

Ethiopia: Coping with Islamic Fundamentalism before and after September 11

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Prime Minister Meles Zenawi commented in the mid-1990s that the most significant long-term threat to Ethiopia's security is Islamic fundamentalism. At that time, the principal external threats emanated from Somalia and, especially, Sudan. The concern with Sudan has, at least for the time being, dissipated. On the other hand, the events of September 11, 2001, have caused Ethiopia to focus on the situation in Somalia, particularly the threat posed by hostile Islamic groups such as Al Itihaad al Islami (Unity of Islam). Ethiopia is the linchpin to the Horn of Africa. What happens there impacts the rest of the region. The importance of Islam in Ethiopia is not well appreciated by the United States, and U.S. officials are well advised to pay attention to Ethiopian Islam and the way in which Ethiopia interacts with its Islamic neighbors.

This analysis will argue that September 11 has not significantly altered Ethiopia's security situation vis-à-vis the threat from Islamic fundamentalism. What has changed is a new interest by the United States and others in possible Al Qaeda links to the Horn of Africa, particularly Somalia, and the prospect that Ethiopia, among others, can take political advantage of this new situation. But before getting to the end of the story, it is important to look first at Ethiopia's historical interactions with Islam and the status of Islam in Ethiopia today. An understanding of Ethiopia's position also requires a review of the last decade of Islamic fundamentalist threats to Ethiopia from Sudan and Somalia.

An Auspicious Beginning Turns Sour

According to tradition, a group of Arab followers of Islam in danger of persecution by local authorities in Arabia took refuge early in the seventh century in the Aksumite Kingdom of the Ethiopian Christian highlands. They were

well treated and permitted to practice their religion as they wished. Consequently, the Prophet Muhammad concluded that Ethiopia should not be targeted for *jihad*. Ethiopia's Christian rulers left no doubt, however, that Islam would be subservient to Christianity. Christian-Islamic relations remained generally cordial until Islamic raids from the Somali port of Zeila plagued the highlands in the late fifteenth century.

The Islamic threat to Ethiopia became more serious in the first half of the sixteenth century when Ahmad ibn Ibrahim al-Ghazi (known as "Gragh the left-handed") rallied a diverse group of Muslims in a *jihad* designed to end Christian power in the highlands. Aided by forces coming from the Red Sea coast of present-day Eritrea, Gragn defeated the Ethiopian emperor and conquered most of the Ethiopian highlands. In the process, he destroyed a number of Ethiopia's centers of Christian civilization. It was not until 1543 that Ethiopia raised a large army that defeated the Muslims and killed Gragn. Thousands of Muslims and Christians lost their lives in these wars.

In 1875 the khedive of Egypt organized a force, including several officers from both sides of the American Civil War, designed to conquer Ethiopia's Christian kingdom. Marching into the highlands from the Red Sea coast, the Ethiopians defeated them decisively. The last major, organized threat from Islam occurred in 1888, when the forces of the mahdi in the Sudan sacked the former capital Gondar and burned many of its churches. The following year the Ethiopians defeated the mahdist troops at the Battle of Metema on the Ethiopian-Sudanese border.

This history reflects Christian-Muslim competition for control over the Ethiopian highlands rather than an early effort to impose Islamic fundamentalist rule. At the same time, non-Muslims, particularly those who hold political power, have not forgotten this background as they confront more recent threats from Islamic fundamentalists.

Islam in Ethiopia

Islam expanded gradually in Ethiopia, especially in the lower-lying parts of the country. Most Ethiopian Muslims belong to indigenous ethnic groups; they are not of Arab descent. Always treated as a secondary religion, Islam emerged in the shadow of Christianity, and Muslims experienced discrimination. There were, however, only brief periods when Christian rulers tried to suppress Islam. There were other occasions, especially the period of rule from Gondar in the seventeenth century, when Muslim communities had considerable autonomy.

