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In Somalia, Islamic Militias Are Fighting Culture Wars

By [MARC LACEY](#)

MOGADISHU, [Somalia](#), June 18 — Flush from a military victory earlier this month that caught Washington and the world by surprise, Islamic militiamen have begun waging smaller battles — cultural, not military ones — in and around Somalia's shellshocked capital.

A week ago, when Mexico and [Iran](#) were still playing the first half of their World Cup soccer match, gunmen allied with the Islamic courts burst into a tiny theater in the Hiliwaa neighborhood of north Mogadishu, condemned the place as ungodly and angrily switched off the television set.

When they caught sight of a man with a trendy Afro, with lines shaved into it, they tied his hands behind his back, took out a pair of scissors and evened it out into a scalp-revealing buzz cut.

"They said, 'Your hair is against our culture and is not Islamic,' " recalled the man, Abdi Fatah, 26. They whipped him with a belt, then jailed him for three days.

With the old warlords gone, Mogadishu is safer, and more dangerous, too. It is a happier place, and a more oppressive one. It is a capital city that is also a rundown shantytown, churning with change. Where exactly it is headed nobody knows.

In the old Mogadishu, militiamen would barge into a home and haul a girl or woman away and rape her. Bullets rang out routinely, and gunmen set up roadblocks and charged taxes on anybody who happened by.

Fewer guns are visible now. The man-made roadblocks have disappeared, leaving livestock and huge craters as the main obstructions to navigation. But a new, more silent battle is under way, for control of the Islamic movement in Somalia.

Moderate sheiks led by Sharif Ahmed, a fresh-faced former geography teacher who insists his country is not using [Taliban](#) of [Afghanistan](#) as a model, are jockeying for power with those with a more rigid interpretation of Islam. For every warm handshake a visiting reporter receives, others offer nothing more than an icy glare.

Mr. Ahmed extends his hand. He lunches with visiting reporters to show he has no disdain for foreigners. He is backed by moderate business people who are eager to bring calm to Somalia and get back to business.

But one of his disciples is Mohamed Ali Aden, 19, who commanded 350 men in the recent war and said he would settle for nothing less than a full-fledged Islamic state.

"We've neglected God's verses for so long," Mr. Aden said in an interview. "We want our women veiled and we want them at home. We men have to grow our beards."

Mr. Aden counts as an associate Aden Hashi Ayro, a young military commander trained in Afghanistan who leads a faction linked to a string of assassinations. He is believed to despise the West. Mr. Ayro could not be reached for comment despite numerous inquiries. People close to him said he had nothing to hide but was unavailable.

Mr. Aden, though, was willing to speak, albeit with obvious disdain. Mr. Aden, an orphan who said religion taught him what his deceased parents never could, spoke in a whisper, his face peeking out from under a scarf.

"If you will not join Islam, you are not my brother," he said, refusing to offer his hand. "I am a holy warrior and those who disturb Islam, we will disturb them."

The scramble for power in Mogadishu is taking place behind the scenes, in mosques and private rooms where clan elders gather. It filters to the surface only in the mixed signals that are being given about what people can wear now, and what they can do.

The capital's Islamic leaders find themselves in an unfamiliar spot. No longer can they just preach about the way things are supposed to be. Now they face the challenge of running a broken-down city of two million suffering souls.

Mogadishu's current journey began a decade ago when the clans that rule the city became fed up with anarchy, after a dictator was ousted. Since there was no government or order, they set up Shariah courts. The courts, each linked to a clan, hired their own gunmen and began the tricky task of settling disputes.

Islamic schools, financially backed by various Middle Eastern countries, popped up. The graduates now fill the rank and file of the new administration.

Amid the horror of Mogadishu, the attempt at justice was welcomed, especially in places like the Bermuda neighborhood, where one ugly incident prompted neighbors to form a Shariah court. Gunmen had dragged a teenage girl from her home and raped her. When they returned weeks later, they found the girl gone, so they took her mother. She resisted, so they shot her to death. When her husband tried to save her, they shot him.

Another crime victim, Salad Adam, 16, lost his right eye two years ago to one of Mogadishu's stray bullets. "I thought I was on the way to die when the bullet hit me," he said. But he lived, only to be shot again in recent weeks, this time in his shin by a militiaman who demanded money.

When they could manage to track down the gunmen running rampant in the streets, some courts adopted stringent forms of Shariah, cutting off thieves' hands, executing killers and doling out lashes for lesser crimes.

