Review

Is the Eritrean Government a victim or a sponsor of Islamic extremism and terrorism?

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The government of Eritrea stands accused by numerous United Nations reports as well as by neighbouring countries, of supporting and sponsoring Islamic insurgents in the Horn of Africa, yet it suppresses its home-grown Islamic insurgents at home. Most interestingly, the Eritrean government is dominated by Christians. This raises questions. What does the Christian-dominated government of Eritrea share or have in common with the Islamic extremists in the Horn of Africa? Why does the Eritrean government support and collaborate with the Islamic insurgents/extremists in the neighbouring countries, when similar groups threaten its existence at home, with the broader objective of establishing an Islamic government? With these questions in mind, this paper argues that the rise and the spread of Islamic extremists in the Horn of Africa did not necessarily come as a result of religious identity, but was motivated by the struggle for political power among the people of this region. This resulted in the existence of two forms of Islamic extremism: (i) 'state-sponsored', which commits acts of terror in other countries (external), under the logic of 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend' and (ii) 'home-grown ones', (internal) which poses threats and aims to overthrow the government at home. This has resulted not only in hostilities between Eritrea and its neighbours, but also in the political intolerance between the Eritrean government and domestic Islamic groups.

Key words: Eritrean, Ethiopia, Sudan, terrorism, Islamic extremist, Islamic fundamentalism, Horn of Africa.

INTRODUCTION

In its report released in July 2011, the United Nations Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea accused the government of Eritrea of planning to disrupt the African Unity summit in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. It accused Eritrea of training rebels to carryout bombings in Addis Ababa, by (i) attacking the AU headquarters with a car bomb as African leaders took breaks; (ii) blowing up Africa's largest market; and (iii) attacking the area between the Prime Minister's office and the Sheraton Hotel, where most heads of state stay during AU summits. The report accused Eritrea of spying activities in countries such as Uganda, South Sudan, Kenya and Somalia, in this way posing a threat to regional peace and security. Although the Eritrean government disputed this, the country stands accused of supporting Islamic groups such as Al Shabaab and Hizbul-Islam, which operate in the Horn Africa, in general, and in Somalia, in particular. The question that baffles many is: why should a sovereign government choose to sponsor groups that advocate terrorism in other countries and among ordinary peoples of the Horn of Africa?

To comprehend this question, we need to understand

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the motives and the point of view of those who perpetrate acts of terrorism and those who abhor terrorism. Islam is a peaceful religion and it is one of the largest religions in western and northern African countries. Most of west African countries are peaceful countries, in which Christians and Muslims live side by side in harmony. The same cannot be said about the Horn of Africa. The Islam that flourishes in this region (the Horn of Africa) is characterised by 'extremism'. This is not a problem, since there is a distinction between 'Islam' and 'Islamic Extremism'. Islamic Extremism though is normally linked with terrorism, yet, in reality 'Islamic Extremism' does not necessarily result in acts of terrorism. Islamist movements base their ideologies on the teachings of the Quran. Most of them harbour ambitions of establishing Islamic governments in their countries. Their nature and activities vary globally. Some of them oppose governments in their countries, compete for power peacefully and seek to bring change that benefits their society; while others resort to violence and coercion to achieve their goals. Those who resort to coercion bring disruption and eventual destruction to their societies. Whether these groups are terrorists, freedom fighters or other kind of revolutionaries, depends on who defines 'terrorism'. During the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s, for example, most Western observers defined the Taliban and the Mujahidin fighter who placed bombs in streets or markets in Kabul as legitimate 'freedom fighters', or 'opponents of the Soviet aggression'. This was so because most Western European countries opposed and feared the expansion of Soviet influence in Asia. At the same time, other Islamists insurgents who placed bombs in streets and markets in Algeria, Beirut, or Cairo were termed 'fanatical terrorists' (Voll, 1997: 241). The Taliban and the Mujahidin movements in Afghanistan received military assistance and training in Western countries, including the United States, Britain and France, to mention but three. These inconsistencies in definitions and perspectives render 'terrorism' to be a relative term.

Likewise, after September 11 2001 many Islamist groups labeled as terrorist groups by the international media, most notably the BBC, CNN, Sky News and Fox News. The message broadcast was that "Muslim extremist groups were responsible for attacking Western Civilization characterized by peace and democracy". Islamic Extremists in the Muslim world viewed the attack as the fight against evil and intrusive modernization, secular and consumerist forces that spearhead the adulteration of Islamic tradition and faith. In short, the Muslim world views the 9/11 attack on America as a victory for Islam and a setback for America (Tolin, 2002).

