

CHRONICLE OF THE AFAR ISSA-SOMALI CONFLICT IN ETHIOPIA:

*How the Issa-Somalis Pressurized the Afar from the Proximity of the Djibouti-Addis Ababa
Railway line Areas into the Awash Valley through Systematic Raids*

The Truth about the Afar Issa-Somali Conflict

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Contents

1. Introduction.....3
3. The Land and the People.....8
4. The Resumption of Emperor Haile Selassie and After12
5. The Conflict under the Rule of the Derg17
8. The Previous Attempt and Failures.....26
9. The Political Will to Resolve the Conflict28
10. The Recommendations to the conflict of Issa-Somali and Afar30
16. Concluding Remarks31

1. Introduction

I happened to write this article because I noticed that there appears to be a limited understanding concerning the historical development of the conflict between the Afar and the Issa-Somali, which has been very much confusing. The Somalis extremist element mostly consciously distorted the reality to cover up its territorial ambition in the Horn of Africa. This has been done by large to justify and promote the Somali desire since in the beginning of their independence of Somalia in the 1960s.

After the independence of Djibouti takeover the Issa-dominated government, the old territorial ambition of Somalia by its policy. This issue remains haunting and threatening the Horn of Africa for decades that followed¹. My acquaintance with the people and the experience in this region helped me to rely on my past observation and affiliation, which may contribute to disclosing the reality and narrowing the gap with necessary information on the development.

The article starts with a background assessment of the impact of colonial intervention in the Horn of Africa, together with the intervention is described, the Afar settlement, within the context of the states with a sphere of influence and limited boundaries that became known as Eritrea, Djibouti, and Somalia. This was followed by descriptions of the Issa tribal structures and the Afar. During the Second World War, the Fascist Italy occupied Ethiopia, which had a significant impact not only on the relation of Somali's new state but also between the people of the whole inhabited region.

After Somalia's independence, the colonial ambition of "Greater Somalia" was taken over by its national government and spread into the Horn, threatening the states in the region. This hostile relation remained and continued to impact the Somalian and Ethiopian governments' relationship at large. After the collapse of Somalia, the territorial ambition of the Somalis was replaced by clan parochial ambitions of the Issa-centered vision of Djibouti. The repetitive intervention and the defeat on the Ogaden 1977/78 changed their strategies through cover-up as nomadic clashes into Ethiopia. The collapse of Somalia and Ethiopia in the 1990s brought a new change of government by the Woyane [the name is used interchangeably with Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF)] only to accentuate the conflict that appeared to be mismanaged by the ruling elite. Out of this critical situation emerged a new policy of reform led by Abiy Ahmed, who advocated democratic changes in the country. Even though this reform

¹*The conflict related to Djibouti will be discussed in another article later on.*

government seems tries to come up with a viable solution,the Somalis became aggressive by coordinating its forces and formally launching its claim, as we shall see below.n.

The Local Map:



2. The Historical Background

The historical and political background at the arrival of European colonialism reflected the people of Horn partitioned and became subject to the external sphere of influences. This was met by expanding the rule of colonialism which defined its boundaries.

The Colonial Intervention in the Horn of Africa

During the scramble for Africa at the end of 1880s, the continent was shared among strong European powers, which implemented what became known as the rule of colonization. The colonial intervention changed the whole political landscape of the area. Italy occupied and created a new country known as Eritrea and the Italians divided the Somalis into British Somaliland and the Italians Somaliland . On the other hand, France began its colony that included mainly the Afar areas by having a small group of the Issa to help them with their divide and rule policy. France was adamant about getting hold of the Gulf of Tadjourah and its surroundings and gradually getting its protectorate² of the city of Obock, with Rahayta Dardar's agreement. The deal meant that France got a foothold in the Red Sea with a protection treaty from the Afar side.

The protection desire stemmed from the earlier defeat of the Turk-Egypt battle at Gamare (Awsa) on November 7 the year 1875, by the Awsa Sultanate of Illalta, where the Afar feared revenge action from the Red Sea by Turks.³ However, the protection treaty was to meet new challenges that might come from external forces, particularly from the Red Sea. Thus, France met a serious obstacle to introducing its policy intended to levy taxes from the local population, rather extend its sphere of influence and fix borders into the West.⁴

Against this background, France sent its consul from Aden (Yemen) to Tadjourah to assess the ground for further expansion of influence, but those sent were assassinated at the Gulf of Tadjourah. Despite this, France continued its expansion efforts into the Southwest of the Territory to Gobaad, where it met stronger resistance against its colonial expansion. The administrator of this expansion Bernard was killed in action at Morahtu (located in the Gobaad). In fact, France seemed not to know the reality of the area before their intervention. Still, it found out its policy of "divide and rule" would find new ground in this context and brought the Issa

² *A State that is controlled and protected by another.*

³ *Turkey was one of the regional powers of the time.*

⁴ *The boundaries dispute between Eritrea and Djibouti continued up to this day*

into the territory.⁵ Hence, the French carried out policy measures to undermine the Afar majority of the territory in favor of the Somali immigrants and at independence it handed over the governorship solely to the Issa minority. It oversaw Issa's affiliation with Somalis that gradually brought about the influence of "Greater Somalia" inside Djibouti. Against this background and the Afar's growing resistance, the territory was wrongly named after French Somaliland again changed later to the Afar Issa coast to further its divisive policy. On the other hand, those who inhabited Zeila and beyond, were to look for better opportunities in Djibouti's new ports, which became an attractive and modernized workplace to travel to.

During the Expansion of Emperor Menelik

At the arrival of European colonial powers into the Horn of Africa, Emperor Menelik was in the process of expanding and defining its sphere of influence against external powers. During this time, both the Afar and the Somalis were squeezed between the expanding emperor Menelik and the European interventions, hence hardly challenging the looming aggressions from intervening powers. Those Afars who inhabited the Red Sea coast had no chance to meet aggression from the Red Seaside, but those inside the country had to face the local power of Menelik to subdue those who already were divided by colonial intervention. Thus, the definition of territorial boundaries and security agreement was done by the emperor's consent, not with traditional local authorities who disapproved of the intervention initially. Menelik exploited external intervention for its own advantage to make sure its powerful influence in the region grew. Parallely, when it comes to domestic affairs, it has consolidated its power both politically and administratively.

