

# UWSLF: A Genuine Truce for Peace or Tactical Maneuver for Surrender to Ethiopia?

## Introduction

The United Western Somali Liberation Front (UWSLF) issued a [press](#) release on April 4, 2010 unveiling a three months-long truce with the Ethiopian government. Three days later, the Ethiopian Communications Minister, Bereket Simon, [announced](#) that a rebel group in Ethiopia's southeastern Somali Region has agreed to “lay down arms after decades of guerrilla war”. According to Bereket, leaders of the UWSLF had, after talks with the government, "accepted totally to abide by the constitution of Ethiopia and operate legally and abandon the armed struggle”. Despite the obvious or intuitive variation between the two statements, a host of other issues ought to be examined. In this paper, we will address the accord, based on what is known about it, between these two antagonists and what it means for the conflict-ridden Somali region of Ethiopia.



## Who are UWSLF?

Even some of the highly regarded Horn of Africa’s political pundits confuse the ties between UWSLF and WSLF. The two fronts share very little in common, if any. Western Somali Liberation Front (WSLF) was a non-Islamist- nationalist armed front that led the 1977 Ogaden war against the Ethiopian government with the help of the then Somali government. After the unsuccessful attempt to liberate the Somali inhabited region in 1977-78, some of the WSLF leaders blamed the Somali government for meddling in their affairs and formed the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF). However, UWSLF originated from Al-Itahd Al-Islamiya- a modern political Islamic organization that was registered as a political party in the Somali region until 1992. Claimed to be provoked by the Ethiopian forces, Al-Itahd launched a rebellion and led an armed conflict with the Ethiopian army until 1996. After five years of fierce guerilla war, the EPRDF government managed to root out Al-Itahd from the Somali Region with the unconfirmed support of the US/Israeli forces.



Ethiopia’s military success can be attributed to three major factors (1) Al-Itahd was transnational Islamist organization with the objective of establishing an Islamic State throughout the Somali peninsula using its Salafi doctrine as the organizing ideology, a political agenda that put them at odds with the governments in the region as well the western world. In other words, Al-Itahd created strong enemies for itself from the

start. (2) Al-Itahad's radical views and "infidalization" of the Somalis who did not agree with their strict interpretation of Islam won them very little public support and (3) the traditional sources of financing in the gulf dried up in the 1990s due to international scrutiny and pressure from the west. These and other factors pushed Al-Itahad to nearly collapse. Following an internal power struggle, the organization elected Sheik Abdisalam to restructure the organization and its leadership in vain. However, the new leader failed to unite the organization and as result was forced to flee to Tanzania. Many other high rank and file members also fled to South Africa and Nairobi. The remaining group settled in Somalia focusing primarily on preaching and business activities. After a few years, approximately between 2000 and 2003, the organization managed to reorganize under the leadership of Sheikh Ibrahim and adopted another name- UWSLF (United Western Somali Liberation Front).

UWSLF mainly recruited from the pool of former Al-itahad members and supporters and operated outside Ethiopia. The Republic of Somalia served as a military and political base for the young UWSLF. The organization opened centers in Bosaso, Kismayo, Mogadisho and Buro. These centers served as offices and military training camps at times. Around this time , the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) emerged and UWSLF hugely invested, both militarily and economically, in the courts. The group also benefitted from the hospitality of the union particularly Sheik Aways's wing of the ICU. This newly found sanctuary fell apart after the Ethiopian invasion in 2006. Nevertheless, the partnership continued until very recently, for example, according to the, [United Nation's Monitoring Group for Somalia](#) UWSLF's army, led by a commander known as Mohamed Arab Hiirey, fought along Hizbul Islam during the surge in Mogadishu in 2008/9.

### **The Advent of UWSLF in the Somali Region**

UWSLF mobilized a small regiment- estimated at between of 100 and150 men, and entered Ethiopia in 2006/7 from the Somalia border. The public maintained its skepticism towards UWSLF/Al-Itahad but UWSLF leaders learned from their past mistakes and displayed a very friendly and soft approach towards the public. Instead of the "infidalization" and strict interpretation of Islam which characterized their approach in the 1990s, they adopted a nationalist-Islamist theme as the main organizing ideology. The organization cleverly also used the legitimate grievances of the public as a mobilizing strategy for support and recruitment. This strategy may have proven successful had the timing been different. The re-organization of Al-Itahad coincided with the Ethiopia's scorched earth operations in the region after the ONLF attacked Obbole oil fields and killed many Chinese workers in April, 2007. It also coincided with the presence of a strong local rival group-Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), which did not want to see another armed group compete for local support. Historically, armed groups in Ethiopia's northern region including TPLF and Eritrea's EPLF also confronted militarily with other armed groups- EUD, EPRP and ELF primarily for the same reasons. This shades some light on the totalitarian nature of Ethiopia's liberation fronts.

