



The Last Days of Jigjiga's big Man: Personal Impressions

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Meeting face-to-face with the Devil

What has transpired in the Somali Regional State (DDS) between July 14 and August 4, 2018, will heavily weigh on the history of this region and its people. Within a short period of time, we have seen a sea change and a humiliating removal of Abdi Muhumed Omar from power. Responding to this development, Human Rights Watch issued the following statement:

“Hopefully, [today's arrest of Abdi Illey](#) is a start to justice for victims of serious crimes in Ethiopia's Somali region. Other officials who directed and supported abuses, including crimes against humanity and war crimes, should also be held to account. The federal authorities should ensure that prosecutions are transparent, rigorous and fair and that victims and witnesses can testify without fear of reprisals.”



In this essay, I will briefly recap my meeting with former President Abdi Muhumed Omar, his mood at the time and the consequential misstep he took on August 4, that

criminalized him, hence put him in the hands of Ethiopia's justice system. On August 26, the government listed about three criminal cases against, including carrying illegal arms and enticing violence between ethnic groups.

On July 14, 2018, I was in the lobby of my hotel, the newly opened Ramada Hotel in Addis Ababa; it sits only few feet away from the busy Bole Road. One of the reasons why I chose this particular location was for security reasons, and to make sure that in the event some unforeseen circumstances take place, I could easily reach the airport in no more than five minutes.

Throughout the months of June and July, the entire country was ablaze with fire, and so did the US embassy in Ethiopia warn its citizens to exercise caution in traveling to most parts of Ethiopia.

With that warning in mind, I decided to observe maximum [personal] caution and forfeited my travel to Jigjiga and spent my vacation in Nairobi. I was only in Addis in the middle of July to transit on my back to Los Angeles. In a way, this was a hurtful experience that my American born boys could not freely visit the region where their Dad hails from (a subject for another time).

In a rainy afternoon of that fateful day of July 14, Jamal Warfa spotted and joined me for a coffee at the hotel's lobby. Jamal is an energetic young man of 45ish and a member of the national human rights commission for Ethiopia. He occupies the seat allocated for the Somali region. I too recognized him from his Facebook postings as the man who was arrested and tortured by the Somali Regional Government.

I was impressed by how busy he is and the multiple engagements he executes each day.

Jamal and I talked about the crisis in the region and the traumas former President Abdi Mohamed caused his people. After a 30-minute long conversation, Jamal suggested if I would mind meeting with Abdi Mohamed Omar; "he is in Addis Ababa," he said with a huge smile. Before I answered "yes" or "no," he showed me his telephone number on his cell phone screen and said, "See, I logged him as Iley." Iley (the one-eyed man) is a nickname for Abdi Muhumed Omar.

Does he know that is how you refer to him, I inquired?

"Not at all," this is only for my reference.

I gave Jamal's offer a hard thought before I took it up! Right away many things ran through my analysis of the positives and negatives associated with sitting with one of the most notorious torturers thus far known by Somalis. His actions have impacted many families in the region, including my own; for no reason, he expropriated my family's properties and threatened to burn the house of my brother in the middle of the night for no reason other than for my some past articles I posted on Facebook. The immediate trigger of his rage against me was when I posted about 500 civilians inside Somalia that Liyu police killed.

Thanks to a member of reer-Ugas Mahamoud's family, who is related to us by marriage and through our grandmother, my brother was saved. The man who threatened my family somehow survived the recent purge of some members out of the regional parliament.

With that past memory fresh in my mind, I decided to accept Jamal's offer for three reasons. As a political commentator, I wanted to take advantage of meeting with a figure whose story will stay with us for many years to come; 2) the night before, I had a substantive discussion with an old friend of mine who knew Abiy's team well and opined that Abdi Muhumed's days were numbered; and 3) I convinced myself his powers to hurt me were limited in Addis Ababa.

I exercised a journalist judgment and took risks to agree to meet. When Jamal called and told him that he wants to visit and he was with me, I could hear in Jamal's voice a back-and-forth conversation between the two.