After the death of Menelik, his grandson Lij Iyyasu was identified as heir who had less chance to go ahead with its leadership and was gradually replaced by Empress Zawditu and Ras Tafari Mekonnen became a regent who later on prompted as a new emperor with a title of Haile Selassie.

⁵*It named the area as French Somaliland though its inhabitants were primarily the Afar population and that the Issas were insignificant. I was unable to find out that the Issa influence in the area prior to colonial support in Djibouti when it became a factor to reckon with*

3. The Land and the People

At the arrival of colonial powers in the area, the present Zeila and surrounding villages were inhabited solely by the Afars but gradually it was replaced by the Issa who then lived beyond Borama.

The Afar Settlement at Zeila⁶ and Surroundings

At the arrival of European colonialists, only the Afar People inhabited the Southeastern areas following the African side of the Red Sea up to Zeila and surrounding. The village of Zeila and the surroundings together with the city of Tadjourah (Is one of the oldest towns in Djibouti and has been the headquarter of the sultan) was known for trade exchange to/from the Red Sea to the highland of Ethiopia. Due to its attraction to commerce connivance, the area hosted massive caravan trade controlled by influential Afar traditional leaders who channeled both trade and guaranteed the security of the passage. Two of such personalities were the Tadjourah Dardar (Sultan) Abubakar Basha and his son Mohamed Abubakar. Thus, his son became known as head chief (Nagaderas) of the area. The Dardar of Tadjourah was one of such influential leaders at the time.

Other known Afar figures were from the area of Gobaad situated in the southwestern part of Djibouti. Chief Kadda Loiyta saw to it that the railway from Djibouti to Addis Ababa was constructed and its security was taken care of.⁷ At that time, there was no indication that the Issa-Somali had any significance⁸ on the area's development. The Issa was a minor group of Somalia who inhabited far beyond the city of Borama⁹ (which is the capital and the largest city of northwestern Somaliland) by then. Their presence into Djibouti and the present Shinela zone merely noticed as the outcome of the colonialists, which saw to it that the Afar homogeneity and influences¹⁰ are limited, through the introduction of another ethnic group like the Issa-Somalis.

⁶ *The name means fine Sea sand in the Afar language. During that time, it was a crucial commercial port. Zeila declined as the ports of Djibouti and Berbera came into being, and today it is located in northern Somalia*

⁷ *Since this time, the Afar had security aspects of the railway up to Awash*

⁸ *The Issa which resided beyond Boram was gradually included in British colonial protectorate treaty.*

⁹ *The name means a tip side of a mountain in Afar language*

¹⁰ *Remember all Afar chiefdoms of Awasa, Tadjourah, Biru, Rahayta and Gobaad were divided into different spheres of influences*

The People

The area from Zeila, Djibouti up to Awash around the railway was under the jurisdiction and grazing area of the Tadjourah and Gobaad sphere of influence. This included the area that is now occupied by the Issas as Shinile zone and Erer (A town along the railway to the west of Dire Dawa) areas as well.

The Afar of Debne and Weima Tribes

The major tribal group that inhabited the areas mentioned above was the Debne and Weima until they were pushed into their brother tribes along the Awash Valley. This made it possible since they joined other tribal groups and became equally affected by the conflict in return. The Djibouti Afar pastoralists' movement was disconnected, as the territory became a state defined as a colonial entity. This meant the pastoralists from Tadjourah and Gobaad were¹¹ cut off due to the state boundaries limiting the movement. However, the freedom crossing the border did not affect the Issa-Somalis backed by colonialists¹².

The Issa-Somali Intrusion

As mentioned above, the Issa-Somali settlement and its influence came about together with the colonialists' intrusion. They expanded after the independence of Somalia by extremist nationalists who saw the whole Horn of Africa envisioned to be ruled by the Somali super government. In addition to that, they introduced their territorial claim that continues to this day under various forms.

In Ethiopia, the Issa-Somali intrusion came about initially by the British colonial government that arranged a temporary agreement for grazing permission into Ethiopia. This made the Issa-Somali pastoralists able to move the Issa Somali into their current area by the emperor Haile Selassie. After the return of the emperor from Europe in the post War development, their issues in Ethiopia were taken care of by the British colian embassy inside Ethiopia. However, nobody consulted the local traditional rulers by then.

