

HORN OF AFRICA: RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE CRUCIAL FOR STABILITY

(First part of two parts)

By Mathza

(Could any one familiar with the Somali clan system provide a family tree type structure of the Somali people?)

The Union of Islamic Courts (UIC) — a resurrected al-Itihad al-Islamia — in Somalia, particularly its extreme elements, was naïve with its grandiose scheme. Its objective was to eventually unite all Muslims in the Horn of Africa, including those it considered non-Somalis, under a Sharia law. Herein lies the root cause of its utopian dream and destructive activities. It felt so invincible that it repeatedly breached agreements with the internationally-backed Transitional Federal Government of Somalia (TFG). It challenged the government of Ethiopia: repeatedly declared jihad on Ethiopia; threatened to annex the Somali Region; supported and used the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) in destabilizing Ethiopia; threatened to invade Addis Ababa; and attacked the TFG knowing that the Ethiopian government was there to protect the TFG following the latter's request for help.

Apparently, one of the main reasons for such arrogance was the UIC's confidence in and reliance on foreign jihadists. It has, however, been denying and continues to deny that it was not harboring "international terrorists" (al-Qaeda operatives) who — it may be assumed — contributed to the current situation in Somalia. There are those, including some Ethiopians, who agree with the UIC's denials. Is it not possible that some of the terrorists, Fazul Abdullah Mohammed, Abu Taha al-Sudani and Saleh Ali Saleh Nabhan, (a) were killed and their remains buried in hidden graves, (b) are alive and hiding as is the case with Sheikh Hassan Dhahir Aweys, the former colonel, who is reported to be hiding on the Somali-Kenyan border, or (c) have managed to leave Somalia just in time to avoid being captured? Besides, it was reported that the wives and children of some of them were caught trying to sneak into Kenya which handed them over to the TFG authorities. Does not this indicate their presence in Somalia at least up to the days the UIC lost Mogadishu? What about evidence provided by the American Daniel Joseph Maldonado who was trained by members of al-Qaeda present in Somalia in preparation for replacing the TFG by the UIC? Did not another American, Amir Mohamed Meshal, say he "*believed there were al-Qaida members?*" Last but not least, what about the revelation made in "Secret aid for al-Qa'ida in Somalia" (Garowe Online, February 18, 2007)? According to the article, Mr. Evgueny Zakharov confirmed the breach of embargo on Somalia. He is the owner of Aeroflot that sold an Ilyushin aircraft to General Tambi of the Eritrean People's Defense Forces. According to Zakharov, Saudi Arabia and Egypt secretly armed and supported suspected al-Qaeda recruits and Eritrea transported sophisticated weapons and equipment from Djibouti, Iran and Arab countries and hundreds of Islamist fighters using the Ilyushin. From previous United Nations report, part of the arms was destined and supplied to ONLF.

Despite the Prophet Muhammad's command not to touch (not to declare jihad on) the Ethiopians, many attempts were made to forcefully Islamize the country. To this end, the Afars and Somalis who were already converted to Islam served as proxies to the Arabs and Turks (Ottoman Empire). Armed with the latest weapons of the time they conducted wars of expansion of their domain (as the Christians did) as well as jihad against the Christians. The longest and most extensive and destructive war was that waged by Ahmed Grag (Ahmad ibn Ibrahim al-Ghazi). He burned, destroyed and looted churches, monasteries and religious and historical relics. He forced many Christians to convert to Islam. He was killed in 1543 with the help of Portuguese forces. Thirty six years later the Turks themselves invaded present day Eritrea and were defeated and chased out to the sea by Emperor Sertse Dengel.

In our time, as the world knows, the UIC has repeatedly declared jihad on Ethiopia in contravention of the Prophet Muhammad's command. Besides, declaring jihad on Ethiopia is against the Qur'an as jihad by definition is a holy war against 'infidels.' In other words, Ethiopia with about 33% Muslim population (according to the 1994 population census) — not 50% as often quoted — does not seem to qualify as a target for jihad. Was jihad declared because the UIC determined Ethiopian Muslims did not meet its criteria for being Muslims?

There are two aspects of jihad. The first is striving for spiritual self-perfection. The second which corresponds to the Somali hard-line Islamists, jihad is a holy war waged by Muslims against infidels who do not recant their faith, meaning all non-Muslims. According to the second, jihadists who die in jihad go to heaven immediately. This is, apparently, one of the motivations that turns young people to killers and suicide bombers.