'Islamic extremism' and 'terrorism' are thus widely used, but loosely defined, terms both in the media and in academia. Although, logically, Islamic extremism does not necessarily or inevitably lead to terrorism, it often does. Islamic extremism involves the enforcement of narrow sectarian practices and may involve using political

power. In order to consolidate political power, extreme coercion becomes necessary and extreme coercion involves violence (Engineer, 2003). Violence is justified by the scriptures of the Quran based on the belief and readiness to be rewarded in the hereafter and on the belief of 'the city of faith and the city of war'. According to Bumeister, 'this readiness must be present if the actions performed are to be acceptable in the eyes of God'. But, most interestingly, the declaration of a jihad is based on this belief of "the city of faith and the city of war" (Bumeister, 2002), and those who adhere to these principles and engage in the holy struggle are promised paradise after death (Bumeister, 2002). This is the context in which Islamic extremists make the word of the Quran their main principle. However, when defining extremism or fundamentalism, a distinction needs to be made between Islam and Islamist movements, since Islam is a religion. As a religion it promotes peace and harmony. After all, '…most Muslims live lives of tolerance, order and decency' (Booth and Dunne, 2002: 4). On the other hand, Islamist movements are organizations who use 'the principle of the Islamic region' in mobilization for supports, and in spreading their political ideologies. Such movements include militant groups that resort to coercion and violence, such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Palestine, the Iranian Mujahidin and Mujahidin organizations in Kashmir, Hisbul-Islam, al-Shabaaba and the Islamic Court Union in Somalia. These groups have developed international networks of supporters and donors which include states and individuals. The Islamic Republic of Iran, for instance, has long been supportive of the Hezbollah in Lebanon. Similarly, in the 1980s, the United States of America provided significant military support for Afghan Mujahidin in the fight against the Soviet occupation (Voll, 1997: 241-242). The use of coercion and violence that mainly targets innocent civilians, however, is what defines the acts of these groups as terrorists.

While the Islamist movements such as Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Mujahidin are regarded as freedom fighters in the Muslim world, there are several other Islamist movements which operate domestically within states with the intention of seizing power from governments. Most of these fall under the broader umbrella of the Islamic movement affiliated to Al-Qaeda and they include the Jihad Movements in Eritrea, the Muslim Brotherhood in North Africa, the Islamic Court Union and al-Shabaab and Hisbul Islam in Somalia. Al-Qaeda as a movement operates globally. Its objective is to establish governments in predominantly Muslim countries based on the principles of the Quran and the Shari'a Law. It does not only fight governments in home countries, but also targets Western governments, especially those with global influence. It is in this context that the attacks on Western states' establishments and systems can be understood.

The focus of this article, though, is not on Al-Qaeda,

but on how the Eritrean government supports and suppresses activities of the Islamic movements. It also examines Islamic extremism in the Horn of Africa. However, before we proceed, an understanding of the underlying philosophical theory of Islamic fundamentalism is imperative

THEORETICAL EXPOSITION OF ISLAMIC FUNDAMENTALISM

The conceptual framework of Islamic fundamentalism is rooted in a conscious attempt to revive and restate the theoretical relevance of Islam in the modern world. This framework is evident in the writings of three 20th century Islamic thinkers, namely Sayyid Qutb, Ayatollah Ruhollah al-Khomeini and Abu al-Ala-al Mawdudi. These thinkers provide authoritative guidelines in the philosophical discourse of Islamic fundamentalism. In the continuum, Ayatollah al-Khomeini and al-Mawdudi are credited for formulating a new Islamic political theory of fundamentalism, whereas Sayyid Qutb is credited for formulating a coherent exposition of Islam as a philosophical system.

However, at the core of these thinkers' theories, is their struggle or fight against paganism *(jahiliyya).* According to Islamic fundamentalist reasoning, paganism is the generic designation given to all systems of thought other than Islam. According to Sayyid Qutb (1982), paganism is deemed to be present wherever peoples' hearts are devoid of a divine doctrine that governs their thoughts and concomitant legal rules to regulate their lives (Qutb, 1982: 570). He contends that since the dawn of history human societies had always been the battle ground between belief and unbelief, right and wrong, religious faith and idolatry. These according the Qutb have always been the case in spite of the fact that individuals and their beliefs carry different names in different stages. Thus duality, according to Qutb, has always remained essentially the same since the history of mankind, and was evident in the definition of paganism not only in Greek philosophy but also in the ancient world as well as utilitarianism and existentialism in modern age (Qutb, 1982).