Three internal developments in the twentieth century revived Christian concerns about Islam. Upon the death of Emperor Menelik in 1913, his grandson, Lij Iyasu, inherited the throne. Iyasu was pushed aside after three years, having made what the Christian leadership considered too many overtures to Muslims, renewing concerns that followers of Islam might try to assume power. Following its invasion of Ethiopia in 1936, Italy took a number of measures that favored Muslims at the expense of Christians, a policy that led to some incidents that Christians did not soon forget. In 1961 the Eritrea Liberation Front (ELF) began an armed struggle to create an independent Eritrean state. A largely Islamic movement, the ELF drew its fighters from Muslim nomadic tribes, and its leaders called for a *jihad* against Christian Ethiopia. Leadership of the Eritrean independence movement subsequently shifted to Christians who continued to hold the upper hand when Eritrea became independent in 1993.

With the overthrow of Haile Selassie in 1974, the socialist Derg regime discouraged all religion and managed to alienate Christians and Muslims equally. The current Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) government came to power in 1991 and has generally encouraged cordial Christian-Muslim relations. Many EPRDF leaders are not known to have strong religious beliefs, but they do seem to understand the need to build a political system based on religious tolerance.

As a result of the way Islam has developed in Ethiopia and due to more recent concerted efforts to avoid religious conflict, Ethiopian Muslims are generally not receptive to Islamic fundamentalism. Muslims in Ethiopia tend to identify first with their ethnic kin. They are geographically intermixed throughout the country except for overwhelming concentrations in Somali- and Afar-inhabited areas. Although the Supreme Islamic Council is an important organization, political power among Ethiopian Muslims

tends to be decentralized. By and large, the Ethiopian Islamic community is a benign one.

There remains the important and disputed matter of religious composition of the Ethiopian population. The 1994 census indicates that there are 14.3 million Muslims in Ethiopia or about 29 percent of the total population. The same census places the Ethiopian Orthodox percentage at about 52 percent. Ethiopia's population has increased significantly and is now estimated at about 65 million. Most outside observers no longer accept the 29 percent Muslim and 52 percent Ethiopian Orthodox figures. In a recent survey of Islamic populations around the world, the International Population Center at San Diego State University said Ethiopia's Muslim population is 29 million. The same survey indicates that Ethiopia is tied with Morocco for the eleventh-largest Muslim population in the world. If the figures in this survey are accurate, it means "Christian" Ethiopia has more Muslims than Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Ethiopia's current population is probably about 45 percent Ethiopian Orthodox, between 40 and 45 percent Sunni Muslim, at least 5 percent Protestant, and most of the remainder animist.

The Islamic Fundamentalist Threat from Sudan

Geography inextricably ties Ethiopia to Sudan as the two countries share a 1,000-mile-long border. Future EPRDF officials benefited from periodic refuge in Sudan as they fought the Derg regime and eventually overthrew it in 1991. During those years of refuge, some close, personal relationships developed between senior Sudanese officials and these Ethiopian leaders. After taking power in Addis Ababa and perhaps in gratitude for Sudanese assistance, the EPRDF reduced Ethiopian support for the Sudan Peoples' Liberation Army (SPLA). Operating out of Ethiopia, the SPLA was trying to overturn the government in Khartoum. After the fundamentalist National Islamic Front seized control of the government in Sudan in 1989, however, concern developed that Sudan would encourage groups opposing the government in Ethiopia.

There has long been a certain tit-for-tat element in the Ethiopian-Sudanese relationship. Groups opposed to the government of Sudan, such as the SPLA and the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), have received, depending on the strategic situation in the region, varying degrees of support from the Ethiopian government. For its part, Sudan has irregularly provided, again depending on regional strategic concerns, support for groups such as the Oromo

Liberation Front and the Benishangul Liberation Front, which aim to topple the government in Addis Ababa. Sudan has also supported Al Itihaad, an Islamic fundamentalist organization based in Somalia and committed to the downfall of the government in Addis Ababa.

