

## The ISIS Factor: What Islamic Jihad Means for Ethiopia and the Rest of Africa - Ghelawdewos Araia, PhD - September 20, 2014

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ISIS is the latest mystique obscurity of the Islamic Jihad variety, but Jihad is not novice to Ethiopia and/or the rest of Africa. The acronym ISIS actually should read ISIL meaning Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (the geographic area that includes Iraq, Jordan, Israel, Syria, and parts of Turkey). The geopolitics of ISIS, though conceptual rather than actual, includes the entire Middle East, all Horn of Africa countries, all North African countries, some African countries, Spain, and countries like Indonesia in South East Asia.

The new ISIL Jihad extremists who gained momentum in destabilized Syria and Iraq have preferred to use the name ISIS, perhaps inadvertently or by design, in order to have a catchy name that corresponds to the ancient Egyptian goddess, Isis (Aset).

Before I delve into the main message of this essay, it is imperative that I clarify the meaning and original intent of Islamic Jihad. After all, what does Jihad mean? The etymology of Jihad is somewhat obscure and there is no general consensus on the definition and meaning of Jihad. If one investigates the concept of Jihad chronologically, however, the term conjures up with “struggle” and with two diametrically opposite meanings: 1) struggle or resistance from within in an effort to cleanse oneself and this could correspond to prayer, meditation, introspection, and altruistic conduct as preached and practiced by selfless members of all major organized religions; 2) struggle with the use and extensive employment of the sword and hence violence against the infidels (non-believers, Muslim and non-Muslim alike).

In either two definitions, the individual person engaged in such a ritual is known as a Mujahid and a group of persons engaged in such kind of struggle are known as Mujahideen. The latter group, do not necessarily observe or practice the first definition of Jihad, which is also alternatively expressed as *al Jihad fil sabil Allah* (struggle in the manner of God). On the contrary, contemporary Jihadists are best fitting to our second definition of Jihad.



Although Jihadists like ISIS are the most nascent violent Jihadists, the Jihad that they preach and promote had been prevalent for centuries and we can substantiate our claim by anecdotal

examples. The early Jihadist that came from Arabia around 639 AD, for instance, conquered Egypt by the extensive use of the sword and by subduing the indigenous Africans. By 708 AD, they have reached Morocco and by then they have practically taken over the entire Northern Africa. By this time, however, instead of employing incessant violence, they have opted to peacefully settle among Africans (mainly the indigenous Berbers), intermarried with the latter and subsequently forged a hybrid of cultures known as Afro-Arab (or Afro-Asiatic as per some linguists), and ever since they were known as Moors in the annals of history. It is these Moors, organized under the leadership of General Tarik (12,000 of them armed with swords), who would cross the Gibraltar and overrun Spain in 711 AD.

Initially the Moors have violently crushed the Spaniards, but once they managed to consolidate and peacefully govern Spain, they completely transformed it by introducing agronomy, the sciences, mathematics, and medicine, not to mention the fine Islamic art and architecture. As a result, Moorish Spain (711-1492) enjoyed a spectacular civilization in the midst of Dark Ages in the entire of Europe.

By contrast, the Jihadists, led by Ahmed Ibn Ibrahim Al-Ghazi (popularly known as Ahmed Grañ), were extremely destructive and brought unparalleled havoc and destabilization to the larger Ethiopian society in the middle of the sixteenth century. They burned and rose to the ground hundreds of Ethiopian Orthodox Christian churches; forced Christian Ethiopians to convert into Islam, and massacred those who refused to embrace their religion.

The two Ethiopian leaders who would be compelled to encounter the 16th century Jihad were Emperor Libne Dingil and his son Emperor Galawdewos. Ahmed Grañ, the leader of the Jihadists in Ethiopia, had a distinct advantage of muskets provided by the Ottoman Turks. The Ethiopian combatants, armed with spears and shields, as well as Shotel (Ethiopian sword manufactured by Ethiopian cottage industries), were no match to Grañ's fighting forces armed with guns. It is for this apparent reason that Libne Dingil was forced to retreat in the face of gun-carrying Jihadists. On top of this, Jihadists from Arabia joined the Jihadists in Ethiopia, most of whom were extracts from the Somalia and Adal area.

Finally, after much destruction, Ethiopians reorganized themselves under the leadership of Emperor Galawdewos – this time armed with guns granted by the Portuguese – and counter attacked and defeated the Jihadists by first killing Ahmed Grañ, and then pursued them all the way to where they came from. Unfortunately, in spite of the advice extended to him by his counsel not to continue the skirmish with the Jihadists who were in disarray, Galawdewos made a fatal decision to go to Harar and fight the Grañ remnant forces on their turf. He was struck and beheaded there on Ethiopian Good Friday. But, his brave soldiers managed to successfully recover his head and body and they carried it to the highlands in order to give him the homage and respect he deserves.