Thus, in Islamic fundamentalist reasoning, the essential nature of human being is religion and that atheism is an aberration. It contends that throughout history of mankind there have been only two methods or ways of organizing human life: the first being the one that declares God to be the sole sovereign and source of legislation; and the second being the one that rejects God, either as a force in the universe or as the lord and administrator of society (Choueiri, 1990). These methods, according to Islamic fundamentalist reasoning are irreconcilable since the first one denotes Islam and the second one paganism. It contends that once human beings accept legislation to be dependent on the will of an individual, a minority or a majority, and not as the prerogative of God alone, they lapse into a type of paganism, be at a dictatorship, capitalism, theocracy or communism (Choueiri, 1990).

It is in this context that Islamic fundamentalists not only draw moral justification for denouncing and overthrowing secular governments, but also designate themselves as lieutenants of God on earth. The duty of the lieutenants *(khalafa)* of human beings is to carry out the command of God especially in human societies of the 20th century, which resemble in their way of life the state of affairs that existed before the rise of Islam (al-Khomeini, 1981). It is therefore in this context that Islamic fundamentalism sought to discover a new fundamental constituents of its doctrine with primary objective of reestablishing Islam as a system of government. This task fell to well-disciplined groups of believers or pioneers know by various names such as: (i) "the vanguard" by Sayyid Qutb (1982); "the Revolutionary Party" by Abu al-'Ala-al Mawdudi (1932); and "the holy warriors" by Ayatollah Ruholah al-Khomeini (1981). These pioneers according to these thinkers are called upon to undertake the reinstatement of Islam in both its doctrinal and political dimensions through the struggle called *jihad* or the holy war launched in the path of God.

It was this line of thinking that fuelled the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in the 20th century not only in the Horn of Africa but also globally.

Having underlined the theoretical assumptions of Islamic fundamentalism, it is imperative that we unpack the domestic political dynamics of Eritrea, since the government of Eritrea is accused of sponsoring terrorism in the Horn of Africa and at the same time it also accuses neighboring countries of sponsoring its home-grown Islamic insurgents.

THE RISE OF ISLAMIC FUNDAMENTALISM IN ERITREA

Evidence shows that the root cause of the rise of Islamic Extremism in Eritrea is not necessarily religious, but is rooted in political competition for the control of the state between the Christians and the Muslims. This is a current development, since the Islamic Extremist only began posing major threats to the Christian-dominated government of Eritrea after independence in 1991. Eritrea joined the war against the dictatorial government of Mengistu Haile Mariam as part of its struggle for independence from Ethiopia. After the fall of Mengistu in 1991, Eritrea was rewarded with independence. Like Ethiopia, Eritrea established a government dominated by Christians.

Evidence shows that the relationship between Christians in Ethiopia and those in Eritrea dates back to the early seventh century. This was the same period in which Islam is believed to have entered the Horn of Africa, or at least those parts of it now known as Eritrea

and Ethiopia, through a group of Arab followers (www.ashab.com) of Islam, who sought refuge in the Axumite Kingdom (www.ethiopiaworld.com) The refugees were well treated and permitted to practise their religion as they wished (Aba-Arre, 1998: 14). The highlands of Ethiopia, however, are known for their early history of Christianity. The Bible tells us that the Queen of Sheba, one of King Solomon's concubines, was an Ethiopian. The expansion of Islam, and the decline of the Axumite Kingdom in the tenth century, led to the rise of fanatical Christian rulers, who proclaimed the restoration of "the glory of Christian Kings". Amda Seyon (1314 to 1344) declared the establishment of the 'new Christian Dynasty' through legitimizing the 'transfer of power and the conversion to Christianity'. Repeated raids on Muslim territories followed. Yekunno Amlak (1270 to 1285); Amda Seyon (1314 to 1344); Sayfa Ar'ad (1344 to 1371); Dawit (1380 to 1412); Tewodros (1412 to 1413) and Yeshaq (1413 to 1430) invaded Muslim territories and forced many Muslims to convert to Christianity. They killed and exiled Muslims who rebelled against their rule (Quirin, 1992: 41-43). Islamic raids from the Somali port of Zeila plagued the highlands of Ethiopia in the late fifteenth century (Shinn, 2001).

