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Roots to the Somali Massacre: Challenging False Narrative

By Faisal Roble
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Awadey's September Massacre

Following the September 12, 2017 Awadey massacre, [the United States Embassy in Addis Ababa](#), Ethiopia, issued a press release that urged “the Ethiopian government to conduct a transparent investigation into all allegations of violence and to hold those responsible accountable.” It continued to say: “We are disturbed by the troubling reports of ethnic violence, although the details of what is occurring remain unclear.”

This essay will attempt to unmask what had happened in Awadey, a small Khat trading town in Oromia region where about 40 Somali civilians were killed. Sooner did the massacre took place than gory scenes of heads being severed, lymph mutilated while triumphant murders dancing over dead bodies appear; adding insult to injury, the criminals and mobs waived machetes and sickles - the murder tools – in the air and performed war dances over dead bodies lying in dirty allies.

The Somali victims were businessmen and women, including some who lived amongst the Oromos for decades. Those killed shared a common identity but had different geographic origins: they all were Somalis from Somali Region in Ethiopia (DDIS), Djibouti and the Federal Republic of Somalia.

The scene of Awadey did not look anywhere close to the scene often-described by Ethiopian nationalists (Andinet ideologues) who preached in debates that Ethiopians have been integrated for generations so much so that a massacre like this was unthinkable.

Alas, the scene of Awadey disproved that attestation, at least for now. If xenophobia left unchecked, Ethiopia can and may experience what had transpired in Rwanda and Burundi; given the defiance of the authorities of Oromia region, more of a similar massacre could be in store for Somali civilians.

Oromia authorities have neither apologized nor sent an official message of condolences either to the families of the victims or to the authorities of the Somali region. Instead, they quickly

embarked on a campaign of propaganda trying to advance false narratives and to whitewash what could be crimes against humanity.

Rather, they right away initiated smear campaign and a cover of the massacre. Speaking to VOA Afaan Oromo, Addisu Arega, the Oromia regional communication director, accused the Liyu (“special” in Amharic) police in the Somali region of crossing into the Oromia region and killing a number of people. He continued to say that people were captured during the fighting, and “based on that information, we have now realized, three entities are taking part on attacking our people: Somali region Liyu police, Somali region militias and a man holding a Somali republic regular Army Identification Card, whom we are investigating.”

It is simply an untenable justification for Oromia officials to argue that members of the Somali National Army, which, in all practical terms, is locked in an existential war with Al-Shabab, came to Awadey and fought against Oromo militias. The propaganda narrative Mr. Arega invoked now is similar to one used by OPDO in 1993, when a conflict broke out between Somalis and Oromos following a concerted attack Oromo groups waged against Somalis in the area between Jigjiga and Babile. At that time Oromia authorities falsely claimed that Colonel Ahmed Omar Jess was fighting inside Jigjiga.

Despite the callous stance of the OPDO and its apologists, Somalis handled their loss in a more compassionate and forgiving way. On September 15, three days after what Somalis are now calling the Awadey massacre, the autonomous Somali Regional Government (DDIS) peacefully mass-buried 20 of the over 40 victims. Over hundred thousand people, whose grim faces wore uncertainty and fear of the unknown that could happen tomorrow, came to collectively and peacefully mourn the dead.

In unequivocal terms, DDIS community, cognizant of its collective hurt, consciously denounced conflict and civil strife; it called for patience and forgiveness without malice to none. The regional president, flanked by religious leaders (member of both the Muslim and Christianity), elders and government officials called for calm and peaceful mourning. Unlike their OPDO interlocutors, the Somali authority decidedly relegated the painful experience of Awadey into the past and longed for better prospects.

Timeline of past Massacres

The Awadey massacre points to yet another complete failure of Oromo leadership since the 1960s. Here is a timeline of multiple massacres misguided Oromo masses carried against their neighbors and follow country folks.

In 1974, following the Dergi’s bloody coup in Addis Ababa the country was awash with several strains of socialist rhetoric. One common slogan was “land to the tiller.”

Although many peasants in the country peacefully welcomed the spirit of regaining their arable lands they had lost to feudalists under the emperor's rule, Oromo peasants felt more empowered with such rhetoric and went on rampage. Without an organized leadership, Oromo vigilante groups attacked civilians in Eastern Hararge. Just like in 2017, armed with machetes and sickles, mobs of Oromo peasants descended onto farms owned by urbanite Hararis or to the gated city of Harar to exact harm against Hararis.