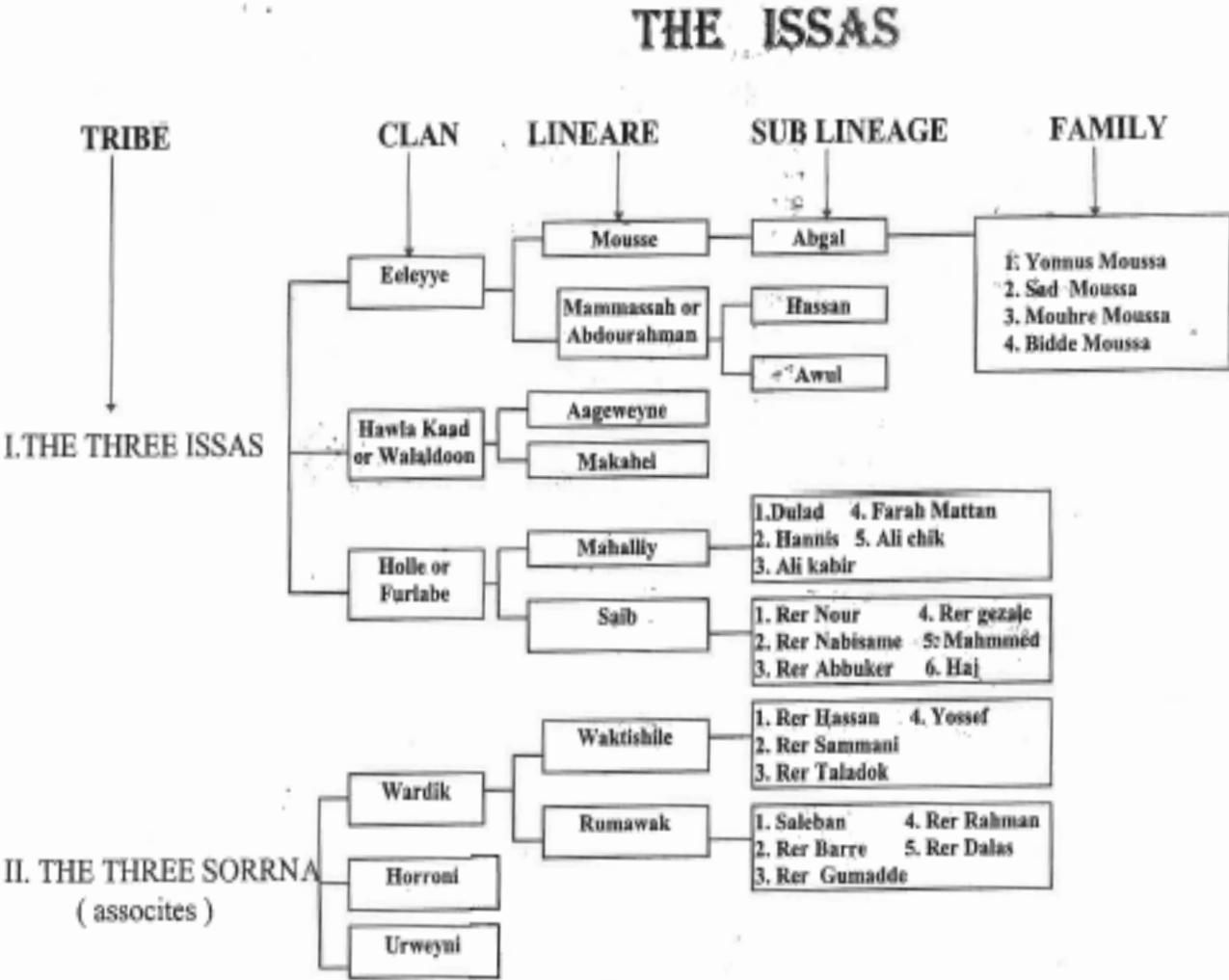
Although Issa's clan structure is mentioned below today and those fighting the Afar changed radically from the past. Some of the Issa who used to fight later moved into

¹¹ *Initially the Afar relations with the colonists were more conflictual and stricter than other frontiers which made the Issa Somali influx into the Afar area possible.*

¹²*In Djibouti the importing Issa-Somali into the country, by using different names, the French colonial rule got an ample opportunity and instrument to its divide and rule policy throughout.*

Djibouti when they became independent and dominated by Issa. Some of the Issas continued to fight the Afars but diminished gradually in size due to the war and drought combined. New clan groups emerged that had the modern weapon and financial capacity to hold the aggression. At times the different tribal groups shared their occupied areas among themselves.

A Tribal chart:



According to the Afar legend, Issa is one of the sons of Haral- Mahis. He is considered as a half-brother to Haral-Mahis's sons. After their father's death, Issa had a disagreement with his half-siblings about their father's Inheritance. Because of that, Issa settled with the Somalis and was considered as one of them.

The Issas are divided into two major categories. The proper Issas belong to the Ougas (spiritual leader) clan. The head chief Ougas is elected by 12 Issa sub-clans and selects 44 elders, which make up the tribal assembly that approves their Ougas and major Issues of concerns. The Issa is very much like Afars, not only in its clan structure but also in culture and tradition.¹³

¹³ *For instance, they have Ginnili (Bargade), Afbeha (Higaal) and Absuma (Geyan)*

4. The Resumption of Emperor Haile Selassie and After

As the regent Ras Teferi Mekonnen became the emperor with the enthronement name of Haile Selassie. Although the new emperor tried to follow the tradition of Menelik, he soon was displaced by the Italian Fascista invasion during the Second World War. Thus, the emperor was forced to escape to Europe as exile only to return home at the end of the War. Therefore, there is no documentation indicating that the two ethnic groups ever had any conflict before the Fascist intervention of Ethiopia.

The Emperor met three significant challenges in regards to the Afar and Issa conflict inside Ethiopia: The invasion of fascist Italy, The reorganization of the provincial administration, and External involvement through “Greater Somalia” and the Army involvement.

The Invasion of the Fascist Italy

As Fascism grew in Italy, it resumed its old ambition of colonial Empire. Italy remembered the defeat of Adawa on March 1 the year 1896, wanting to avenge the debacle. However, Ethiopia was the only independent country in East Africa, and if taken over the country, it would have much opportunity to control the Horn of Africa. Thus, it invaded Ethiopia to make it part of the colonies around in the area. The Fascist army invaded Ethiopia from Eritrea in the North and Mogadishu in the East following the railway line from the frontier town of Dawalle through to Awash and up to the hinterland.¹⁴ The Italian colonialist mobilized the Somali mercenaries recruited from Mogadishu, came through Ogaden and landed on the railway areas' villages. The Afar was not familiar with white-armed people and was surprised by the sudden invasion of massive armies. The occupation by the Fascist army which came not only with the expectation of submission but also with the demands of supplies of foodstuff, manpower for armies, and not least guides to show the right way to penetrate inside the country.

The invasion was a strange situation for local people who considered themselves independent and therefore opposed the submission. Clashes were regular around Der Dabba (in Afar language, the current city of Dire Dawa), Hurso (the city between Dire Dawa and Erer), Erer, and beyond. To withstand the growing resistance, the fascists called upon the Afar leaders of the area for a fake reconciliation meeting at Hurso, only to find out to be massacred at the spot. 70/80 elders, chiefs, and warlords who were gathered were massacred coldblooded.¹⁵ This massacre deteriorated the relation between the Afar and the occupation army where the army

¹⁴*During this time, the area from Djibouti to Awash was inhabited by the Afar people.*

¹⁵*The graves of this massacre near Hurso are known until today as the “elders’ graveyard”*

defined the Afar's territorial movement not to pass the river that crosses through Dire Dawa.¹⁶ Thus, the occupation army continued to harass people beyond the railway up to Erer, Afdem, Asboli, and Gewane, killing the people and capturing the men for recruitment. In Gewane village, known people were arrested and hanged openly to terrorize the area's citizens. This is also true to what happened around Erer in an area called Bouna, where another major massacre occurred on the Afar. One such warlord was Datta, who was captured and torn to pieces in front of the people. In one of such incidents, one of the leaders called Ali Kayri¹⁷ who was captured and was to be hanged, he was granted the request to see his son, when they saw the way he was hugging and kissing his son he was released from captivity and survived the massacre¹⁸.