In the first half of the sixteen century, Ahmad Ibn Ibrahim al-Ghazi, a Turkish Muslim leader, united a diverse group of Muslims in a 'jihad' – in this case, jihad was meant holy war - designed to end Christian power in the Ethiopian highlands. Aided by forces from the Red Sea coast of present-day Eritrea, Ibn Ibrahim al-Ghazi defeated the Ethiopian emperor and conquered most of the Ethiopian highlands. In the process, he destroyed a number of Ethiopia's centres of Christian civilization; and his power extended from the highlands to the Red Sea coast of Eritrea. In 1543, the Portuguese helped the Ethiopian emperor raise a large army that defeated and killed Ibn Ibrahim al-Ghazi. Thousands of Muslims and Christians lost their lives in these wars (Aba-Arre, 1998: 15).

In another related Muslim-Christian conflict, the Horn of Africa suffered a Muslim invasion from Egypt. In 1875, the Khedive of Egypt organized a huge force designed to conquer the Christian empire of Ethiopia. When the Egyptians marched into the highlands of Eritrea, an Ethiopian force defeated them. In 1888, Sudanese forces, led by the Mahdi, invaded the former Ethiopian capital, Gondar, and burned many of its churches. The following year the Ethiopians defeated the Mahdi's troops at the Battle of Metema, on the Ethiopian-Sudanese border (Aba-Arre, 1998: 15).

It is clear from this selective account of major conflicts that the Muslim-Christian rivalry in the Horn of Africa is a product of historical internal and external hostility. The Ethiopian Christian Emperors have the dominant power, to the extent that they were able to suppress local resistance and managed to defeat external aggression. However, the impact of such religious hostilities and external interference could not be easily healed. This antagonism contributed negatively to Eritrean politics in the 1940s, though struggles for political power were also motivated by personal ambition.

Many Eritrean Christians were suspicious of their Muslim compatriots. While most Eritrean Muslims actively fought for Eritrea's independence, the majority of the Christians (in the 1940s) favoured union with Ethiopia. The reason behind their rivalry was clearly religious mistrust. Most Eritrean Christians considered that commitment to the independence struggle implied submission to the Muslim societies of the Middle East. Similarly, Muslims regarded favouring unity with Ethiopia as implying submission to the Christian Empire of Ethiopia. Therefore, the 'Eritrean patriots during the early period (1940s and 1950s) knew that religion would play a central role in the struggle for and against self-determination and in the task of nation building in the long-term' (Amar, 2003).

Some of the Eritrean patriots, such as Ibrahim Sultan Ali and Woldeab Woldemariam, played a symbolic role in an attempt to keep the people united. The first simple act of confidence-building in the possibility of unity among Christian and Muslim people, mainly in the highlands, was their attempt to break the old tradition of not eating meat of animals slain by the 'other side.' At that stage, persuading people to break the taboo of eating from 'one dish' (Muslims and Christians sharing a meal) was not easy.

However, they understood that they had to break barriers and build bridges for national unity. Eritrean periodicals, such as *'Aynifelale* ['Let's not be disunited' in Tigrinya, one of Eritrea's local languages], was published with slogans and pictures educating fellow Eritreans on how important it was for members of the two religious groups to live in harmony (Amar, 2003). However, the rivalry between Christians and Muslims worsened with the rise of Islamic extremism in the 1990s across the region (Horn of Africa).

The Eritrean Islamist groups are movements that represent the evolution and progress of Islamic extremism in Eritrea. They evolved partly from the rise of Islamist extremist elements in the Middle East during the1960s and 1970s; and partly as a result of internal conflicts among Eritrean armed factions, which fought for Eritrean independence between 1961 and1991(Team, 2001). Located in the Red Sea coastal area, Eritrea is strongly influenced by situations in the Middle East. Islamic revivalism and expansion of extremism has had an undeniable impact on Eritrea's political history. Many Eritrean students who joined Islamic schools, particularly in Saudi Arabia, during the 1960s and 1970s, were influenced by the ideologies of Hasan al-Banna, Sayyid Qutb and Abu al-ala Mawdudi (Choueiri, 1990; Bland, 1994; Monshipouri, 1998; Joef, 1998).