Without any central government to speak of in Hararge at the time, Somalis to their credit came to the defense of their brethren Hararis; in awe, Hararis then coined the slogan that went this way: "we prefer an Amhara that we know than an unpredictable Oromo."

One of the first challenges that the Tigray Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF) confronted in Eastern Ethiopia in 1991 was managing the uncontrollable massacre of hundreds of Amharas in Eastern Oromia. Following the 1991 revolution, because of a temporary power vacuum or a weak central government, Oromos once again took their anger on Amhara settlers in Oromia areas. The Oromos mercilessly attacked civilian Amharas in Ajerso Gore, Hirna, Dadar, Harar, Diridhabe, and elsewhere.

Between 1991 and 1996, it used to be a regular evening news on Ethiopian National TV to see dead bodies of Amharas being recovered from gorges and distant villages. Some of the victims lived in these areas for over hundred years. As a result, unabated massacre in Oromo areas became a sore point between TPLF and OLF at the time.

Out of their good conscious, Somalis again defended Amharas and Tigers in the region, particularly those in Diri-Dhaba. Why? Because Somalis believed it was their Islamic duty to defend unarmed civilians who live amongst them. "Protection of your neighbor" is both an Islamic and a Christian value. In comparison, not a single Amhara or Tigre was hurt in the Somali region.

In 1993, the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) in collaboration with Oromo Peoples Democratic Organization (OPDO), a member of the EPRDF coalition, militarily attacked Jigjiga and placed claim on multiple Somali territories, including Chinacsani and Babili. The late Dr. Abdulmajid, who served Ethiopia's Minister for Foreign Cooperation and Permanent Representative at the United Nations, was hacked by members of EPRDF soldiers of Oromo extraction while he was conducting official visit in the vicinity of Jigjiga.

Remember Mr. Arega of OPDO telling VOA following the Awadey massacre that members of the Somalia army fought alongside the Liyu police in September, 2017? As much of a lie as this assertion is, the same was said by OLF and OPDO in 1993, only that time the character they blames on all the evil was Colonel Ahmed Omar Jess, who at the time was locked in a deadly conflict over the control of Kismayo, Jubbaland of Somalia.

The aftermath of the Awadey massacre of Somalis has caused massive displacement of both Somalis and Oromos from Oromo and Somali regions, respectively.

Also, a conflict Oromo militia initiated with Sidamas (SNNPR) resulted in the displacement of 2000 Sidams from Guji zone at about September 17, 2017. All reports thus far indicated the DDIS leadership has taken all possible measures to safeguard the welfare of Oromos in Somali regions.



The fact that Oromos have attacked repeatedly their neighbors since 1974 cannot be wished away. History has recorded and may do so in the future that criminal act of massacring civilians for phantom nationalistic agenda by Oromia elites against Amharas, Somalis, Sidams, Hararis, Afars, and other must come to an end.

One can only surmise that because of bad leadership, Oromo nationalism is mutating and possibly morphing into a xenophobic claim of territories, thus susceptible to anarchic outbursts that may cause harm to innocent civilian within their reach.

The Politics of Map-making

Following the fall of the Dergi regime, under the TPLF leadership, Ethiopia reorganized and consolidated its administrative zones into 9 Ethnic maps including Amhara, Tigry, Somali, Oromo, Afar, Sidama and other (see Faisal Roble, Ethiopian Review; June, 1992.) Initially



referred to as the charter map of the transitional government of Ethiopia, the remapping of Ethiopia was based on colonial and national records, thus consolidating all Somali ethnic people

Out of this ethnic based regionalism, donor countries and the United States of America in particular expected that a new federal government of Ethiopia would emerge to fully move away from the long history of ethnic conflicts and wars that stunted any type of progress in the region.

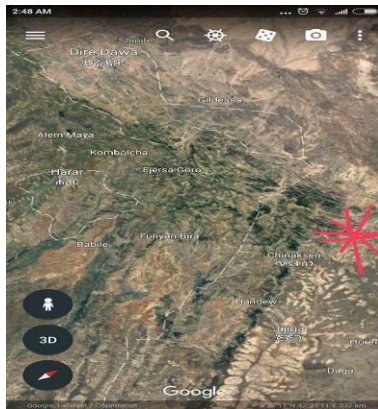
The Charter-based 1991 map to which Somali leaders signed as part of the new Ethiopia

Since that map was adopted, Amharas and Tigres have by far shown a degree of satisfaction with the territories designated for them. Somalis also were to a degree satisfied although a large swath of Somali territories were given to the Oromo side.