In less than a year, UWSLF found itself fighting both the ONLF and the Ethiopian army. Consequently, around 2008, the organization managed to forge cooperation with the late Dr. Dolal's ONLF splinter group (Somali: Golaha Sare ee ONLF). This was a marriage of convenience for the two shared no ideology. Dr. Dolal's wing needed boots on the ground for his protection in order to buy time to recruit followers. On the other hand, UWSLF saw this as an opportunity to present itself as nationalistic local-freedom fighting organization. This, however, lasted very short. In April 2008, an incident that changed the dynamics and dictated the fate of UWSLF took place. Dr. Dolal and almost the entire military leadership of UWSLF including the commander and five other central committee members were killed near Denan by the Ethiopian army. This was a military setback the young UWSLF has never recovered from.

### **UWSLF's Troubles in Somalia**

Sheik Sharif's presidential election in 2009 meant both the Somalia's government and the opposition were Islamists. UWSLF had to choose an alliance. The organization tried to maintain a healthy relationship with both forces but that was not sustainable. Eventually, UWSLF leaned towards Hizbul-Islam but that put them in conflict with the rest of the Islamist groups and the Sharif's government. Under such unfavorable circumstances, UWSLF could neither maintain a neutral presence in Somalia nor could they join other forces in Somalia. To go underground like they did in the late 1990 or to make peace with Ethiopia were the very few options UWSLF had on the table. They chose the latter. This, however, did not end its business and preaching activities in Somalia. UWSLF still operates a number of educational and philanthropic institutions in Somalia.

### **The Negotiation Process**

The leader of the Shura council, Ahmed Neshat, has been rumored to have inconspicuously met Ethiopian Embassy officials in Kenya in 2008. Whether this was the beginning of the negotiations or not is difficult to attest. But the meetings that happened in Sweden, Kuwait and Djibouti are affirmed. These meetings were facilitated by individuals as well as some government officials of those countries. In the case of Kuwait, Sheik Ibrahim's friends in the Kuwaiti government made possible a significant face-to-face meeting between the Sheik and an official from Ethiopia's ministry of foreign affairs. It is important to note that the Somali regional government was not involved in the negotiations-this indicates how the regional government can neither make peace nor war with anyone.



Almost all the meetings were initiated by the UWSLF for the above-discussed strategic reasons. These private contacts finally evolved into full-fledged negotiations that led to the Djibouti agreement. The two sides never publicized the so-called agreement but those in the loop say central to this accord are four major issues:

1. Amnesty for UWSLF members
2. Repatriation of UWSLF army
3. The government to guarantee freedom of religion and religious activities
4. The government to allow UWSLF rank and file members to freely engage in the social life (business, education....etc)

A fifth unconfirmed point is the government to allow UWSLF to operate as a political party. However, developments that followed the truce/agreement indicate that the leadership of UWSLF may not want to organize themselves as a political party; time will tell. What is praiseworthy is the unity of the UWSLF leadership in taking such a decisive action, a unity others may need to learn from them.

Although UWSLF has so far declared that there is only a three months-long truce with the Ethiopian regime and that the negotiations are underway, the reality on the ground is that the entire leadership and the army of UWSLF are guests for the Ethiopian government. Thus, the notion that there is more to negotiate for is a mere politics at best. When the Prime Minister of Ethiopia, Meles Zenawi, addressed the journalists regarding the concluded elections in Ethiopia, he wrongly referred UWSLF as WSLF, and emphasized the point that UWSLF has tried extremism and realized that it has no place in Ethiopia, a statement that portrayed UWSLF simply as a group that has failed because of its ideology.

### **Why Ethiopia entered agreement with UWSLF?**

Any government would welcome the forfeit of its political opponents be armed or non-armed but Ethiopian government will harness more political capital than UWSLF may realize. The following are some of reasons:

- 1- Morale boost to the military- Although UWSLF was not a military threat at the moment, the neutralization of UWSLF counts as a military victory.
- 2- Intelligence- The government will tap into valuable intelligentsia UWSLF has been holding about the region and Somalia.
- 3- The threat of good example- The government will use UWSLF's move to lay down arms as the only option on the table for the remaining armed groups. In a post-election press conference, the Prime Minister of Ethiopia referred the UWSLF agreement, and a

potential similar agreement with a faction of the ONLF (Dr Dolal's wing), to indicate that armed struggle is bound to fail.