The internal conflict within the Eritrean armed factions was the crucial factor for the creation and growth of the

Islamist groups. The Eritrean armed struggle was launched in 1961, after the failure of the campaign for independence against British colonial rule that had been underway since the early 1940s. From its inception, the armed struggle aimed at achieving national independence. There was no obvious sectarianism among those fighting to free Eritrea. However, there was ideological rivalry within the leadership of the armed factions, especially in the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF). The division was between the politics of right and left (Team, 2001). Many Eritrean politicians argue that ELF was dominated by the doctrines of the Labour Party, which advocated socialism. This socialist ideology did not please conservative or sectarian elements.

There was also an ongoing movement that opposed a sectarian tendency within the leadership of ELF. This movement led to the split of ELF into two separate factions: ELF and the Peoples Liberation Front (PLF) which was changed to the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) in 1977. The EPLF is the current ruling party in Eritrea. The Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) was later dominated by Muslims. This was followed by the establishment of other Islamic groups such as the Islamic Brotherhood and the Eritrean Islamic Jihad Movement. This split sparked a civil war from 1980 to 1981, which resulted in the expulsion by the EPLF of ELF from Eritrean territory to the Sudanese borders (Team, 2001). The expulsion disorganized the leadership of ELF to extent that some in the leadership began entertaining Islamist extremist ideologies. They turned to religion as a means of mobilizing political support.

This resulted in the establishment of the Eritrean jihad movements as a response to the sectarian and discriminatory tendencies of the EPLF government against Muslims during the armed struggle and in the post-independence period. During the liberation struggle, the movements accused the EPLF of not respecting the social structures of Eritrean society and forcibly conscripting Muslim women, which was against the Islamic religion. In post-independence Eritrea, Islamist groups accused the government of restricting and even banning Islamic practices and torturing and abducting many Muslims merely because they were genuine Muslims. In short, they accused the government of overall tyrannical rule over the country.

The EPLF government depicts the Eritrean Islamist groups in two ways: First as bankrupt organizations in the politics of the armed struggle for Eritrean independence, whose failures led to terrorist acts based on religious ideology; and secondly as instruments of external forces. The EPLF government points fingers at the Islamic Front, the ruling party in the Sudan, for backing these groups with the aim of establishing an Islamic government in Eritrea, as part of Islamic internationalization. Islamic internationalization aims to bring together various Islamist groups from all corners of the world under the umbrella of the Popular Arab and Islamic Congress (PAIC). The

Sudan is the centre for such a conglomeration. It was in this context that the Eritrean government began supporting opposition movements in neighbouring countries in retaliation for the support that neighbouring countries were giving to Islamic movements in Eritrea, hence the evolution of the logic of 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend'. The question, however, is: how does this manifest in the horn of Africa?

THE LOGIC OF "THE ENEMY OF MY ENEMY IS MY FRIEND" IN THE HORN OF AFRICA

Islamist groups exist in almost all states of the Horn of Africa, namely Somalia, Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia and the Sudan. While governments of these states battle against the rise of Islamist movements at home, they also sponsor and provide sanctuary to Islamist movements in neighbouring countries, in so doing sanctioning acts of terrorism in this region. However, no state takes responsibility for such acts. Instead, they trade accusations and counter-accusations among themselves. Such acts have led to deterioration of relations between and among states in this region. The enmity between the governments of Eritrea and the Sudan, for instance, is one example, which eventually led to the breaking of diplomatic ties between these countries in December 1994. The row between these governments began when Eritrea accused Sudan of harbouring and nurturing Eritrean Islamic movements in its territory. Other countries in this region, as well as western European countries and the United States of America accused Sudan of supporting jihad movements whose intention were to destabilize non-Islamic governments' social and political cohesion in the region. The Islamic Front government of Sudan was accused of providing sanctuary for the 'International Terrorist Network' such as Al Qaeda. Such accusations encouraged other countries in the region, namely Eritrea, Ethiopia, Uganda and Kenya, to establish a Regional Alliance to deal with a destabilization threat from the Sudan. According to the *Washington Post 10 Nov. 1996* the Alliance was supported by the USA and the EU and Sudan was listed among states that provide support to international terrorist groups. Although the Sudan denied such allegations, both Western and African states accused it of being involved in giving sanctuary to terrorist organizations. Woodward, for instance, explains that, in 1993, the US administration listed the government of the Sudan as a supporter of 'terrorist' groups (Woodward, 1997: 112). This was primarily based on the fact that Sudan was a safe haven for Osama Bin Laden from 1991 until his expulsion in 1996 (Gilles, 2002: 315-316).