As the 1990s progressed, relations between Ethiopia and Sudan (and Eritrea and Sudan) deteriorated. The downturn first became obvious in the Sudan-Eritrean relationship when the Sudan-based Eritrean Islamic Jihad (EIJ) conducted armed attacks inside Eritrea beginning in late 1993. In response, Eritrea broke diplomatic relations with Sudan by the end of 1994, charging that Khartoum had declared war against Eritrea. Relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea were very close at this time. The turning point for Ethiopia occurred on June 26, 1995, during the Organization of African Unity (OAU) summit meeting in Addis Ababa, where the OAU is headquartered. There was an assassination attempt against Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak as he was driven from the airport to the summit. Subsequent evidence made clear that an Egyptian terrorist group with operatives in Sudan had hatched the plot, and three of the assassins escaped to Khartoum via Sudan Airways after the unsuccessful attempt. Although Sudan initially denied any involvement, it became patently clear that it had been involved. Several captured plotters spoke publicly of Sudan's support for the failed effort.

Deeply embarrassed by this incident, Ethiopia took a series of steps against Sudan in September 1995. It closed the Sudanese consulate in Gambela in western Ethiopia and shut down all nongovernmental organizations operating in Ethiopia supported fully or partially by the government of Sudan. It reduced the number of Sudanese embassy staff in Addis Ababa to four and cut back on the number of Ethiopian diplomats in Khartoum. It terminated all Sudan Airways and Ethiopian Airlines flights between Sudan and Ethiopia and required all Sudanese citizens to obtain a visa before entering Ethiopia.

Sudan refused to extradite to Ethiopia the three Egyptian suspects believed to have been involved in the attempt on Mubarak. Ethiopia then stepped up its anti-Sudan rhetoric and support for the SPLA. Sudan, in turn, accused Ethiopia of a cross-border attack at the beginning of 1996. By the end of 1996, the Sudanese chargé d'affaires in Mogadishu called publicly for a holy war against Ethiopia during a meeting with supporters of Al Itihaad. The SPLA stepped up its actions from Ethiopia against Sudan and in the beginning of 1997 even had the support of Ethiopian forces

in a cross-border attack near Kurmuk. The speaker of Sudan's parliament and National Islamic Front leader, Hassan al-Turabi, threatened to incite Ethiopian opposition forces in Sudan against Ethiopia if the latter did not stop its cross-border activity. At the beginning of 1998, Ethiopian foreign minister Seyoum Mesfin accused Sudan of being a danger to regional stability, fomenting plots against Ethiopia, and backing terrorism. The Sudanese Alliance Forces (SAF), supported by the NDA, announced in February 1998 that they had attacked the Sudanese Dud Island garrison south of the Ethiopian-Sudanese border town of Qallabat. In a statement distributed in Addis Ababa, the SAF said this constituted an escalation of operations to eliminate the National Islamic Front.

Then, regional security dynamics changed in the Horn of Africa. On May 12, 1998, Eritrea unexpectedly occupied a small piece of territory previously administered by Ethiopia near their border. This quickly led to a serious two-year conflict between two previously close friends and had the effect of realigning relationships throughout the Horn of Africa. Operating in the belief that "the enemy of my enemy is my friend," Ethiopia slowly and quietly explored improved ties with Sudan. Near the end of 1998, Sudanese media began to suggest that Sudanese-Ethiopian ties were on the mend. Foreign Minister Mesfin felt constrained to point out that relations between the two countries could normalize only after Khartoum handed over to Addis Ababa the three terrorists who tried to assassinate President Mubarak.

Behind the scenes, Ethiopia and Sudan put the past behind them and began to restore normal relations. Sudan Airways resumed its weekly service to Addis Ababa early in 1999. Sudanese president Omar Hassan al-Bashir made an official visit to Addis Ababa in November 1999. Ethiopia and Sudan subsequently agreed on a variety of practical measures to normalize relations, including the use of Port Sudan by Ethiopia, creation of a free-trade zone, and improvements on the road passing through the border town of Qallabat. Ethiopia moderated its support for the SPLA, while Sudan presumably did the same or even stopped assistance to anti-Ethiopian groups in Sudan. Prime Minister Meles made an official visit to Khartoum at the beginning of 2002. Relations are now fully normalized and are likely to remain so for the foreseeable future. Eritrea has also normalized relations with Sudan, but the level of mutual suspicion remains much higher. Even Uganda, the third member of the anti-Sudan troika throughout most of the 1990s, has reestablished diplomatic relations with Sudan.