Jamal was also in return saying “waa nin aqoonyahan ah,” meaning Faisal is “an intellectual” and worth the meeting. I suspect he did not want to do it initially because for a call over the BBC radio that I called for his resignation (July 10, 2018) was still fresh in his mind.

After a brief but intense conversation, he agreed to receive us. We took a taxi to the address he gave to Jamal. The hotel we arrived at was a decrepit and low-priced hotel with a bar and a low-grade restaurant in the lobby. Ethiopian ladies were serving the hotel and the bar in multiple capacities.

The environment scared me and I painted several scenarios in mind as to why such a powerful man as Abdi Muhumed will stay here. I bombarded inquiries to Jamal. Jamal himself was somewhat surprised but comforted me that this place could be a decoy and a pickup point to our destination. I wondered whether he paid the hotel to use it as decoy. Nonetheless, they know the former President well; they even knew him by his nickname “Iley.”

After a long 15 minutes of waiting, a forty-something young Somali, partly drenched with rain, entered the hotel and with haste said: “where is Jamal?” We both reported to him. To my surprise, the young man asked of me:

“Who is this man?”

“This is none of your business, just take us to the man!” Jamal authoritatively responded. “You know me you I am?” Jamal followed scornfully. The tone of exchange was unfamiliar to my ears that which is adapted to the usually softer and cordial Western manners.



With the minimal verbal exchange, we were collected into a fancy black car (Mercedes, I believe). There was an armed man sitting in the front. Both the guard and the driver were chewing, and the guard man had a gun sitting on his lap with his right hand all the time on the gun of what appeared to be AK-47. He was very somber, serious, and, to say the least, scary or scared. He did not say much except disgustingly munching. The driver, on the other hand, was rather more human and a bit more talkative.

Only about two minutes deriving on Bole Road, we detoured to a pitch-dark, spooky unpaved road. We traveled slowly and at times took alleys. The rain picked up the pace. Thick drops of tropical rain started hammering the roof of the car. If not as spooky as any one of Alfred Hitchcock’s scenes, it was scary enough to have prompted to quickly silently recite “suratul Yaasiin,” (Quran verses).

I was reminded of an article Dan Connell, a former journalist and currently, a humanitarian worker wrote for the Horn of Africa Journal in 1978, which I read while attending Laffole College in Mogadishu at the time. In the seminal piece, Dan, whom I last met in Atlanta in 2012ish on peace conference, walked us through dark alleys and hidden neighborhoods as part of his survey of Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party's urban hideouts. I was in a state of mind of a throwback to yesteryears.

I kept thinking what if something happens to me? What would happen to my two boys in the hotel? The last words of my young son before I said to them that I will be back soon haunted me: "why don't you, Dad, give it up and stop always talking about this Jigjiga business that we can't even visit! That really hurt!

What type of society do I belong to that I can't even visit was the unavoidable reality at hand?

Then I convinced myself to expunge the devil out of my thoughts (I repeated three times *Acuudu bilaahi mins shaydaanu rajiim- iska naaray*) and started thinking positively.

After what seemed to be long 20 minutes of grueling derive, we finally reached our destination. It was a huge house with a metal gate guarded by two armed young men; they were in their Liyu police fatigue; they opened the gate on the order of our escort who was armed.

The car proceeded. Right in front of us was sitting a one-story building. Despite the rain, doors were open. The unit is cozy and fancier than a watchman's quarters but not fancy enough to house a family.

About five well-armed young restless men formed the last layer of this fortress-like house that is located in one of Addis Ababa's unrecognizable neighborhoods located in hidden hills. All of them were chewing so that they would stay alert to protect the big man.

Among them stood a thin and tall man, who interrogated us. Jamal again talked to him without any fear. They started to frisk us and collect mobile phones. Jamal refused both requests. But I gave-in for they said they did not know me. On my part, I did not resist the frisk so that I don't put myself in harm's way more than what I had already been.