Three centuries and three decades after the martyrdom of King Galawdewos, another great Ethiopian leader by the name Emperor Yohannes would be the target of the Sudanese Dervish Mahdist Jihadists. It should be known that the Dervish were first led by Mohammed Ahmed, who claimed his own version of Jihad by assuming the prefix of 'Mahdi' (the Guided One). As his title suggests, thus, he would declare war on Ethiopia and his successor Khalifa would exhibit insolence against Ethiopians and to the extent of even extending overweening warning

to Christian Ethiopians and their king to convert to Islam or else would be the victims of the sword.

When the Dervish Jihadists came to wage war on Ethiopians in March 1889, the forces that led the way, as scouts were Ethiopian Muslims who had sought sanctuary in Sudan. The Battle of Metema ensued, but despite the initial victory of the Ethiopians, a bullet struck Emperor Yohannes. Wounded and bleeding, he was taken to a relatively safe place and had at least enough time to express his will before his last breath. The Mahdist forces, emboldened by the retreating Ethiopian army, managed to get hold of the Emperor's body and severed his head in order to demonstrate their Jihad ritual of victory.

Ethiopia, thus, have had encountered several Jihad encounters and wars in its past history but it is still important to study the current Jihadists, rallied around the Wahabi denomination of Islam that consolidated in the Arabian Peninsula in the 18th century. The Wahabi sect served as the flagship to modern Jihadists, not only in the Middle East but elsewhere in the world where genuine Islam is hijacked by terrorists Muslims like the ISIS group that we have discussed in the context of our second definition of Jihad. However, the latter should not be confused with the nationalist Jihad movements aimed at deterring and defeating colonial forces.

Nationalist Jihad movements in Africa are best exemplified by the Algerian resistance, led by Abd al Qadir, against the French in 1832-1847; the Samori Ture-led resistance against the French in 1882-1889 in the Guinea-Futta Jallon area of West Africa; the Somali Dervish resistance, led by Said Mohammed Abdullah (the British called him "Mad Mullah"), against the British and Italians between 1896 and 1920; and the Sanusi resistance in Libya against the Italian colonial forces in 1912. To some extent, the Fulani Wars of 1804-1810 and the Al Hajj Umar (aka El Hadj Umar Tall; Senegalese and founder of the Tukulor Empire 1852-1864) Jihad wars could fit into the nationalist Jihad movements, but these latter two Jihads were directed against Muslim Africans due to contest of power and struggle for hegemony in their respective areas.

The current Jihad, unlike the nationalist Jihads, and contrary to Prophet Mohammed's appeal "not to kill women and children", have been engaged in indiscriminate killings of "infidels", including Moslems considered to be "impure". This portends to omen anticipating destructive political culture perpetrated by prominent Jihad leaders such as Abdullah Yusuf Azzam, credited for being the father of the new global Jihad. The Palestinian Azzam masterminded organized Jihad against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, and he targeted countries like Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Bosnia, Somalia, and Eritrea as potential springboards for Jihad. Azzam's agenda of Jihad, thus, would assume a global dimension characterized by guerrilla warfare against regimes in power and terrorizing the general public.

Following Azzam's global Jihad agenda, thus, the Somali Al Shabab Jihadists, would attack Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, and Ethiopia, and also its own Somalia that had already committed suicide long before Al Shabab came into being. By the same token, the Boko Haram of Nigeria, known for its notoriety of kidnapping young girls, is geared to destabilizing Nigeria and attacking neighboring Niger, Cameroon and Mali. In 2009, the Nigerian Government launched a military attack against Boko Haram, in which the leader of the Jihadists, Mohammed Yusuf, was killed and the rest of the criminal gangs fled to neighboring countries. But soon after, they

regrouped and reorganized themselves in such a way to have become a formidable challenge to the Nigerian Government in the North Eastern part of the country.

In Ethiopia, the Jihadists were unable to gain a foothold from which they could operate and launch their attacks, and as a result they were unable to gain momentum. However, in isolated incidents and locale, they managed to terrorize and kill innocent Ethiopians. Two decades ago, unknown militant Islamists in the Arsi area of southern Ethiopia slaughtered priests of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Some priests who escaped the massacre testified then, "they have never seen those Muslims before and they had no quarrel with their neighbor Muslims whatsoever." In 2011, in remote South Western Ethiopia, especially in the Asendabo and Besheno areas, the Jihadist terrorized the people and burned close to fifty churches; in 2013, Shiek Nur Imam was murdered in Wollo by unknown gunman (gunmen); also in 2013, an attempt was made by other Jihadists (or they could be the same group responsible for other atrocities carried out in the name of Jihad) to explode a bomb in the Addis Ababa stadium when Ethiopia and Nigeria soccer teams were ready to play and when the stadium was filled to capacity. This attempt was foiled in large measure due to high alert of the Ethiopian intelligence service; and recently, Ambo, a city in west Ethiopia, witnessed its businesses wantonly destroyed by unknown terrorists and as a result, several people, including students, were killed.

While the Ethiopian Government managed to get hold and apprehend the Jihadists associated with the Stadium incident, the Ambo predicament remains a mystery, because, to this day, the perpetrators are unknown and unaccounted for their criminal acts.