As the Fascist occupation army moved to the hinterland, it met strong resistance behind Danile mountain (about 20 km north of Awash town), where people fought to the last man. As the war approached the central highland of Ankober (a town in central Ethiopia) through the Afar, Ethiopian patriots cooperated fighting together with the occupation army. One well-known case was patriot Abebe Aragay who had his base around Ankober and supplied food staff and fighting force to the Afars in the area. At the defeat, the occupation army handed over their weapons and ammunition to the trained Issa to continue fighting. After they left the country, the relation between the Issa-Somalis and Mogadishu consolidated. Simultaneously, the war continued with the Afar for decades, as we shall see later.

The origin and significant of “Greater Somalia”, *and* the idea of greatness concept was initially coined¹⁹ by Italian colonists to unite an ethnic group into one shared influence so that the colonial power could achieve a larger colonial empire. During colonialism, the concept helped unite the Somalis into driving its nationalist politics, which after independence transcended into the country's regional policy. The first contact of Somalis was during the invasion of the Italian Fascists through the mercenaries in the country.

These interpreters added the Afar refusal to recruitment and disregarded the supply of manpower to fascists, the Italians to carry out brutal practice against the Afar pastoralists in the area. The Somalis bridged the relationship with invaders, describing the Afars as opponents of the foreigners. The connection between the two elements was laid down

¹⁶ *This was the first limitation, which was made by Italian fascists*

¹⁷ *Personal communication with victim*

¹⁸ *Personal communication*

¹⁹ *The same view was coined to the Tigrean which included all the Tigreans with the same language*

during this time, since the nationalist concept was new. As we shall see, the idea was expanded after Somalia's independence leading to sporadic conflict between the Issa and the Afar and remotely backed by the state of Somalia.

The Return of the Emperor and Re-organizing the provincial administration

As Haile Sellassie returned from exile and resumed power in Ethiopia at the end of the Second World War, things did not continue as in the past. New policies were introduced to restructure the country and a new line of modern administration. Within this administration framework the Afar in the southeastern part was placed under Harargue Teklay Gizat /administrative Region/ and into one sub. Sub province which was stationed first at Afdem but gradually changed to Erer. This sub province included Afar inhabitants around the railway line and beyond into the Middle Middle Awash Valley. Other people who were included in the administration were the Oromos who settled the southeast of the railway line. The Gurgura tribe inhabited around Hurso where the Issa were to visit the area temporarily for grazing purposes due to the agreement made between Ethiopia and the British Somaliland protectorate government.

As discussed above, the trained and politically Somali-backed Issa-Somalis continued their hidden resistance for "Greater Somalia". The first bold attack attempt was already made at Ur-Dala (is situated West of Erer) and the second was made after the independence of Somali at Mafay-Dala (is the North of Mieso) in 1965 at Mawlid day, where over 358 Afar civilians were massacred. This continued at the second Mafay-Dala battle, where the Afars were better prepared to defend themselves.²⁰

This intensified conflicts led to the split of the sub-province administration of Erer into two strong demand of the Afar, which was not happy within the administration that partly led to the transfer of their part to own separate administration but joined into the city of Cheer-Cher in Asebe-Teferi, together with the Oromo of the areas. The Afar had a liaison office at Mieso²¹ and Afar leaders led the districts of Afdem and Mieso by then. The other Afar demand was to establish its own separate sub province situated close to their inhabitants. Although the

²⁰*After the withdrawal, the fascist occupation and the independence of Somalia continued based on guerrilla warfare which was not known in the area at that time. This struggle of the Issa Somali later included the backup of Djibouti which became the center of the Issa parochialism for decades that followed, as we shall see later.*

²¹*The liaison officer was the late Fitawrari Humad-gaba who was also the Vice Administrator of the sub-province of the Church called the Adal and the Garaguracha with a headquarters in Assebe-Tefer.itated*

new sub province was far away from their area but did not oppose being together with the Oromos.

The Threat of “Greater Somalia” and Army involvement

After the independence of Somalia in 1960, the desire to unite the rest of Somalis in the Horn of Africa grew rapidly, becoming part of the unofficial foreign policy of the country. Somalia had a propaganda radio station transmitting in different languages to mobilize support inside neighboring states. People were called upon to come to Somalia and get trained to fight back in their respective countries.²² On the Afar side, Ethiopia tended to support Afar opposition in Djibouti, which rejected the annexation of the territory into Somalia. The two polls pushed each other to their respective side. Ultimately each side supported the respective neighboring countries, which held the balance and guaranteed the strategic position of Djibouti. Anyone who controlled Djibouti was expected to check the Red Sea.²³ Thus, Ethiopia had to operate against this background, not to hurt the relationship but to not let falling territory on the enemy side. On the other hand, Somalia already has established clandestine activities with the Issa elements to drive the conflict under the cover-up of the pastoralist search of grazing and water land.

The security matters against this background, the army of the provinces operated under unclear risky directives. Somalia was still consolidating itself after independence. But continued to support guerrilla warfare inside the Eastern Ethiopia. At the same time, it was common to swap livestock from each ethnic group, which disturbed the administration of Ethiopia but with permission to move into the limited sphere of influence of the Afar area. However, the Issa-Somali pushed further claiming Ethiopia belonged on the pretext that to every Ethiopia who lived in it. Although permission was given to the Issa for grazing their livestock, to keep peace and security, but converted to raid several times. Under the cover-up of the right for grazing, the Issa used to expand the territory for grazing and used for contraband trade penetration into the hinterland of Ethiopia. Ultimately, the Afar pastoralists who could not submit to contraband trade were pushed to the proximity of the Awash Valley. Under this critical situation the administration introduced the army presence in every corner of the conflict

²²*Thus, many sought opportunities to get their cases exposed and backed in their struggle. From Djibouti, FLCs emerged and from Ogaden, there was Western Somali Front and others.*

²³*For Ethiopia, this was very important to secure the port of Djibouti because its exports and imports passed through the port of Djibouti.*

area. Meanwhile, the worsening political, economic and social situation in Ethiopia initially led to the separation of their administration and gradually contributed to the spontaneous revolution of the country.