- 4- Image of peace loving government- The government will present itself as peace partner in the eyes of the international community as well as the local Somali population.
- 5- Propaganda against opposition forces- From Abdi Iley to Bereket Simon to Meles Zenawi, the Ethiopian government has used the UWSLF's agreement/truce as a tool to discredit armed opposition groups. The government media has also utilized the truce to propagate against ONLF, for example, Waltainfo.com, a government affiliated website, carried an article about the Ginbot 20 Celebrations in Jijiga to mark the 20 years EPRDF have been in power in Ethiopia. In that article, Sheik Ibrahim, the leader of UWSLF, was quoted: "Sheik Ibrahim on the occasion said that members of the front would work in closely along the government to ensure the all-round benefit of the residents. He further called upon anti-peace elements to lay down arms and operate peacefully".
- 6- Advantage of an early elimination- TPLF may have learned something from history!! In the early 1970s, the Derge regime used to refer the Tigray Liberation Front as small banditry group. But, that small banditry group grew into a powerful army that smashed the half a million army of Mengistu Haile Mariam. TPLF is not in a position to undermine UWSLF for it can grow into a powerful organization and its early elimination is to the government's advantage.



### **What does the peace agreement/truce mean for the Somali Region?**

Somali Region has been (and still is) marred by conflict between European and African powers who wanted to control this land and its inhabitants who resisted that control. Nearly a century lapsed since those conflicts began and there is no end in sight. Hence, peace has remained manna from heaven for the citizens of the Somali Region. In such context, it is everyone's guess that the people of the Somali Region are longing for a durable peace. Whether the agreement between the government and UWSLF will bring lasting peace to the Region is a different matter altogether.

Apart from daily pictures and video streams promoted by UWSLF affiliated websites about the UWSLF/government conferences and journeys, the only significant step that resulted from the truce/agreement so far is the release of some prisoners. On May 14, 2010, a government affiliated website,



[Cakaaranews.com](http://Cakaaranews.com), reported the release of 680 prisoners from the jails across the region. The information we gathered contradicts this figure and puts the exact number of the prisoners released at 170. Note: there are about 2000 prisoners in the infamous Jeel Ogaadeen alone.

The agreement has also revived the talk about peace among the people of the Somali Region. Some analysts also say it will be a litmus test for the Ethiopia's sincerity about peace.

Peace or no peace, UWSLF boys came home with their *Kalashnikovs* and *Keffiyehs*. What will happen next is not more than an educated guess but analysts project three scenarios:

- (1) UWSLF will register as a political party and will try to operate as an opposition. Those in the know say UWSLF has not propped itself for this option.
- (2) UWSLF will cease to exist as a political organization and members will determine their faith individually. Under such circumstances, some may choose to lead private life and may even become successful businessmen and others may join armed forces in the region- government militias, ONLF...etc.
- (3) UWSLF will officially disappear but will go underground to promote their political ideology. With this option, the government may not guarantee such freedom and that may generate a new conflict between the two sides.

## **Conclusion**

There is no doubt that the citizens of the Somali Region yearn for peace. The Karamarda Group strongly believes that a peace deal with Ethiopian government is the ultimate solution to the lengthy conflict. The Somali Region needs more than any time a well negotiated, transparent, meaningful peace deal for the age old conflict between successive Ethiopian regimes-including the current TPLF/EPDRF regime- and the inhabitants of the region. A meaningful and transparent peace agreement will have to bring about a visible shift in government policies across the social, legal, economical and political spectrum.

UWSLF, as a political organization, has every right to enter into peace talks with the Ethiopian government. It has the privilege and the power to negotiate repatriation and amnesty for its members and supporters. It is also within the logic for the UWSLF to choose the means of struggle its party should pursue. But it should be careful to create a false hope for the ordinary man and woman in Somali Region. UWSLF needs to flesh out the details of agreements it entered or will enter with the government. This transparency is crucial for three major reasons: Firstly, the public will have the chance to scrutinize how this agreement will affect the current policies of the government and their lives. Secondly, the public will have the chance to indirectly monitor whether parties have lived up to the agreements. In other words, the public will have the opportunity to participate in the process. Thirdly, and more importantly, this agreement and how it is enforced would help the public to understand whether the Ethiopian government is ready to

make any compromise and whether it is willing to respect the constitutionally guaranteed right of self governance for the citizens of Somali Region.

While we reserve our final judgment, our assessment thus far is that the government's side has not, at least so far, shown any willingness to change its misguided policies towards the Somali Region since the truce/peace agreement was reached. UWSLF should, therefore, be cautious to bed with the government as long as the rules of the game remain the same in the Somali Region. In the same vein, the public particularly the Diaspora needs to wait and see if the truce/peace agreement brings tangible dividends or not.

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