Soon, the clan-based courts merged in a powerful alliance that eventually took on and toppled the

warlords who had been ruling and running roughshod over Mogadishu residents.

But those courts owe part of their strength to the Bush administration, which tried secretly to undermine them. In recent years, American intelligence agents paid warlords to root out Islamic militants operating in Mogadishu. The United States said a small cell of [Al Qaeda](#), made up of foreigners, had set up shop in Mogadishu after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks and were being protected by court leaders.

"Al Qaeda's concept is right and one day they will rule," said Mr. Aden, the young militia commander. "The name Muslim and Al Qaeda are the same to me. We are alike."

But sympathizing with Al Qaeda and working on its behalf, Somalis say, are two different things. "I think there are people here who love bin Laden and Al Qaeda but that's true in every capital, even Washington," said Ali Iman Sharmarke, a prominent Mogadishu radio journalist who studied in America. "But those willing to strap a bomb to themselves and fight for Al Qaeda, they're not here."

Still, Washington's concerns remain, and now the task of portraying moderation falls to Mr. Ahmed, the top leader of the Islamic courts. Soft-spoken and erudite, he said he first became involved in Shariah courts in Mogadishu after a 12-year-old boy at the Islamic school where he was teaching geography was abducted by militiamen.

"We are a Muslim people, we want to live in a peaceful way, we want to live with the rest of the world in a peaceful way," said the bearded Mr. Ahmed, 41, who was trained in the Koran in Sudan and Libya. "We are not terrorists and we do not associate with terrorists."

The Islamic courts are not World Cup haters, either, Mr. Ahmed has said, explaining that a rogue militia, not an official order, led to the closing of some theaters.

Mr. Fatah is still watching the World Cup, although he is now doing so in the houses of friends who have satellite dishes. Other Somalis, though, continue to pack into public theaters in other parts of town, where the local militias have opted for moderation.

But there have been other confrontations. Earlier this year, Islamic militiamen stopped Ismahan Ali Mohamed, 18, on the street and ripped the long, tight-fitting skirt she was wearing. They ordered her to wear a looser garment next time.

Now, she wears a flowing hijab on the streets that covers all but her face. "It feels heavy and it's not comfortable," she said, removing it inside a hotel restaurant to reveal a bright pink outfit that still covered her but allowed more of a glimpse of what was underneath. "With this, I feel happy and beautiful and free," said Ms. Mohamed, an aspiring actress.

A friend, Ubah Mohamed, 34, who runs a beauty shop, said she feared the new rules. "If these Islamic people get their way, we'll have to cover all the way," she said. "I'm a beautiful girl and I like to show others how beautiful I am. Behind the veil, no one can tell."

Malyun Sheik Haidar, 31, who publishes a small newsletter devoted to women's issues, heard from a

man involved in one of the Islamic courts that her publication would probably be shut down. "He said, 'Women have a right to sit in your house and do domestic things,' " she said. " 'You don't have a right to do a journal on human rights.' "

At a rally orchestrated by the new Islamic leadership to show the population's opposition to foreign peacekeepers, the only guns visible belonged to Islamic militiamen providing security. But one of them readied his AK-47 to fire and pointed it at the head of a young boy to shoo him to the side.

For every complaint the new leaders are receiving, though, many more praise them for quelling the random violence that became normal life in Mogadishu.

"Before, women were kidnapped, raped, killed and tortured," said Hakima Mohamud Abdi, 52, a businesswoman. "Now we've seen a great change and we're very satisfied."

Mohamud Adaan, a businessman who has given donations to the courts, said he expected slow changes that over time would reduce drug use, prostitution and other vices. Even the use of khat, a plant that is chewed as a popular natural stimulant, will be addressed, he said, since it has been shown to rile up the young armed men who cause so many problems in Somalia.

"We will not make changes fast," he said. "We will take time. We will rehabilitate people. We will not just step up and outlaw this and that."

Analysts say a struggle is going on within the courts, which are made up of many interests, ranging from Islamists of all stripes to business people and community leaders.

"If you look at me, I don't have a beard and it would bother me if someone stopped me and said that my face was a problem," said Shariff Osman, the Canadian-educated dean of the computer science department at Mogadishu University. "It's in the coming days and weeks that we'll see how this plays out. People now have a euphoria that the warlords are gone. They are waiting for what's next."

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