Oromos, on the contrary, were never satisfied, and eventually placed territorial claim against many nationalities, but particularly against Somalis. Their complaints included the loss of Finfine (Addis Ababa) to the federal government, plus several agriculturally rich districts in Gojam and Shoa. They also right away placed claim against large swaths of Somali region.

With Oromo nationalism on the surge, EPRDF leaders made all possible efforts to satisfy the Oromo Peoples Democratic Organization (OPDO), a junior member of the EPRDF coalition.

EPRDF leaders also believe that significant concessions to OPDO is the only way to undermine the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) insurgency, while strengthening the position of its junior partner, OPDO. That strategy is being implemented at the expense of Somalis by “robbing Paul to pay Peter.” Somalis have unfortunately become that convenient Paul; by 2010, Addis was determined to satisfy Oromos at the expense of divided Somalis.



To that objective, a small clan that has settled in the Somali region about 70 years ago called Jarso, that now live in pockets within the Somali region was mobilized by a joint hand of EPRDF and OPDO leaders. By October 2004, a sham plebiscite was conducted to “determine” the status of more Somali districts. The Somalis on the onset bitterly disputed the way the election was conducted and launched an official dispute. Among the grounds of dispute were: Oromos, who are members of the coalition of EPRDF, had their soldiers intimidate Somali voters at the polls, plus a threat given to the elders of the region by EPRDF leaders stationed in Harar. Also, Oromo/EPRDF representatives rigged and stole votes.

*Fire is ablaze 25 KM from Jijjiga
and Somalis at the mercy of Oromia*

By the closing month of 2004, Somalis were robbed off, and 80% of the contested districts and a good portion of their land that was binary between them and the framers of the 1991 Charter-based map was unfairly ceded to Oromia. Many Somali stronghold communities in Ma’esso, Afdheer, Libaan, Babali, and Chinacsani were erroneously re-designated as Oromo territories.

The robbing of Somalis effectively brought Oromo boundary close to Jijjiga. And even that did not satisfy Oromos! Today, Oromia is dead serious to take over Tuli Guuleed, Haadow, Baabili, Bambaas and most of Faafan. What would Somalis do but fight to the bitter end is the million dollar question many are asking? Moreover, what binds Somalis to the federal constitution if their map has been slowly gutted since they signed the Charter of unity in 1991?

Concluding Remarks

Oromo conflict with those who live among them or with their neighbors reflect historical, economical and territorial grudges that they have, most often having no merit. Killing civilians can never be justified based on past or present history. Moreover, the contradictions Oromos claim to have with their neighbors are not unique.

On the contrary, universal conflicts between brotherly neighboring nationalities are common and need be addressed through enlightened public policies. What is unique to Oromos, however, is the failure of their leadership to manage the anger and historical grievances of their masses, whether or not those grievances have merit.

In the cases of Amhara and Somali massacre, the Oromo leadership in both instances were well aware of the clouds of conflict gathering and implicitly supported them. They miss-agitated their peasants on a dangerous course of xenophobic identity politics, the result of which is the September, 2017 Awadey massacre.

Whereas the leadership in the Somali region decidedly called for calm and peaceful grieving, the Oromo leadership chose combative politics, and has been busy in either fanning the conflict or denying the massacre.

Of course, the massacre of “Black” September in Aweday has been politicized by many groups, most of all by Oromia regional government. Moreover, Ogaden National Liberation (ONLF), who is allied with Ginbot-7, an anti-federal conglomeration of centrists, and OLF, has yet to issue a condolence note to the families of the victims.

The ONLF-Ginbot-7-OLF axis of unholy alliance and their sympathizers sinisterly blamed the Liyu police on the entire matter. But, when you talk to the Somalis in the conflict area, they are longing for some sort of protection, be it Liyu police or even an honest peace broker from the federal government. Thus far, the federal government has not provided adequate protection to the Somalis.

The position assumed by the axis of unholy alliance of ONLF-Ginbot-7, and OLF on the Oromo-Somali conflict is nothing more than a quack analysis of the current condition that does not line up with the history of the Empire-come-federal state vis-à-vis the Oromo question since the early 1970s. This alliance got the Awadey massacre wrong! Awadey massacre is part of a dangerously and emergent Oromo nationalism that refuses to sit well with its neighbors.

If any investigation is to be carried out, such effort must unpack Mr. Arega’s propaganda-laden interview with VOA, and/or similar false narratives organized by Oromia.

A global message must be sent to all sides that human life must not be wasted because of perceived past or present grievances against Ethiopia's regimes which after all have been unkind to Somalis than they have been to any other nationality in the empire.

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