5. The Conflict under the Rule of the Derg

At the spontaneous change in 1974 in Ethiopia, the Afar were among the first to come to the new government requesting justice around the development of Awash Valley and get attention to the deteriorating situation of the Issa Somalis raids. Together with its socialistic rhetoric, the Provisional Military Government of Ethiopia, the Derg had to deal with many other issues among the conflict situation in Southern Afar: The invasion of the Ogaden by Somalia, the security problem around the Railway, and resolves conflicts between the Afar and the Issa-Somalis.

The Ogaden Invasion

The Realities of the invasion, while Ethiopia was in a revolutionary change; Somalia invaded the Ogaden of Ethiopia. The invaders captured many towns inside Ogaden, Dire Dawa, Erer and reached as far as Afdem (as the Italian Fascists did earlier) along with the Railway line. It is important to mention the battle of Afdem where the fighting went for weeks. At this battle, prominent Afar personalities were killed on the defensive line, including the railway security head Saido Nure, Ali Gero Nure, and a chief called Ali Kooke.²⁴ Also, like a prominent Oromo chief in the area and other Ethiopians were victims. Furthermore, civilians who were massacred on streets and others were evacuated to Awash, Warar, and Gawane. The invaders took over all resident houses with their belongings.²⁵

At the defeat, those Issas who facilitated and guided the invaders were lulled to separate themselves from the invaders and were stationed in different camps along the mountain of Afdem, by getting salaries and rations to survive. Meanwhile, they were posted to take care of the security of the Railway. But the Issa-Somali forces instead turned out to push the Afar from Afdem, Mullu area, and surroundings to get a vacuum to access contraband operation. Thus, the Issa established contraband bases in the city of Bikke (which is located between Erer and Afdem), the village Sankilla/Buttigi, and further in Kilaalu (East of Gawane) areas situated between the Afar and the Issa frontiers.

During the post-invasion development, the military government of Derg had no mercy on disobedience, destroying anyone who opposed the rule. Meanwhile, the independence of Djibouti came into being and its government meant that the Afar who opposed the colonial

²⁴*Even the security of the Railway was terminated with the deaths of patriots who defended the security.*

²⁵*Afdem village was ruined, and properties of the residents were confiscated by invaders*

rule of France, were left out from sharing power at independence. Unfortunately, the political stand of the Afar opposition groups were on the socialist side that coincided with that of Ethiopia, which the West including France, then opposed. The domination of the Issa-Somali in Djibouti was shown to be advantageous for the Issas, not only in the territory but also beyond it, even inside Ethiopia. Hence, Issas from around the neighboring states were appealed to migrate into Djibouti to reverse the number of the Afar and to get better work opportunities at the same time.

The Independence of Djibouti and its back up to the Conflict

The Issa intensified its contraband trade across Somaliland, Djibouti, and Ethiopia borders fulfilling the financial desire of the Issa rebel fighters. Besides, the fighting radius was shifted from the railway, which was now controlled by the Issa-Somalis army to the Awash-Millie highway, which was completed in the late 1970s. The Issa-Somali idea was that the Ogaden invasion was considered to have failed because it was impossible to control the railway. Thus, after the defeat, the Issa rebel army was stationed around the railway to control it. Soon after the focus was turned to the highway of the Awash-Millie Road. Thus, the Issa split rebel groups carried out assassinated passengers and drivers on the road, blaming the surrounding inhabitants of the Afars for wrongdoing. Because of this blame, the Afar could not move any distance in searching for grazing for their livestock without being killed by the armies or Contrabandists.

The security problem grew, and the Afar Liberation Front (ALF) rebel groups intensified their fighting in and around the highway. Meanwhile, one of the Derg members, Colonel Tesfaye Tasfa, was killed while returning from an Afar conference that promoted self-rule in Gawane. The villages Gadmaytu, Undafoo, and Adaytu were destroyed because they hosted illegal trade of contraband transactions. As a security measure, a new grazing limitation area was decided in 1987 between the Afar and Issa-Somali to be 35 km from the highway to the east. Soon the Issa undermined the limitation agreement and trespassed the area into Afar. Under such critical situations, the military regime collapsed and was replaced by new rebel governments in Addis Ababa.

6. The Conflict under the Woyane (TPLF²⁶) Rule

The Afar Issa-Somali conflicts consolidated as Djibouti became independent and the Governments of both Somalia and Ethiopia collapsed. Though I doubt how much the Woyane government attempted to resolve the conflict. Meanwhile, it posed to lift it up to a national level, but it remained ineffective to implement it. However, it must be shown to carry out the following points: Held conferences between the two peoples in different places, Formed combined committees, which attended to the issues, Studied a map of settlement of the people through time and Made an in-depth assessment of the history of the administration framework related to the conflict between the two people.

Held conferences

Major conferences were held between the two people in Dire Dawa, Addis Ababa, and Awash several times. These conferences had no pre-preparation or clear objective of resolving the conflict rather than informing them about their critical relation. Among the meetings, the one that was observed in Addis Ababa. During this meeting, the central government threatened the Afar regional government to withdraw its regional budget and those who were disliked²⁷ by the government were dismissed on the spot. Two high government officials of the Afar region fell because they criticized the federal government for supporting the Issa position. Elected regional parliament members were dismissed and reshuffled to satisfy the Woyane (TPLF) government. A temporary settlement was made but did not bring about changes in the relations of the conflict; on the contrary, the fighting intensified.

The other conference was held at Awash just at the eve of the Ethio-Eritrean conflict, where the Afar and Issa representatives described their position within the conflict framework. Hence, it was found that the Shinile zone was deeply involved in the conflict in intensifying it and sharing the booty of its advantages. In contrast, the Afar zones were profoundly corrupt and did not do anything to resolve the problem except that returning livestock swapped from the Issa. This was very hard to implement without using military force. Many innocent civilians were imprisoned and killed without any charges.

