

US Strike on Galmudug Soldiers fuels clan tensions between Puntland and Galmudug

29 September 2016

On 28 September, around 4 am, a group of Galmudug soldiers was hit in a US airstrike near Buurcad. Between 13 and 22 people died.

According to Puntland sources, on 26/09, a group of seven technicals manned by armed men had parked on the outskirts of Buurcad, a hamlet about 20 km E of Galkacyo airport. The Puntland Security Forces (PSF) were alerted to this presence, and did a reconnaissance the night before, assisted by US drones. They reportedly identified an AS threat in the group, namely the group's leader, Abdirizak Alooheel a known AS leader and explosives expert hailing from Habar-Gidir/Sacad. Fearing an attack on the airport or their security bases to the East and Northeast of Galkacyo, the PSF called in US air support. In the attack, two technicals were destroyed, four escaped, and one was captured. Between 13 and 22 opponents were killed, others were injured, and one person was captured.

Al Shabab has denied any involvement, or presence of its troops so far North. Galmudug similarly denies the presence of AS elements among the soldiers that were temporarily stationed at Buurcad.

The following day, the word spread fast that a group of Galmudug soldiers had been killed by US drones, and an angry crowd assembled in Galkacyo South, chanting anti-PL and US slogans and burning the American flag. As tensions rose, there were rumours that Galkacyo airport was going to close, and that NGOs may have to evacuate, but by the evening, such rumours had subsided. The next day (on 29/09) however, another demonstration was held in Galkacyo South, with the participation of several political dignitaries in Galmudug.

Puntland and the US have stuck to their version of events ("self-defence") although the US has agreed to carry out an investigation into the incident. A US envoy reportedly arrived in Cadaado on the evening of 28/09 to have talks with the Galmudug government. The Somali government backs the Galmudug version of events ("the US was tricked by Puntland into participating in clan warfare"). It has called for an investigation but also called for peace, terming the incident 'friendly fire'.

Buurcad is situated close to the undrawn 'green' line that separates the Darod to the North and the Hawiye to the South. This line of clan fracture was the scene of intense fighting in the early years of the civil war. In recent years, also, deadly clashes have taken place between the Darod/Majerteen/Omar-Mohamud and the Hawiye/Habar-Gidir/Sacad in Galkacyo and the area to its east. In these clashes, security forces from both states can be indistinguishable from clansmen. In November 2015, Puntland and Galmudug forces clashed over the exact location of the Green Line through Galkacyo, leading to about thirty fatalities and many thousands displaced.

More recently, the Omar Mohamud population of Galkacyo and North Mudug has blamed the Galmudug authorities, and notably the Habar-Gidir/Sacad who control Galkacyo South, of facilitating the twin VBIED blasts of 21/08 against Puntland government and civilians, claimed by AS. Echoing this public sentiment, the Puntland authorities have multiplied hostile statements and gestures against Galmudug since the suicide attacks. They notably banned all vehicle traffic from South to North for several weeks,

and have put strict limitations on the free movement of people across the border, causing economic and other problems for southerners, thus raising clan tensions.

On 30/08 Puntland revealed that many of the AS operatives behind the attacks in Galkacyo, as well as the AS leadership in Galmudug, are Habar-Gidir/Sacad. Most experts agree that AS has no active forces in South Mudug, but Puntland believes there is natural clan complicity between Habar-Gidir/Sacad soldiers (and maybe their leaders) and AS operatives. The command and control structures within the Galmudug forces are very weak (soldiers are often not even paid) so armed men naturally gravitate towards their clans.

To complicate this picture, there may be non-local AS forces involved, remnants of the coastal invasion of Al Shabaab in Puntland of March 2016, or infiltrates from South Somalia. AS has often used clan conflict to its advantage, siding with the underdogs against their bullies, while holding a discourse against clannishness. The AS leadership may thus be supporting the Sacad against their more powerful northern neighbours, in an attempt to destabilize the region.