One other Jihadist Ethiopian group that should be followed closely with eyes wide open on the part of the people and the Ethiopian Government is the Oromo Islamic Liberation Front. This front is minuscule by all measure and has no support from other Oromo political groupings, but it could be a potential rallying cry for fanatic Wuhabists, who, in turn, could cause damage to the larger Ethiopian society if underestimated and ignored. Another group within Ethiopia that should be under the radar and constantly watched is the Salafi Muslim group that was engaged in creating unnecessary nuisance and disturbance in the Addis Ababa Merkato Mosque. They deliberately provoked members of the Mosque by a bizarre demand of using the facility of the Mosque for their own Salafi agenda instead of finding a mosque of their own. That may sound like an insignificant problem if one views the infantile conduct of the Salafi group. What is important to know is, in order to promote true Islam, the Salafi version of Islam advocates the use of the sword and violence. That is why Salafis should be followed and their activities scrutinized.

The ISIS factor should not be underestimated either. Nevertheless, ISIS is not as formidable as some media outlets portray it. As indicated at the beginning of this essay, ISIS is the newest version of the global Jihad organizations and movements, but it has emerged as relatively strong and destructive force in Syria and extended its tentacles into Iraq only because the two states were weakened by continuous civil wars, unrest, and fratricidal politics. ISIS established itself in the weakest link of the Middle East, so to speak. By the same token, the Al Shabab that became the unchallenged Jihad force in the wake of fragile and fragmented Somalia, is now weak and in disarray (if not vanishing from the Somalia horizon) thanks to the involvement of African Union (AU) forces, as well as Ugandan, Kenyan, and Ethiopian contingents whose

mission is to reinforce the AU mission against Jihad forces and also stabilize the Mogadishu-confined Government of Somalia.

If States are strong and the people exhibit determination and resolve, Jihadists could easily turn into paper tigers. A strong state and decisive people can defeat all kinds of terror unleashed by the Jihadists. The current coalition of some Arab countries, Iran, some European countries including France, as well as the United States could dialectically reveal new opportunities in fostering a lasting peace in the Middle East and Africa. However, the people in general and the Coalition in particular should seriously study the conventional mold of thinking of the terrorist groups and their global networking. It should also be quite apparent that militant Islamists conveniently use Muslim Brotherhood all over the world. Ethnic and/or linguistic differences are immaterial for Muslims worldwide, and it is for this reason that Muslims from Bosnia to Indonesia could easily forge a sense of solidarity insofar the diverse Muslims with various ethnic backgrounds are Muslims. The militant Muslims carefully nurture the latter sentiment for their own global Jihad agenda. A good example of Moslem Brotherhood in whose cocoon extreme Jihad could flourish is the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MOJWA), also known by its French acronym, MUJAO. The MOJWA group is a splinter Jihadist group that severed relations with Al Qaeda in 2011 and that recruited Muslims, irrespective of their nationalities, from all West Africa.

Once a clear distinction is made between genuine Muslims and terrorist Jihadists, the best way to defeat the terrorists is to mobilize moderate Muslims against the extreme Jihadists. This kind of strategy would have two advantages: 1) Islam would cleanse itself from the monster Jihadists and moderate Muslims would comfortably and confidently live anywhere among Christians, Jews, Hindus, and Buddhists; 2) global peace would reign and countries (especially emerging economies) would not be distracted from a pressing development agenda and would enjoy a moment in history to fulfill their mission in overcoming underdevelopment, hunger, illiteracy, and the vagaries of poverty.

If Ethiopia is going to meet the development agenda, it should at any cost systematically and craftily deter the contagion of Islamic Jihad. Ethiopia is the pride and promise of all Africans; it is also the cradle of humanity (home of Denknesh or Lucy) and ancient as well as medieval civilizations, and as such must be protected from Jihad anomalies, violence, and destruction. The Ethiopian Government has an historic obligation to protect the larger Ethiopian society from the dangers of Islamic Jihad, but this historical mission should not be left to the Government alone. The Ethiopian people should also jealously guard their respective districts by organizing militia-type cadres in cooperation with local government authorities. The current consciousness and alertness of Ethiopian religious leaders, including the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, Ethiopian Muslims, Ethiopian Catholics, and Ethiopian Evangelical denominations is admirable and it should be sustained.

As has been discussed in this essay, Ethiopia have had the brunt of Jihad attacks and destruction in its past history as well as in its most recent and contemporary history, and this is a very good example where we can fuse the past and the present. The Jihad encounters in Ethiopia are not necessarily identical, but they are certainly analogous from which we can learn lessons. This might sound a convenient simplification of the Ethiopian experience in the context of Jihad movements, but it is in fact a universal truth that people learn from history's broadest

patterns. While we learn from history, however, as indicated earlier, the most crucial objective against Jihadists is to study them very much like cultural anthropologists do. The current global Jihad á la ISIS is composed of fanatic, obdurate, cruel, and dehumanized groups and they have nothing to contribute to civilization. The only language they understand is violence, and whether we like it or not they must be counter attacked with violence, and I believe the Biblical adage *Those Who Live by the Sword, die by the Sword* is quite a fitting to ISIS and other Jihadists.