Furthermore, there was a linkage between 'less visible, smaller, and more openly terrorist organizations' (Voll, 1997: 242). The National Islamic Front of the Sudan is a case in point. Woodward and Voll claim that countries

such as Egypt, Eritrea and Ethiopia accused the Sudan of being a base for terrorist groups. Military training camps, which were run by military personnel from Iran and Afghanistan, were established in Sudan (Voll, 1997: 242). Some Islamic militants from Egypt received military training in the Sudan (Woodward, 1997: 109). The same offer of military aid was extended to Eritrean Islamist groups and to Osama Bin Laden himself (Aba-Arre, 1998: 138-145). According to Gunaratna (2002), while in the Sudan (1991-1996) Bin Laden reportedly developed close ties with Sheikh Arefa, the leader of the political wing of the Eritrean Islamic Jihad Movement (EIJM). Because of such ties, Al-Qaeda trained several hundred of the EIJM members in its Sudanese and Afghan camps. Al-Qaeda also provided money to further the EIJM's operations against the government of Eritrea (Guanarantna, 2002:152). One hundred thousand US dollars ($100,000) was provided to the EIJM, to strengthen its military activities (Bergen, 2001: 215). The EIJM appointed Muhammad al-Kheir as one of its leaders, since he was close to Abu Ubaidah al-Banshiri, to liaise between the EIJM and Al-Qaeda. The EIJM is also known as Jama'l Jihad within the Al-Qaeda network (Guanaratna, 2002: 152). Consequently, the EIJM was enlisted in the worldwide network of Osama Bin-Laden. Indeed, in his statement in the General Debate of the 57th Session of the UN General Assembly (2002), the Permanent Head of the Mission of Eritrea to the UN, Ambassador Ahmed Tahir Baduri, complained of the EIJM as a terrorist group, as follows:

The Eritrean Islamic Jihad Movement and the so-called Eritrean Popular Islamic Conference who have been created and sponsored by Al-Qaeda and other regional and international Islamic groups to perpetrate subversive acts in Eritrea for the last ten years. In 1994, Eritrean security forces intercepted assorted group of terrorists, who included in their ranks Al-Qaeda-trained nationals of several countries. In 1995, this group murdered, in cold blood, four Belgian tourists inside Eritrea. Sporadic cross-border acts of terror and subversion continue to this day. In a statement contained in document S/1997/517 of 7 July 1997, my government warned the international community, first the then Organization of African Unity and later the United Nations Security Council, that international terrorist threat from extreme fundamentalist Islamic groups are on the way. The Eritrean Jihad terrorist movements, which are members of the Al-Qaeda network, are now part of the so-called Alliance of Eritrean National Forces. This umbrella organization has bases and physical presence in some neighbouring and a number of western countries. These groups continue to obtain sanctuary as well as financial and other forms of assistance in western capitals (Baduri, 2002).

Baduri seems to claim that the central blame lies within the existence of the PIAC as a centre for various Islamist groups. Among the various groups, Al-Qaeda was depicted as the leader. This was the belief of many observers. By definition, therefore, being a member of this global network implies that the EIJM has a link to the Al-Qaeda network, directly or indirectly. To have a link with Al-Qaeda makes the EIJM a terrorist group, at least by association.

In turn, however, the EIJM complains that there is oppression of Eritrean Muslims by the government of Eritrea, which it defines as a terrorist act in itself. This was emphasized in the words of the EIJM's deputy Secretary, Abul Bara' Hassan Salman:

During the revolution, the regime pointed its guns at the hearts of the unarmed Muslim citizens in order to forcibly conscript Eritreans into the army. Hundreds of Muslim civilians were killed by the regime in this process of conscription. When the regime got into government, they increased their terror activities against Muslim citizens, especially the intellectual terror. They did this through the shutting down of the educational and religious institutions, which worked even during the imperialists' time. A fogy regime came and tightened its reins and closed some of these institutions and is working to dry up the sources of their funds so that it can create a barrier between the Muslim people and their creed. … The regime regards every Muslim who practices his religion, adheres to its obligations, and cares for his honour as a danger, so they filled their prisons with the pious Muslims, teachers and students, politicians, leaders, and the common people, in order to arrest their fear. These base people do not even take prisoners to court for a trial, as there is no true justice in Eritrea. Further, no one dares to ask where these prisoners are held or what had happened to them, for any person who enquires about them will end up in prison too. Eritrea today can be regarded as a country being governed by a very strong terrorist regime, which owns the means to enforce its oppression (Salman, 1998).