The Islamic Fundamentalist Threat from Somalia

Somalia, like Sudan, shares a 1,000-mile-long frontier with Ethiopia. Border relations are further complicated, however, by the fact that the southeastern part of Ethiopia, much of which is called the Ogaden, is inhabited overwhelmingly by Ethiopian Somalis. Somalis on both sides of this porous border have for centuries crossed from one country to the other. It is often difficult to ascertain what citizenship a particular Somali holds. It has been the official policy of neighboring Somalia since independence in 1960 to incorporate into its territory Somali-inhabited areas in contiguous Djibouti, Kenya, and Ethiopia. This policy resulted in constant border tension between Somalia and Ethiopia and the occupation of the Ogaden by Somalia in 1977 and 1978. Only the collapse of the Somali state in 1991 put an end to irredentist activity against Ethiopia. There was, however, no apparent Islamic fundamentalist element in Somalia's policy during this period.

The end of the Siad Barre government in Somalia and the Mengistu Haile Mariam regime in Ethiopia, both of which fell in 1991, provided a unique opportunity for proponents of Islamic fundamentalism in the region. The new EPRDF government permitted the development of political parties, cracking down later on those that ventured too far from EPRDF goals. Members of the Somali fundamentalist group, Al Itihaad, reportedly functioned briefly in the early 1990s as a political party in Ethiopia's Ogaden. Either lacking adequate indigenous Somali support or facing opposition from the EPRDF, they joined more-numerous, like-minded colleagues in Somalia, which had become a failed state and political vacuum.

Al Itihaad uses religion as a tool to achieve political power. It is influenced by Wahhabism, a rigid and puritanical ideology from Saudi Arabia that is in conflict with the predominant Sufism creed in the Horn of Africa. According to Adan Adar of the Somali regional state in Ethiopia, radical Somali fundamentalists who fought against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan in the 1980s founded Al Itihaad in the early 1990s. Some of its top leaders reportedly graduated from Islamic universities in Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait. A mysterious network of private and public organizations that support Islamic charities fund Al Itihaad. Much of the funding originates from wealthy families and ruling elites in Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, and Kuwait. The details of its political program are not well understood, but it is believed to support the creation of a Somali state based on Islamic law and which

incorporates Somali-inhabited areas of Ethiopia (and presumably Djibouti and Kenya) into that Islamic state. There is no doubt that Al Itihaad is a threat to Ethiopian territorial integrity.

Al Itihaad and most other political organizations in Somalia are opportunistic when it comes to seeking power. Mohamed Farah Aidede's United Somali Congress (USC), the nemesis of the United States in 1993, has nothing in common ideologically with Al Itihaad. Yet the USC established in the early 1990s a marriage of convenience with Al Itihaad. After Mohamed Aidede was killed in 1995, his son Hussein, a former U.S. marine, succeeded him as leader of the USC. Hussein continued ties with Al Itihaad for opportunistic reasons, although now he is among Al Itihaad's foremost detractors. The connection of Al Qaeda and Osama bin Laden, who was living in Sudan until asked to leave by the Sudanese government in mid-1996, to events in Somalia is much less clear. It is doubtful that Al Qaeda played the important role that bin Laden claimed three years after the fact in Aidede's conflict with U.S. forces.

Al Itihaad strengthened its position in Somalia by establishing links with successful Somali businessmen and creating its own businesses, particularly in the area of banking, telecommunications, export-import, transport, and religious schools. It developed its own militia and became friendly with some of the Islamic courts in the country. Al Itihaad and like-minded sympathizers became a major source of employment in a country with no national government. For some, it replaced the failed Somali nationalism of the postindependence era. In the last several years, Al Itihaad seems to have placed a greater emphasis on promoting its version of Islamic life through education and increasing its influence in the business sector. There is also evidence that Al Itihaad has a degree of influence with Somalia's new Transitional National Government (TNG), although TNG leaders are trying hard to distance their struggling government from any organization linked to terrorism. In any event, the TNG controls very little territory.