Lonely last days

We entered a multi-room mansion-looking huge but partly empty house. We finally saw Abdi Muhumed Omar by himself in this huge room. With a high ceiling, the room in which he was sitting looked bigger than its actual footprint. Facing him was a sofa and the room was decorated with wall-to-wall Arabic sitting sets. He was occupying a corner that was directly facing the main door to the house.

At first sight, he looked as if was he relaxing? He was chewing Qat, something I did not miss to note for I read somewhere some years ago that he banned from his ministers to do so. Beyond the feasible euphoric feelings, I will slowly learn that he was lonely, unsure of his future, and was in a state of gasping his last air of a powerful man. He was not sure where and when his train will crash. But the crashing was imminent.

The following three hours, Jamal and I managed to get deeper and deeper into his state of mind; I was particularly able to extract valuable information without him knowing about it. I took mental note by clinging to keywords so that I will never forget the main points of his state.

I personally got an intimate knowledge of who Abdi Muhumed Omar is. In a separate piece, “The Profile of a big man and Past Nightmares in Jigjiga.” I will remunerate his cruelty compared to past rulers of Jigjiga (the 1960s a man called Faras cade, or the man with the white horse and the 1970s, a notorious police commander called Iska xidhe or he who enjoys arresting).

When Jamal introduced me to the former President, he said, “Yes I know his family and his brother, the Sultan.” But he never mentioned what he had done to my family and the life threat he gave to my brother. He also avoided to look at me in the face – the same thing he did, no eye contact, in 2015 when he accidentally sopped by President Gaas of Puntland at Addis Hilton), with whom I was having a brief personal talk. He also avoided then to give me any eye contact.

Once I walked into his house, I desperately wanted to ask him why he did what he did to my family. Even if I did, I did not see any possible admission of guilt coming from him. Besides, I was not sure what he could do in the event that I crossed the line.

Throughout our conversation, he often avoided to look either at me or at Jamal. Constantly on the phone talking to generals and security officials, he avoided to look at me in the eyes. Most of the conversation he carried over the phone focused on asking general to help him “pacify Sitti region, and begging them to stop the armed invasions coming from Jinacsani against Somalis in Tuliguuleed.

I understood that he was looking for someone in the army to help him things come back to normalcy. One thing I got out his telephone conversations was that official business was conducted in an informal way with no paper trail.

Knowing that he disarmed the Somalis in Tuliguuleed or even failed to defend them from constant attacks by Oromo, I asked him why he did so. I asked him: “Mr. President, if you can’t protect the dying civilians in Tuliguuleed, why disarm them? I could see that he was so embarrassed. But he wanted to not show it off.

Nonchalantly and with no discernable emotions, he simply said: “I will stop the war soon.” He got up, tightened up his falling pants and went straight to the door that was wide open. I was not sure why he got up or what would he do next. But for a moment, I was scared.

Upon his return to the room, though, a big of sigh came from me; he picked up his phone and called more army or security officials. He did not talk to one single Somalis through the period I was there. I kept wondering why he was not contacting his ministers or parliamentarians. He behaved as if he did not need to hear from them. He was doing everything with non-Somali officials. And, to me that was a clear sign of a comprador, lackey and stooge installed in power not by his people but by outsiders.

One exception to the rule: he called Ahmed Shide who was at the Awasa dinner with PM Abiy and President Issais. Jamal and I could literally see Mr. Shide picking up the phone. Mr. Abdi would boastfully point to us and show us when Mr. Shide picks up the phone sitting right behind Abiy and Isaias. He called him about three times in a period of 30 minutes. We witnessed all those calls because the ceremony was aired on live TV.

I am not sure if it was me or Jamal, but we asked him why he was not at this huge ceremonial dinner. He told us that he did not want to go. But I, later on, learned that President Isaias Afework did not want his presence.

He talked about his relationship with PM Abiy and painted it as “excellent!” When he said that, he did not stop the conversation there. He continued to share this unbelievable comment – that Abiy asked him to leave the presidency of the region and take any federal position except the foreign minister. He continued to say that he was offered the “defense portfolio.”