From this perspective, it seems useful to ask who, on each occasion, defines 'terrorism'. There can be little doubt that Abul Bara's membership with the EIJM, itself linked to Al-Qaeda, a terrorist organization, damages the credibility of his accusations. However, this does not mean that any oppressive act by the government of Eritrea against its Muslim population is acceptable. Therefore one can argue that there is a contradiction between the EIJM's goal and the means of achieving it. Political goals are better achieved through tolerance, rather than an attempting to manipulate religion as a means to an end.

One can add another disturbing episode, which took place in April 2003. A British geologist, who is believed to have worked for the Canadian firm Nevsun Resources, a mineral exploration company specialising in gold mining, was found killed in Western Eritrea in 2003. The government of Eritrea claimed that this was an act of

terror by the EIJM and was designed to discourage investment in Eritrea (*BBC News*17 April, 2003). The EIJM, however, refuted the accusation and claimed that the killing of innocent civilians has not been their method of fighting. The British government refrained from blaming anyone until further investigations occurred (www.meskerem.net). The claim of not killing civilians by the EIJM, however, was at odds with its explicit acts against civilians in the 1990s. In 1995, for instance, the group killed a civilian elementary school teacher, named Hamid, at a village in Western Eritrea. Such acts were routine incidents in Western Eritrea. They targeted particularly Muslim civilians (interview, 2008). The reason was that the victims were associated with the 'Christian government in Eritrea'.

It seems that the EIJM changed its public accounts of its policies to cover up its previous actions. Nonetheless, it was involved in acts of terror, since it made innocent civilians its targets. Using religion as a means to achieve a sectarian political agenda is unjustifiable. In Islam, killing any person without a just cause is the equivalent of killing the whole of humanity and saving one person's life amounts to saving the whole of humanity. This is a truly humanistic and spiritual dimension of Islam and of many other religions.

Before the border war with Ethiopia in 1998, Eritrea worked with the EU and the USA. This co-operation was rocked by the accusation by the Eritrea government that the European countries and the USA were being lenient towards Sudan, which sponsored insurgent groups in Eritrea. One Eritrean government explained:

There were no strong sanctions from Europe or others to put pressure on the Sudanese regime, for instance. Though sanctions were imposed on the Sudan by the Security Council after the attempt to assassinate President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, they were not effective. Not only that but also those who worked on the sanctions had to lift them because they gave priority to interests they may get from the Sudan (interview, 2008).

This argument suggests that, no matter what penalty the UN imposes, any of the 'big states', such as the USA and the EU, can breach it because they give priority to their own interests unless the threat has a direct impact on them. It also meant that the efforts of Eritrea to halt threats posed by international terrorist networks were not given much attention.

The co-operation between the USA and some countries in East Africa, reached its highest point in 1996, when a report by the *Washington Post* of 10 November 1996 disclosed that the USA had plans to help East African countries to topple the government of the Sudan. The report quoted the Clinton Administration and Congressional officials as saying:

The U.S. government is about to send military aid to three African countries collaborating to help overthrow the militant Islamic regime in the Sudan, regarded in Washington as a key sponsor of international terrorism. Nearly $20 million in surplus U.S. military equipment will be sent to Ethiopia, Eritrea and Uganda, the three countries that support the Sudanese opposition groups in preparation of a joint offensive to topple the Khartoum government (Ottaway, 1996).

Such support continued under the Bush Administration. According to the *Washington Post* report of 10 November 1996, the U.S. government under the Bush administration supplied military aid to these countries. It quoted government officials confirming that military aid was sent to East Africa and that 'all of the military aid is non-lethal and defensive, and includes radios, uniforms, boots and tents, but … could be expanded to include rifles and other weapons' (Ottaway, 1996). The officials denied that the equipment was specifically earmarked for the Sudanese rebels, despite the declared anti-Khartoum policies of the recipient governments. Clarifying the US government's position on this matter, George E. Moose, Assistant Secretary of State for African affairs, was quoted by the report as saying "we are assisting these governments in their own defence. Nothing we are giving them is to be used for any other purpose'. However, both congressional sources and several African affairs experts expressed scepticism as to whether the equipment would be kept from rebel ranks, since much of the aid consisted of basic items suitable for outfitting a guerrilla force (Ottaway, 1996).