How does all of this relate to Ethiopia? Al Itihaad was a factor in Somalia by the end of 1992 when it vowed to make the arriving U.S. troops suffer the same fate they experienced in Beirut in 1983. Four Somali Islamic organizations, including Al Itihaad, met in Khartoum in February 1993 to discuss strategy for expanding fundamentalism in Somalia. A month later, a U.S. military spokesman in Mogadishu announced that U.S. troops had

found a cache of arms at a compound belonging to Al Itihaad. About mid-year, Al Itihaad launched an anti-Western and anti-U.S. propaganda campaign in Mogadishu, calling for *jihad* against the United States, but it was still having trouble obtaining widespread support. By the end of 1993, Al Itihaad had made significant inroads in northeastern Somalia near the port city of Bosasso and began small-scale attacks on Ethiopian forces in the Ogaden. Ethiopia's minister for external economic cooperation, Abdul-Mejid Hussein, an ethnic Somali who is now Ethiopia's permanent representative to the United Nations in New York, stated publicly in December 1994 that Al Itihaad had been terrorizing parts of Somali region and forcing the EPRDF to send troops to contain the situation.

Although Al Itihaad actions aimed at Ethiopia seem to have dissipated in 1995, the next year was a different matter. There was a bombing of the government-owned Ghion Hotel in Addis Ababa in January 1996, followed a month later by a bombing of the Ras Hotel in Dire Dawa, Ethiopia's second-largest city. Al Itihaad claimed responsibility for both bombings and for the assassination of General Hayelom Araya, head of operations of Ethiopia's Ministry of Defense. Ethiopian authorities subsequently concluded that an Eritrean businessman unrelated to Al Itihaad killed General Hayelom. There was an assassination attempt in Addis Ababa in July 1996 against Abdul-Mejid Hussein, then Ethiopian minister of transport and communications. Abdulkadir Mohamud Dhaqane, Al Itihaad spokesman in Mogadishu, quickly announced responsibility for the attack and reiterated Al Itihaad complicity in the two hotel bombings. Dhaqane added that Al Itihaad would continue attacking senior Ethiopian officials and would pursue its guerrilla attacks in the Ogaden until the latter became independent.

A bomb ripped through the bar and lounge of the government-owned Wabe Shebelle Hotel in Addis Ababa in August. Ethiopia believed that Al Itihaad was responsible and responded to the series of attacks with a military assault on Al Itihaad's followers in Somalia's Gedo region. This action destroyed Al Itihaad's base at Luuq and confirmed some non-Somali support, including foreign individuals, for the fundamentalist organization. Al Itihaad claimed in September 1996 that both its soldiers and Ethiopian troops died in a smaller fracas at Dolow, a town that has sections on both sides of the Ethiopian-Somalia border near the Kenya tri-point. The Ethiopian Ministry of Defense announced an attack by Al Itihaad forces at Dolow in December. A leading Somali cleric and one of the

founders of the Islamic courts in north Mogadishu, Sheikh Abdulkadir Mohamed Sheik Somow, denounced Al Itihaad at the end of 1996 for claiming to speak for Islam in Somalia and attacking Ethiopian forces inside Ethiopia.

Al Itihaad executive committee member Sheikh Hassan Dahir Aweys stated in Mogadishu at the beginning of 1997 that his organization would become an Islamic political party. After sharply condemning Ethiopian actions inside Somalia, he denied that Al Itihaad in Somalia had any connection with attacks by Al Itihaad supporters in Ethiopia. This marked a change from the earlier Mogadishu office policy of Al Itihaad, which claimed responsibility for attacks in Ethiopia. Terrorist attacks continued in 1997—at a private hotel and the post office in Harar, the Makonnen Hotel in Dire Dawa, and the Tigray Hotel, Blue Tops restaurant, and Tana market in Addis Ababa. No one claimed responsibility and Ethiopian authorities ultimately arrested individuals linked to the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) for most of these incidents. Oromos constitute the largest ethnic group in Ethiopia; many support the EPRDF, but a significant minority does not. The main branch of the OLF, which is composed of Christians and Muslims, does not have any direct ties to Al Itihaad. In the meantime, Ethiopian forces continued to cross into Somalia as necessary in search of Al Itihaad.