With my twenty-five years’ experience of supervising employees (both good and problematic ones), I started to suspect the authenticity of his claim. I pushed more buttons and bluffed him how it would have been a great achievement for the Somalis to have him as Ethiopia’s Defense Minister. At this point, I was praying that he does not assume I was leading him for that would have been deadly. But the guy is accustomed to people always telling him only what pleases him, he did not suspect of the intent of my inquisitive interrogation.

Our conversation pivoted and both Jamal and I dared to ask him substantive questions. By now he authorized the guard to give me back my mobile telephone, which was dead by now. He entertained us with Jail Ogadeen stories and the release of prisoners. Jamal asked him why he did not visit the jail. To answer this, he put on a human face and said he did not want to go there unless he was ready to release some of his close friends. He mentions one Abdullahi Ethiopia, to whom he repeatedly referred as a friend who betrayed him. He also mentioned in brief his atoning moment that “he never understood the purpose of those friends who videotaped him without his knowledge.” At that point, I consciously called to his attention that my cell phone was dead. Jamal also pushed his phone away and placed it a blind sight.

To his credit, Jamal pushed him to release more, especially those in semi-slave labor comps. He promised he would do that pending getting a green light from the feds. On my part, I was sadly brooded and agonized at the fact that my people are in slave condition in 2018. I felt hurt and powerless in the scheme of things.

As the night progressed and the rainfall tapered, we moved to a more substantive discussion on power transition. We put to him the idea of giving it up before it is too late and before things in the region get out of hand. I was privy of a growing impatience in Addis about his stay, especially since the gory report on human rights abuse was released. Addis Ababa was looking for a way to remove him from public and international attention. At this juncture, he was no use but a source of significant embarrassment to Addis. He was also a huge commodity for propaganda purposes since Ethiopian nationalism and unity always feeds off of Somalis, the problem child of Ethiopia, as in Masfene Wolde Mariam’s argumentation of “Somalia, the Problem Child of Africa.”

Surprisingly and pleasantly, Abdi Mohamed agreed with our suggestion to transfer power: He said he was ready to give up but in an orderly manner! We threw in names and groups. He said no to all, but to ONLF. That is when I said to him, “but the ONLF-EPRDF talks will take a long time, and they may not even be in a position now take the power of a region that they don't have a single bureaucrat.”

With his answer, it was clear that he was a canning and calculating dictator who wanted to extend his reign. He very well knew that if he says that the only group that can replace him is ONLF, he will buy time. I never understood why he would prefer ONLF over those opposition individuals who were in Addis Ababa at the time some of whom, if not the majority, were his former employees.

I am not sure if I verbalized to him that he will have the same fate as other known leaders who fall out of grace, but I believe I told him that if anarchy reigns, things would be less pretty in Jigjiga. As soon as we left him the bodyguards brought us back to my hotel, Jamel and I came to the conclusion that the same fate that befell Saddam Hussein of Iraq and Gadhafi of Libya was awaiting him.

Timeline of the Demise of “Aabo” Abdi Muhumed Omar

Jamel and I departed the company at about 9 PM local time. After one hour, I called back Jamel and shared with him that given the inside read I have about Abdi Mohamed Omar and his numbered days, I will develop a proposal with [I published the proposal on Wardheernews](#) three scenarios in which peaceful power transfer can take place.

On July 19, I released and shared a draft proposal with prominent people, including ONLF leaders, folks inside the region, and friends of the federal government who assured me to have delivered it to the right audience. Soon after,.

Former President Abdi returned back to Jigjiga on the 20th. Between 21st of July and 1st of August, he worked ceaselessly on an adventurist plan to wreck the region a havoc. He conducted many meetings, often at night, with his cabinet members and members of the party's executive team (9 hand-picked men and women).

On August 2, someone (anxious citizen) who said he is one of the civic leaders in Jigjiga contacted me and communicated with me. He burdened me with sensitive information that I was not ready to deal with. This is how the exchange went (short version of a longer exchange):

Anxious citizen: Faisal, I am a man from the eastern regions of DDS and I know you through your writings and speeches. It is very possible that the region (DDS) will declare and announce an unprecedented move. There will be a declaration of secession. Please keep an eye on it.