Meanwhile, in a discussion on territorial legitimacy disagreement appeared and finally the Afar called to bring the Oromos of the immediate neighbors to judge the reality. The

²⁶ ***Tigray People's Liberation Front***

²⁷ ***The vice president, two zonal heads of the Afar region were dismissed with immediate effects***

attending Oromo made their final stand clear that Issa-Somali claims had no justification whatsoever for their claim because the Afar and Oromo were the only neighbors before they were both pushed away by the Issa force. The Issa-Somali repetitive raids drove the Afar and Oromo victims as far to the hinterland provinces of Arusi and Shewa. Before that, only the Afar and Oromo communities lived side by side in the past. Finally, the Woyane (TPLF) government neutralized the issue and decided that the country would confront the Eritrean invasion on the Northern border areas and that the domestic differences should remain to be tackled afterward immediately.²⁸

Formed Combined Committee

There was a committee composed from the two neighboring zones of the Issa and the Afar whose objective was to facilitate the resolutions. This committee had the budget and transport facilities to carry out the task across the border. As far as their activities, I could not come across their report and measure taken through time, except using the budget without accountability. On the contrary, the operations helped the Issa-Somali penetrate the Afar furthermore. In one of its actions, the army helped the Issa come into the Bilen hot spring, accompanied by a huge military and tanks. This was considered a blatant violation of Afar dignity but remained silent to pass it without any incident.

A General Study on Afar and Issa Conflicts

This general study was carried out thoroughly on the Afar side using all necessary informants and documents but never approved formally by the Central Government or made public. On the Issa-Somali side, it lacked the political will to justify the promotion of their case. The Issa claimed the Issa-Somalis could never accept the Addis Ababa University study because of their prejudice against the Somalis. Afar argued that the university was an independent entity that should not side with either ethnic group. There appeared to be the second major controversial issue: The administration identified the limitation agreement between the Afar and the Issa-Somalis.

The Afar argued that they were systematically pushed from their own areas by force. The first limitation was made by Italian Fascists at Dire Dawa and massacred during the

²⁸***After the war, the Wayne Government called for an urgent meeting, held in Awash, threatening that they won the war and that they were boosted to have a huge army, which may be enough to impose its policy by force. Nobody dared to oppose the order openly and that was the end of it.***

Second World War. Actually, this was in cooperation with the Somali mercenaries. Haile Selassie did the second limitation at Erer river and the final limitation was done by the military government at 35 km from Awash-Millie highway. These attempts were undermined by the Issa-Somalis instead resorting to conflicts, they decided to systematic raids to oust the Afar from the area.

The Issa Somali argued that they were Ethiopian, and the land belonged to Allah, but the Afar pointed out that the aggression was not permitted by Allah. Although the Afar accepted the administrative limitation for grazing, the Issa-Somalis never satisfied with the deal and claimed the reverse. The Central government could not expose their position and failed before they could achieve a specific solution. To define the limitation, it was necessary to assess the history of the administration.

The other point must do with the administrative development of the area. Historical development of the district and sub-districts show that the Afars were the primary partner in it and that it was the Afar who accepted the limitation for the sake of peace and stability. In contrast, the Issa Somalis always never abided by it. That was the case from the administration of Erer up to the Awash Valley all the way. The Central Government remained reserved to take decisive action to settle the conflict for good. This made Afar suspicious about the intention of the Central Government. It considers it beneficial in the conflict by keeping the two communities at loggerhead against each other. In fact, the conflict area has been the most underdeveloped and exploited by the Central Government since the 1960s. Due to the war, the local communities never settle or participate in the development or require shared government growth.

An administrative retrospective of the area

Although the Afar-Issa conflict has been the most studied issue in the administration of the area, it could not be resolved by the respective governments in the last decades. The studies were expected to come up with a viable recommendation to the resolution of the conflict that did not bypass the central government approval. The Issa-Somali would not cooperate in providing the documentation that proves their legitimacy to the area claimed or come up with a viable proposal to the solution of the problem. As the study was completed and presented to the PM Office, it was considered supportive of the Afar case and was rejected at the time.

Issa-Somali followed repetitive terror on the highway on the drivers, killing innocent people. Ultimately assassinated the one who headed the study in zone three Niena Tahiro, member of the Representative Council, on April 30, 2000. In reaction to this act, there followed a massacre of people in Gawane. Those accused and imprisoned were done arbitrarily without a court procedure.²⁹This made the problem and conflict roll over into the administration of the reform government of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, as we shall see below.

²⁹*After his death, the government did not follow up with the investigation until now*

7. The Conflict under the Reform of Abiy Government

It is too early to judge the government policy under the Abiy Government, but the conflict between the Issa-Somali and Afar seems to continue as last year. In fact it became more intensive and official in its approach, as we shall see. The recent meeting of the rival parties with the PM seemed to be promising a new target-oriented measure of some kind.

The Continuation of the Conference for Peace

The reform government seemed to hold a conference inside of the conflict area in specific villages of Adaytu, Undafoo, and Gadmaytu. This started last month in Adayta, where the Afar and the Issa-Somali who are resident in the area attended. At the conference, the message was made clear to the people, this is to say those who are not willing to live peacefully in the area should leave with immediate effect, and others who would live peacefully in the area could attend the conference and publicly air their view.³⁰ As the conference was held the aggressive Issa contrabandistas made raids against the villages where the conferences were held. These elements intensified the aggression against civilians on the highway of the area. However, the conferences were expected to continue in Undafo, Gawane, Gadmaytu, and Awash turn by turn. But this never happened to continue in other places. The further attempt at Undafo failed because the extremist element attacked the village, killing and wounding those who attended the conference. The killing on the highway intensified. Thus, the conference continues to be reviewed for better strategies and approaches.