One Ethiopian Oromo group, albeit of minor importance, with links to Al Itihaad is the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Oromia (IFLO). It has conducted a few small-scale attacks in Ethiopia's Bale Region. A new organization called the Oromo, Somali, and Afar Liberation Alliance (OSALA) announced its formation in Mogadishu in August 1997. The group consists of the United Oromo People's Liberation Front, Oromo Abbo Liberation Front, Somali People's Liberation Front, Oromo People's Liberation Organization, the Afar People's Liberation Army, and the Islamic Union of Western Somalia. It vowed to put an end to centuries of Judeo-Christian ideological hegemony in Ethiopia and Eritrea by means of guerilla warfare and popular uprising. Little was subsequently heard from this organization. One group that has conducted limited terrorist activity in the Ogaden and probably has ties to Al Itihaad is the militant wing of the Ogaden National Liberation Front, a Somali organization.

Al Itihaad raised the possibility in October 1997 of discussions with Ethiopian authorities, emphasizing that Ethiopian forces should depart the Gedo Region of Somalia. This suggestion went nowhere. Instead, Ethiopia instituted a policy of quietly providing military equipment

to friendly Somali militia in central and southern Somalia. This occurred as Hussein Aideed extended his authority into Gedo, probably in collaboration with Al Itihaad. Somali groups, including Al Itihaad, announced in Mogadishu in January 1998 that Ethiopia had pulled all of its forces out of Gedo. Al Itihaad abducted six Red Cross workers in the Ogaden in July but released them two weeks later.

The Ethiopian-Eritrean conflict that broke out in May 1998 soon began to impact Ethiopian-Somali relations. As early as July, the head of Ethiopia's Somali regional administration accused Eritrea of collaborating with Al Itihaad in efforts to discourage Ethiopian Somalis from joining the military effort against Eritrea. Once all-out war developed with Eritrea, Ethiopia was not in a position to devote much attention to the Somali border. In June 1999 it did briefly send troops into Somalia in support of the Rahanwein Resistance Army against supporters of Hussein Aideed. In July four men assassinated Al Itihaad commander Colonel Abdullahi Irad outside a mosque in Mogadishu. For the past seven years, Irad had organized the raids against Ethiopian forces in the Ogaden. Al Itihaad suggested Ethiopia was responsible for the assassination. Ethiopia claimed that between May and August it killed or captured more than 1,000 OLF and Al Itihaad forces near the Somali border. Ethiopia accused Eritrea of working with Hussein Aideed and anti-Ethiopian groups operating out of Somalia.

As an indication of the fluid political landscape, Hussein Aideed appeared in Addis Ababa in October 1999 for talks with Ethiopian officials. Ethiopia again sent troops into Somalia in January 2000, this time in the Mudug region in support of Abdullahi Yussuf Ahmed, the president of the new Puntland regional administration in northeastern Somalia. Ahmed claimed that Al Itihaad had become active in certain parts of Puntland with the aim of creating problems between Ethiopia and Somalia. Occasional terrorist attacks continued in the Ogaden. In February armed men opened fire on a Doctors Without Borders vehicle, killing one person and seriously injuring another. No one claimed responsibility, and the Ethiopian government spokesperson suggested it could have been conducted by the OLF, Al Itihaad, or the Ogadeni National Liberation Front.

A review of press coverage throughout the 1990s reveals virtually no connection made by the media between Al Itihaad and Osama bin Laden. The earliest reference was a March 2000 *East African Standard* report from Nairobi that stated that Al Itihaad is reportedly closely linked to Osama

bin Laden. This situation changed dramatically after September 11, 2001. For example, Ethiopia's government daily, the *Ethiopian Herald*, wrote in late September that Ethiopia had proof of links between Al Itihaad and Al Qaeda. The U.S. and international press have been replete with similar linkages. Ethiopian Foreign Ministry spokesman Yemane Kidane stated categorically in late September that Al Itihaad has a direct link with Osama bin Laden. Responding to a question from the Arabic-language paper *al-Hayat*, Prime Minister Meles said on November 24 that the Al Qaeda network exists in Somalia and that Al Itihaad is the real power behind the Transitional National Government (TNG), a charge denied by the TNG president.

