact that the town has a fairly significant tax base that dwarfs other districts in the state. According to Galmudug revenue generation sources, taxes that accrue to the state from Guri-el customs account for more than 50% of the total domestic revenue.

**Geographic advantage:** Guri-el is located where HirShabelle and Galmudug states meet. It is the gateway to Galmudug. The livelihoods of approximately 100 villages along the border of Ethiopia-Galmudug, and Hiiraan-Galmudug are dependent on Guri-el. Likewise, for the people in Ceel-buur district and its surrounding villages, Guri-el represents a lifeline for them, as the major source for goods and services they need.

**Religious significance:** Traditionally Guri-el is home to the Sufi sect particularly the Qadiriya order, which commands a significant following in Guri-el and its surrounding rural areas. When ASWJ came back to Galmudug recently and fought Galmudug forces at Bohol, the staunch adherents of the group in Guri-el, specifically Qur'anic school teachers, came out and took arms in support of ASWJ against what they called the "crusade of Salafism". This was a thinly veiled description of those in the Galmudug state government who don't subscribe to their Sufi practices and beliefs.

### **Guri-el gets attention**

ASWJ withdrew from Guri-el in the aftermath of four days of heavy fighting that caused the death of at least 120 people mostly combatants from both sides. There were 600 injuries on both sides, and the displacement of more than 100,000 people (16,740 households), along with the destruction of properties including hospitals (VOA Somali, 2021). Following this, the president of Galmudug and his cabinet arrived in Guri-el and held an extraordinary cabinet meeting on 29 October 2021.

The cabinet raised in their agenda, among other items, the status of Guri-el. The cabinet, after listening to a proposal made by the Galmudug Minister of Interior, Reconciliation, and Local Governments, approved unanimously to promote Guri-el to a district. This was news that the Guri-el community has welcomed and has long been awaited.

The people of Guri-el have been protesting against the prevention of Guri-el from participating in the UN Joint

Program for Local Government (JPLG) held in Dhusamareb. The debarring of Guri-el from that meeting was justified on the grounds that Guri-el had no official district status that qualifies it to benefit from the JPLG. This sparked the anger of the people in Guri-el who took to social media to vent their consternation. They complained that the Galmudug government has ignored their city and the status it deserves. The protesters claimed that Guri-el is a major contributor to the Galmudug revenue pool in contrast to the other districts.

The elevation of Guri-el to a district by the Galmudug cabinet is seemingly intended to shield against other events similar to ASWJ's capture of the city. The move cooled down the popular feeling among the Guri-el community that the Galmudug state was not giving them the rights they expected from it.

After being elevated to district status, Guri-el local government officials participated in the JLGP meeting in Dhusamareb, which the President opened. Along with that, the Galmudug government decided to station regular troops in the district to prevent potential security risks.

To formally complete the procedure of Guri-el district status, the Galmudug legislature voted unanimously in favor of Guri-el becoming a full district in Galmudug State on 16 November 2021. Finally, on 20 November 2021, the President of Galmudug ratified the Galmudug state legislature's approval of the act on Guri-el's district status. This closes the issue of accrediting Guri-el as a district, which has been a thorn in the side of the state government. This is the first town to be recognized as a district in Galmudug through the formal procedure of forming districts.

### The way forward

The recent violent conflict in Galmudug and the recurring threat from the ASWJ provides lessons to the leadership of the Galmudug administration. The most important lessons that come out of this conflict and ways forward to sustainable stability and cohesion include:

**Establishing inclusive Darawish forces:** to avert the recurrence of the kind of violent conflict that has happened and deal with the threat facing the state, the Galmudug administration should establish inclusive state security forces consisting of the diverse 11 clans of the state. Currently, Galmudug is dependent on FGS for counter-insurgency and the provision of security for its capital and is unable to single-handedly thwart existing and emerging threats. Just recently, Galmudug was at great risk of being swept away by ASWJ's offensive, unless the FGS came to its rescue.

**Devolving power and forming effective local governments:** state government should decentralize powers from the capital to the districts and bring services and development projects closer to the population in the Galmudug districts. Devolving power and service was the rationale underlying the adoption of federalism in Somalia, and it allows local people to participate, feel a sense of ownership of their destiny rather than having this superimposed, and hold local officials to account. If Galmudug and the rest of the FMS decentralize powers and services to the local level, tensions would significantly diminish and FMS could gain broader local legitimacy.

**President Qoorqoor should invest more time in Galmudug:** the President has been away from the state for much of his time in office. He has been preoccupied with the rift between the center and periphery over the model of the elections and later the federal President and his Prime Minister. While he was away from the state, progress by the state government has stagnated and this stirred questions and partly provided an opportunity for violent dissenters to organize violence and destabilize the nascent state government. Thus, the President should invest more time in the state to discharge his mandate and tackle local challenges heads on.

**Genuine reconciliation:** the recent violent conflict in Galmudug is the result of neglecting to undertake genuine reconciliation in the state addressing resentments held by some parties, specifically ASWJ, to augment the legitimacy that the state government enjoys. Reconciliation is more cost-effective than settling disputes on the battlefield. For this logic, it is neither too late nor cowardly for the Galmudug state government to reconcile with every party that has grievances - particularly ASWJ - to avoid further bloodletting and the erosion of state-building gains made thus far.

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