Intensive continued armed involvement

The intensity of the conflict continued not only in the Somali region of Ethiopia but also from those involving neighboring countries of Djibouti and Somaliland combined. The confrontation that was strongly backed by the Djibouti government took place at the southern-eastern tip, Obno of the Afar region was one of such village. Unfortunately, people raided while they were at sleep where many civilians, children, and elderly were massacred. But fortunately, the Afar awakened by the bombings and the village retaliated with revenge action. The Djibouti army vehicles were burned, and fighters³¹ were captured. The intervention of the Issa

³⁰*Those Issa-Somali who advocate peaceful participation attended and others who rely on tribal links and those who live in the area mongering conflict rejected the conference as illegitimate.*

³¹*The information provided by the regional authorities was denied by the central government of its foreign policy to identify it as intervention.*

government of Djibouti was discovered through the satellite of France intelligence and debated in the France Parliament.

Parallel to the conflict, the Federal government sent armies several times but became of no help because of its contraband connection. Abiy came with a new solution to send his republican guard. Their situation was unclear because they were fighting more than their expected mission, which is to guard the security of the highway. Although they seemed to be neutral in terms of killing the pastoralists on the highway, the Afar complained that the federal armies should stop the conflict before it happens. If the war happens, to favor the Issa-Somalis the army remained neutral but whenever the Afar reacted strongly they stood in between with Ethiopian flag and huge armement.

The other time confrontation continued at Garani which is a neighbor to Obno. Afars were much more prepared for this battle because the area is known for its contraband trafficking of goods into the northern part of Wello. They captured the contraband depo, material, and weapons associated with Al-Shabab. Although the central government was careful not to speak about the incident but never denied it as before. This continued in the area of zone three, also in the south of the Afar region. The intensive war was carried out in eastern Gawane in Gruumudli, where the same things happened. In Hanruka (East of Awash) and Galalu (west of Gawane), a series of fighting took place where the combined Issa-Somalis forces were defeated. The Afar patience emptied for good unless the government comes up with a viable solution, the conflict remains to continue. Now the Afar option remained to rely on its self-defense.

The Political Squabble on National Scene

Under the reform politics of the new Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, the Somali territorial claim shifts from clandestine operation to the public scene. For the first time, the Somali regional government cabinet publicly laid territorial claims on the Afar territory inside Ethiopia. It was the first local regional government of the country that ever claimed its undue territory by force. Also, this was the first time the combined Somali forces admittedly fought the Afar pastoralists. Previously it instead waged a proxy war in proximity along the railway backed by neighboring Somali-speaking countries.

This appears to have been gradually supported by the Issa representative's appointment called Adan Farah, who is the chairman of the Ethiopian House of the Federation. Through the manipulation of this person, Afar asserts that the central government seems to be misled about

what has been going on in the conflict. In addition, the Ethiopian Somali government was told to withdraw its army from the frontlines and not to use weapons, which are not allowed to be used in the local armies in the region. However, the conflict continues to this day.

8. The Previous Attempt and Failures

There is no document, which I came across referring to the conflict between the Afar and the Issa-Somali in the past, particularly before the arrival of European colonialism in the area. After the portion of people partitioned and introduced states with arbitrarily defined boundaries in the Horn of Africa, the peoples of the regions were subjected to limitation of movement for grazing and trading restricted. Others found themselves exploring their opportunities in the newly constructed ports of Djibouti and the Railway.

During the Second World War, the Afar pastoralists opposed the penetration of Fascist Italy, which pushed them beyond boundaries. As conflict intensified by the occupation forces, the Issa Somalis aligned with the colonialist bands and made use of the opportunities to be trained and achieve arms and ammunition. Due to the growing resistance, the Italian forces set a limit for Afar movement in the area. This was the first limitation done by occupants. The occupation force was not only very much interested in resolving the differences rather exploited the submission of Ethiopia in general and that of Afar in particular, to penetrate the hinterland.

After the Second World War, the returning Haile Selassie Government had little time apart from restructuring the administration for its advantage. It operated to consolidate its absolute monarchy rule. The regime established the Erer sub-province within the administration framework where all ethnic groups were included. Still, those who advocated "Greater Somalia" like the Issa were not ready to accept the new administrative setup. Thus, the administrative split and the movement restriction were introduced where Issa was not prepared to accept; instead, Issa continued its fight. The Issa-Somali had an issue to be used as a pretext for a grazing movement, demanding to continue fighting beyond what was agreed upon between Afar and Issa at Erer. They wanted to move beyond permission, even if this was conflictual³².

As the military Derg took over, the government had little spare time for this conflict as it was surrounded by civil war in every corner of the country. Meanwhile, Somalia made a military invasion in the Ogaden where many Ethiopians died, and the railway was besieged. In its attempt to split the rebellion of the Somalis, the Derg managed by separating Issa as its own faction and withdrew only to make use of its advantage. Even here, new limitations were made between the two communities without acceptance of the Issa elements.

³² *Among the meetings held between the Issa-Somali and Afar led by the government were in 1951 Dire Dawa, 1958 Addis Ababa, 1959 Erer, 1960 Afdem, 1961 Erer and 1965 Erer in Ethiopian calendar. All resolutions passed by the meeting were undermined by the Issa Somalis.*

In the 1990 both, the Somali state which advocated the unity of all the Somali and even Ethiopia which opposed the idea of “Greater Somalia” collapsed. In Ethiopia, a new rebel government led by the Woyane (TPLF) seized power, which was shown to be hesitant to resolve the conflict in the country. Meanwhile, the Issa-dominated state of Djibouti was consolidated, taking the Issa case to the political and economic front. The woyane politics had helped the issue to bring it up to the national agenda but, on the other hand, reinforced the conflict.

The reform-oriented government of Abiy must tackle the whole problem sooner than later. The issue has remained untouched for the last few decades and has remained difficult to resolve to this day. Still the recent measure by Abiy Ahmed seems to promise a better future for conflict resolution between the two communities.

Things on the Issa side in general and that of the Ogaden in particular is not yet settled because the regional rule shifted from the pro-woyane led government of Abdi Ilay to the new leader of Mustafa Mohammed. He seems to have been closely attached to the new Abiy government. In fact, the situation appears to have deteriorated after the reform government because the Somali regional government lifted its approach by formally involved in the conflict, attracting its neighboring countries such as Djibouti and Somaliland. Due to this looming situation, the Afar seems more united and determined than ever to defend itself.