After the United States shut down the American offices of Somalia's largest remittance company known as Al Barakat for alleged ties to Al Qaeda, Ethiopia went a step further and closed all Somali remittance banks operating in the country. Authorities said they would allow the banks to reopen if an investigation shows they have no terrorist connections. According to recent press accounts, Ethiopian troops invited by Abdullahi Yussuf Ahmed entered Puntland in late November and again in January 2002. Ethiopia denied the reports. In mid-December 2001, Ethiopian foreign minister Mesfin accused Eritrea, which continues to have poor relations with Ethiopia, of providing training and support to Al Itihaad and the OLF. Speaking from Addis Ababa in late December, Hussein Aideed said his followers would do everything possible to eliminate Islamic extremists such as Al Itihaad from Somalia. He added that the TNG in Somalia has close links with Osama bin Laden and subsequently called on the United States to help rid Somalia of Al Itihaad.

Ethiopia after September 11

Looking first at Somalia, the events of September 11 offer Ethiopia an opportunity to attract support from the United States and possibly others to put even greater pressure on its enemies based in Somalia, especially Al Itihaad. There is no question that Al Itihaad, especially in the 1996–1998 time frame, conducted terrorist acts against Ethiopia and is properly cited by the United States as a terrorist organization. As a result of strong Ethiopian retaliatory actions and perhaps some tactical considerations within the organization, Al Itihaad seems to have been less engaged against Ethiopia since 1998. The linkages between Al Qaeda and Al Itihaad are not absolutely clear based on publicly available information, but it is reasonable to assume there has been coordination and consultation at a minimum. The ties may be much deeper. Nevertheless, Al

Itihaad is essentially a Somali organization with a Somali agenda. No information in the public domain suggests that its terrorist activities have so far gone beyond its Somali agenda. This is, of course, no consolation for Ethiopia as it defends the Somali-inhabited Ogaden.

With or without external support, Ethiopia will take advantage of the current antipathy toward terrorist groups in the Horn of Africa to improve its security situation and reduce the strength of its enemies, whether or not they have links to terrorism. Critics of Ethiopia often suggest that it prefers that Somalia remain a failed state where numerous fiefdoms retain limited geographical control. This conclusion is accurate only if the presumed alternative is a unified Somali state that is hostile to Ethiopia. The best of all worlds for Ethiopia is a friendly and unified Somalia that has no interest in Somali irredentism and is capable of maintaining internal security and preventing the rise of groups like Al Itihaad. Such a regime may be wishful thinking; in the meantime, Ethiopia will support friendly, albeit constantly changing, fiefdoms.

Turning to Sudan, the events of September 11 did not significantly affect Ethiopia's relations with its neighbor to the west. Ties between the two countries had normalized before September 11. Ethiopia will always have a healthy skepticism about the motives of a fundamentalist government in Khartoum. At the same time, the leadership of both countries is essentially pragmatic. Due to its ongoing dispute with Eritrea and less-than-perfect relations with Djibouti, Ethiopia wants access to Port Sudan and wishes to avoid conflict along the 1,000-mile-long Sudan border. Sudan welcomes decreased Ethiopian support for the SPLA and also wants to avoid security problems along the border. Sudanese president al-Bashir seems to be firmly in control, at least for now, and supported by moderate fundamentalists in the government. Hassan al-Turabi, the leader of the extremist wing, remains under arrest. Although some radical fundamentalists remain in the government, they appear to be holding back. Ethiopia is well aware of the enhanced cooperation between Sudan and the United States on terrorism issues. All of these factors encourage Ethiopia for the foreseeable future to continue the process of improving ties with Sudan that began well before September 11.

As the United States pays more attention to terrorism and the role of Islamic fundamentalism in the Horn of Africa, it is important to understand the short-term and long-term antecedents of these issues. Islam is an important part of the Ethiopian body politic and is likely to become more

important in the years ahead. It was a generally positive force in the last century. U.S. policy in Ethiopia needs to be cognizant of and sensitive to the Christian-Islamic divide so that it does not exacerbate an internal relationship that has the potential for conflict.

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