Around the time of the UIC defeat pictures of Somali children in military uniform and gears in some websites showed the exploitation of children at tender age. There is no doubt that many of the followers of the UIC are products of madrasahs (Islamic schools), the incubating and breeding ground where they were indoctrinated in Wahabism and recruited into the al-Shabaab (the youth military wing) militant organization which has been operating since 2004. Most, if not all, of the schools were the creation of the UIC leader, Aweys (former leader of al-Itihad al-Islamia) after his militia was rendered a spent force in the 1990's.

Those who recently committed atrocities in Agaro and Shasha localities in Ethiopia were brainwashed, apparently motivated by politics and/or their desire to go to paradise and possibly with the intention of inciting the Muslim population to start jihad in Ethiopia. They burned churches; and killed and forced Christians at gunpoint to recant their faith and convert to Islam. They converted churches to mosques. It was reported that the incidents were instigated by outsiders. If true, who were they? Is it possible that they were Somalis from the UIC, probably like Ali Mohammed Halene, a Somali fresh from Mogadishu who was recently caught in the Somali Region trying to obtain Ethiopian passport? In the absence of proof is it reasonable to assume that the incidents were the result of local jihadists indoctrinated by the madrasahs financed by Saudi Arabia? It should be recalled here that some Ethiopian Muslims indoctrinated in Wahabism promote

extremism and conflict. They, for instance, tried to take over the Muslim leadership in the country and were responsible for disturbances in the Moslem community in the 1990s. They incited the shootings and loss of lives at the Anwar Mosque in Addis Ababa.

In recent years a few Christians have had their share of intolerance against their Muslim brothers and sisters. We should recall here that individual Ethiopian Christians not long ago committed grave blunders in desecrating the Qur'an. This should be condemned in the strongest terms and those working behind the scenes, if any — irrespective of whether they were religiously or politically motivated — should be brought to justice, if it has not already been done.

Imposition of a system of law and governance based on religion on others, like introducing Sharia law in a multi-religious society such as Ethiopia, becomes a serious source of confrontation, hostility and instability. Some Islamic radicals impose and intend to impose the sharia law, even in the Western democratic countries. A case in point is condoning violent Jihad and a call for Sharia in the UK that was expressed by Muslims radicals in Christiane Amanpour's report "The War Within" aired by CNN on 20 January 2007. It would be worth noting that 13% of UK Muslim community considered the London suicide bombers martyrs, according to the report.

The Christianity/Islam experience in Ethiopia is completely different, probably the only of its kind in the world, and deserves to be emulated by other countries. True, there have been some problems and incidents that tarnished such exemplary relationship. Examples include Ahmed Gragn (already referred to) and Emperor Yohannes IV. The latter forced Muslims in Desie town to convert to Christianity. One, of course, cannot deny the fact that in the past, until the EPRDF instituted the present system of governance, Christianity as the traditional official state religion of the country had advantages over Islam. Unfortunately, as in any change, implementation may be difficult and time consuming, especially in the complex Ethiopian society and tradition. In view of this, it is understandable if our Muslim brothers and sisters feel there are still issues of implementation. Notwithstanding this and true to tradition, the Ethiopian Muslim clerics and people to their credit have — in no uncertain terms — condemned the UIC's jihad on their country where the first hijra occurred. They have taken cue from and demonstrated the traditional Ethiopian religious tolerance which was acknowledged and appreciated by the Prophet Muhammad himself. The nine-member high level delegation of Ethiopian Muslims in Diaspora on a two-week working visit to Ethiopia confirmed the Ethiopian culture of tolerance and hospitality. The selection of Addis Ababa in a Christian/Muslim country as venue for the Third International Conference of Muslim Leaders to be held in late June is the Muslim world's affirmation of the Prophet Muhammad's recognition of Ethiopian religious tolerance. This gesture by the Muslim world is a clear indication of disapproval of extreme Islamic fundamentalism.

Despite the overall positive factors referred to above the UIC has, repeatedly, expressed its hostility towards Ethiopia and its intention to annex the Somali Region in Ethiopia as well as areas in Kenya and Djibouti. It is a resurrected al-Itihad al-Islamia (follower of Wahabism) which was heavily financed by the Arab world. It conducted terrorist acts in

and military operations against Ethiopia in mid 1990s to incorporate the Somali region. Ethiopian forces utterly defeated it until it ceased to exist as a fighting force.

It appears the UIC, like the preceding Somali governments, is oblivious of the fact that, according to the OAU (now AU), colonial borders in Africa are not to be tampered with. In their wisdom African Heads of State and Government agreed to keep the sanctity of colonial borders in order to avoid myriads of confrontations among member states. It should be noted here that there is practically no border in Africa free of serious implications for potential confrontation and violent conflicts. There is no way that the UIC will be given a chance to create precedence in breaking this taboo. The only option open to neighboring countries in Africa is to accept the OAU policy and enjoy peaceful coexistence.