Faisal: This is a very serious and dangerous business. Did you guys, or the President and his people assess the danger that comes with this move?

Anxious citizen: That is what is worrying all of us here in Jigjiga. This man is hasty and an adventurist by nature (ninkan odeyga ahi waa iska degdegaa, dadka la shaqeeyaana ma wax uma sheegi karaan (challenge garayn karaan) – Somali version).

Faisal: I don't believe he can do it because there is a constitutional process. If he does that, they will come and get him, arrest him and they will bring someone Addis Ababa has faith in. I assure you they will bring one of the guys meeting who are right now in Addis Ababa. He is playing with fire.

I sensed from his writings, the anxious citizen was distraught and heartbroken. He came across as someone who was afraid for his life, his family, and his community.

Anxious citizen: Walaahi that is my understanding. I agree with you. There are strict procedures before you do this type of declaration. This guy is a buffoon and paranoid. I have been assured just now while I was communicating with you that tomorrow could be a D-day. But I believe this would lead to his fall and death.”

Reading his anguish, I gave this poor citizen what I thought could save my city, my region and my family from the impending disaster. I recommended to him to expose and preempt his adventurist action through a parliamentary procedure. If you don't do that, I told him, his action would give outsiders a perfect alibi to invade the region with federal forces and arrest him. (Waa in laga hortagaa (Somali version).

Anxious citizen: please let us wait till tomorrow; let us hope against hope that he will change his mind. Nobody except his inner circle know about this.

I chuckled at suggestion that nobody knows about it. At this point I was frank enough to tell him this: by my estimation and based on my knowledge of the Somali culture (they lack discipline, principles, and how governments work) Addis probably has by now full information about his juvenile plan. (Waxaan u qoray “Daawladu waa wada indho” – meaning the government spies are everywhere, I told him). I also told him that perhaps some of his closest friends have by now snitched.

Who could it be that survived the notorious purge carried out by the autocratic ruling party of the region? Could it be some of his relatives in the party who have survived but were notorious for the last 8 years? History will tell.

Anxious citizen: Faisal, he had already alerted his reports and key personnel all to be standby.

Faisal: Please don't die with this fool. He is not normal and he will take all of the regions down. There must be something you guys can do.

Anxious citizen. Brother, we will not die. Somalis just need an alternative. No one likes or trusts this guy. He had victimized the entire society.

The rest of the communication is long and I will keep in my archives. But, my final recommendation was to call a press conference first thing in the morning, and let the parliamentarians demand an emergency meeting on the matter and restrain this adventurist guy. In that case, the feds will not move in. I pleaded with the guy to do something for the greater good.

Anxious citizen: I will keep you updated; I am convinced Ilay's body will be dragged and paraded like they did to that of Gadafi.

With that I departed company with the anxious citizen. On August 4, 2018, the federal troops armed with tanks and many helicopters including Apache helicopters descended onto the city and effectively put him under arrest. So came the end of era of Abdi Muhumed Omar characterized by trauma, trepidation and unprecedented human rights abuses. It needs to be remembered that the federal government of Ethiopia has been a major accomplice in whatever Abdi Muhumed Omar did, and that needs to be addressed soon or later. The blood one of the most oppressed societies in the world not be forgotten.

It pains me to read the entire text of this historic exchange between myself and an anxious Somali citizen – a depiction of the helplessness of my people. For days, I avoided reading it because of the depressive nature of its content. Once I realized that Abdi Muhumed Omar had ungraciously fallen into the hand of Ethiopia's poor justice system (injustice, if you will), I managed to pull myself together and decided to share this agonizing story about the fall of the small autocrat some called "Abo" or godfather.

With that we face both prospects and uncertain future in an era where Oromo hegemonies and OPDO triumphalist attitude is causing the death of thousands of innocent Somalis in the face of divided society.

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