9. The Political Will to Resolve the Conflict

The Issa-Somali position: The clearer position of the Issa-Somalis about the territorial claim. On the Issa-Somali side, things became more apparent than before under previous regimes. Under Abiy reforms politics, everything became exposed including the Somali claims. The claims that used to be latent came to be public by the support of the Somali regional government and by the backup of a combined force from neighboring Somali-speaking states. At the forefront now exist the Somali regional government of Mustafa Mohammed, who has a good relationship with Abiy Ahmed. Initially, he used the conflict as orchestrated by Djibouti but now formally put the Somali Cabinet declaration regarding the conflict and gradually became positioned to send his forces deeply involved to expand their territorial sphere of influences. The positioning of the individuals in the higher position of the Federal government consolidated their push to their illegitimate demand of territorial claims among the Afars. The position is as clear as it might and has to be done by hook or crook in the years to come and to be resolved by all means

The Afar Position: The Afar position became clearer as Issa-Somali forces fought through combined forces and declared territorial claim officially by the Somali regional government. The Afar understood the problem as they believed but searched for a peaceful solution to the conflict through the administrative framework. But they realized their attempt was doomed to failure. This situation has consolidated their feelings. The Somalis are not interested in a peaceful solution and ignore the federal government's attempt to resolve the conflict. This has united Afar more than before, and it is unlikely that Afar would accept the solution by force. The deadlock is reached where the federal government is busy with its own homework, that the Issa-Somali and the Afar conflict to the doorstep of the federal government's to be resolved as soon as possible .

The Position of the Federal Government: Thanks to Abiy Ahmed, who is trying to introduce reform in the country things looks bright³³ in the future. He would see that the federal government would not interfere in local affairs in the decentralization context. This has shown to be the truth where the federal government has been witnessing the conflict going without significant intervention. The Federal government has to define its federation policy, which could be solved within the constitutional framework.

³³ *The reality of his politics may be Challenge and May come to face the moment of truth after his war against Tigray and the thereafter*

One new element in the conflict has been Ethiopia's involvement in Somalia's internal affairs. The previous Ethiopian regimes operated inside Somalia to determine security by searching for intelligence information. After the collapse of Somalia in the early 1990s, the reverse is being done. Ethiopia recruited Somali opposition to take over Somali as a whole. Since Ethiopia became deeply involved through UN peacekeeping in the country's stability, it reflected the feedback as well. This is even reflected in its internal policy development, where the Somalis are closely aligned with the Abiy government. Other neighboring people³⁴ who are affected by the Somali intention are the Oromo. The fear has lasted as long as Ethiopia becomes deeply involved in Somalia. The situation becomes overwhelming, and may push the country into the more significant problem of the Horn of Africa.

³⁴ *These are the Afar, and the Easter Oromo who are repeatedly raided due to their territorial ambition*

10. The Recommendations to the conflict of Issa-Somali and Afar

I believe this conflict shall only be resolved with clear and fast measures based on the realities of the areas. When it comes to the conflict in the past administrative processes ignored the facts on the ground and remained mismanaged. Especially the feeling among the Afar is highly hurting issues in the past, which witness the sad history. Talking about the geography of the area, one could be concerned about its uncertain future, so I proposed the following parallel tasks to be implemented:

- 1.** The problem should be resolved with clear policy intention as soon as possible by a task force led by Afar and backed by the Federal Government
- 2.** The implementing task should have a strictly scheduled plan of action based on a time framework, which should be public through Media outlets
- 3.** Ceasefire with an immediate effect should be enforced by all means
- 4.** The administrative limitation between the Somali and Afar regions should be implemented by all means as soon as possible
- 5.** The boundary set up not only accepted but also implemented by the Afar region since the people mainly inhabit the region
- 6.** Resettlement of the displaced people for decades must be helped with their livings in a development framework
- 7.** The army should only help to implement the plan of action and should be removed from the area as soon as possible to the national border
- 8.** Curtail the contraband smuggling on the national frontiers by defining its channel from the sources
- 9.** Continue reconciliation and cooperation across the border with the Somali regional government after defining the boundaries between the two regions.
- 10.** The implementation process should not last longer than six months.

11. Concluding Remarks

The article has presented the conflict between the Afar and Issa-Somalis under different governments through time. Initially, the Italian Fascists came to further colonial interest in the region and coined the concept of “Greater Somalia”. At the independence of Somalia, the concept was exploited to mobilize the desire of the Somali nationalists, which attracted Somali nationalism elements in neighboring countries. At the failure of the Somali invasion in the Ogaden and later on at its collapse, Djibouti took over the old aggression and operated undercover through the cover-up of tribal affiliation. This type of aggression worked well because it was never exposed externally as a formal attack coordinated to the satisfaction of the Somali extremists. This had shown to be the case when the fighter of the aggression was captured in the battlefield in the south. The Djibouti Issa dominated government use all possible means to further the interest of the Issa Somali State, where the tribe may have its own agenda of the Issa regional state³⁵.

If the Afar region continues to exist, it will be impractical unless major military aggression is carried out, not only by the Ogden regional government but also by the Somali-speaking countries. The attempts and measures used to resolve the conflict currently have been hardly possible to implement because the Issa-Somali always demands illegitimate rights but has been changing desires by using any opportunities to be used at the time. Thus, any attempt tried was always rejected by Issa-Somalis. On the Afar side, it always promised a formal agreement supported by the Federal government for the sake of stability.

My recommendation should be final and shall be public, which should reflect law and order, referring to the communities of the Afar region. I fear unless this conflict is resolved sooner than later. Ethiopia may well be drawn into the more significant tribal conflict in the Horn of Africa – where the Afar may be the first victim in the area. Gradually the whole of Ethiopia may well be affected --! Let’s hope for the better!

³⁵*This concept is expected to include the occupied areas of the Afar in Ethiopia, the south-eastern part of Dhinilr, Northern Somaliland between Boramo and Zeila. The Issa clan groups are fighting each other over who controls and invests in the area after finally taking over the place. The former Issa tribal groups either declined due to drought or death, whereas the newer clan groups have a connection with those behind and economically powerful through contraband*