The US (reportedly, CIA) has a joint base with the Puntland Intelligence Services (PIS) at the airport. Jeexdin is another PSF base to the Northeast of the city. Both bases are a mere 10-15 km away from Buurcad. The US has been involved with the PSF for many years now in a training and advisory function, and has recently turned its attention to the threat emanating from IS in Bari. To counter this, the US needs the full support of the Puntland authorities. It may thus indeed have unwittingly been drawn into providing air support for a clannish operation against a group where there was no real AS threat.

For the Galmudug authorities, this is clearly what happened. The slain soldiers were buried in a funeral procession attended by many politicians in Galkacyo on 29/09. Galmudug demands an apology, which is not forthcoming – and this angers Galmudug civilians and politicians alike. The Galmudug ‘set-up’ version has been picked up by the Somali government and international media. For Puntland, the Somali government’s position may be evidence of its pro-Hawiye stance.

Besides the ‘self-defence’ and the ‘set-up’ interpretations, another common and popular one is the conspiracy theory, whereby the US is purposefully fanning the flames of conflict to weaken Somalia and pursue its own interests. The proponents of this theory point out that it is the US who calls the shots in the PL-US relationship, not vice-versa.

The consequences this incident may have on US drone policy, and on cooperation between the US and Puntland on the IS and AS threats in Bari, is a matter of conjecture. But what certainly seems to be the case, is that tensions are rising sharply between the Omar-Mohamud and the Habar-Gidir/Sacad in Galkacyo. Whether this will spill over into violence, and at what level, and who will be drawn into this conflict (Al Shabaab? US? Somali government?), during the coming electoral period is the main question.

09 October 2016 Update

Puntland and Galmudug forces have clashed just South of Galkacyo, where Puntland is planning to build a livestock holding centre. This clan-based conflict opposes Omar Mohamud and Leelkase on one side, and Habar-Gidir/Sacad on the other. On 7 October about 10 clansmen died in clashes, as the Galmudug forces tried to halt the construction, claiming it is taking place on their land. Puntland denies this and is

adamant on continuing the construction. Elders and businessmen on both sides are trying to reconcile the clans, and Galmudug's President, as well as some of the State's notables, have called for peace.

The clash comes shortly after the killing, on 28 September, of about 15 Galmudug soldiers in a US airstrike. Galmudug says this friendly fire incident was caused by deliberate misinformation by Puntland, fed to the US, because of clan rivalries. Puntland maintains, until today, that the soldiers were in fact AS operatives planning to attack sensitive installations in Puntland, and that the strike was one of self-defence. Although this was originally the line of the US, it seems they have discussed with Galmudug's President Guleid, and agreed to somehow compensate the State for its losses.

The livestock holding centre Puntland is building is meant to facilitate the transfer of animals from South Central to Bosaso Port. After the twin VBIED attacks in Galkacyo on 21/08, Puntland closed the border causing major business losses for traders from South Central. After many protests, at the highest levels, Puntland agreed to reopen the border for livestock and other trade, but only until they complete a livestock holding centre, which will allow Puntland to again halt cross-border livestock trade. Cattle will be unloaded by Galmudug traders in the centre, and then be transferred to trucks managed by Puntland businessmen. Presumably other value-adding operations (such as vaccination, testing, triage) can also take place here.

Puntland claims the land belongs to the Darod/Leekase, and engaged clansmen to help build the centre, offering them employment there when it is finished. However the Habar-Gidir/Sacad claim the land is theirs, and expect to reap, or at least share, the benefits of the centre. Its location is to the West of the road leading from South Galkacyo towards Cadaado, more or less on the Green Line cutting the city in two.

On 9 October elders from both clans tried to defuse the tensions and reached an agreement that may pave the way for a more inclusive solution to the conflict in Galkacyo. However sporadic gunfire could be heard all day, indicating the issue is not yet over.