Such military aid was interpreted as the first attempt by the US government to overthrow an African state by using another African state since the end of the Cold War. This was so despite the fact that could there had been various implicit interventions, as the *Washington Post* of 10 November 1996, pointed out:

The decision to provide military aid to the three African nations reflected the growing administration anger at the Sudan, which the White House considers second only to Iran as a staging ground for international terrorism and for Islamic extremists involved in subverting neighbouring, pro-U.S. governments. While the United States provided covert military aid directly to anti-communist rebel groups in Angola during the Cold War, this is believed to be the first example in the post-Cold War era of Washington giving military support to African countries avowedly intent on the overthrow of another African government (Ottaway, 1996).

Despite the US government's military assistance to African countries in the fight against terrorism, one Eritrean government official argued that long-term national strategies hindered a stand against the regime in the Sudan due to the fact that "Many European countries were attracted by the development of the oil industry in the Sudan, and that such countries were not ready to compromise their interests till the 9/11 disaster in the US shocked their security directly (interview, 2008). What this official was trying to say was that before the terrorist

attacks in the US in 2001, big countries did not care about the threat of terrorism in the Horn of Africa.

From the above account it is clear that Eritrea was one of the countries that collaborated with other countries in the Horn of Africa to combat terrorism. Its role in finding solutions to bring peace to the Sudan via Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) in East Africa was recognized internationally. It played a crucial role in bringing the Sudanese opposition groups, such as the SPLA and other democratic movements, to the negotiation table with the Sudanese government. This was mainly because Eritrea was the major supporter of Sudanese opposition groups (interview, 2008). However, things changed when the border war broke out between Eritrea and Ethiopia in 1998, in that the Eritrean government began supporting groups that opposed the Ethiopian government and *vice versa*.

ROLE OF THE ERITREAN GOVERNMENT IN SPONSORING TERRORISM

Bad neighbourliness does not only exist between Eritrea and the Sudan, but also between Eritrea and Ethiopia. Soon after attaining its independence from Ethiopia in 1991, Eritrea and Ethiopia had good diplomatic relations and collaborated in the fight against Islamic insurgents and terrorism in the Horn of Africa. After all, the governments in these two countries fought jointly to remove the dictatorial government of Mengistu Haile Mariam and when the Mengistu regime fell in 1991, Eritrea attained its independence. Both Eritrea and Ethiopia joined an alliance with other East African states, namely Uganda and Kenya, in isolating the Sudan for promoting and sponsoring terrorism. This Alliance suffered a heavy blow in 1998, when a border conflict erupted between Eritrea and Ethiopia. This led to a shift in diplomatic relations in the region. Ethiopia immediately improved its diplomatic ties with Sudan in so doing disbanding the Regional Alliance which was established to isolate Sudan. This weakened the role of the Front Line States' Alliance against the International Terrorist Network. The main actors in the Alliance, Eritrea and Ethiopia, became fierce foes. The governments of the Sudan and Ethiopia, for their part, initiated programmes of co-operation to isolate the government of Eritrea and labelled the Eritrean government an aggressor. Furthermore, they began fostering and aiding every Eritrean opposition group.

The Eritrean government responded by giving aid and support to the enemies of the Ethiopian and Sudanese governments. This became particularly evident in 2006, when Ethiopia invaded Somalia in pursuit of Islamic insurgents. The Eritrean government took advantage of the situation by providing military aid to Somali insurgents. Historically, the Eritreans have made common cause with the Somalis against the central

Ethiopian government. Between 1977 and 1978 Somalia and Ethiopia fought over the Ogaden region, a Somali regional state in Ethiopia. It covers an area of 400 000 sq km (www.wikipedia). It is inhabited by predominantly ethnic Somali and Muslims. The dispute was never resolved and the Ethiopian government continues to battle with Islamic insurgents in this region.

The fact that both Somalia and Eritrea fought against Ethiopia at different times during the borders issue drove Eritrea and Somalia into an alliance against the Ethiopian government. The border war between Eritrea and Ethiopia lasted from 1998 until 2000 and resulted in more than 100,000 casualties on both sides (www.wikipedia). Although the war ended with a negotiated agreement of ownership concerning the disputed area, neither government has fully accepted or implemented the agreement. Eritrea is particularly discontent with the US and holds the US responsible for not forcing Ethiopia to honour and implement the peace agreement which awarded Eritrea the symbolically important town of Badme to its side of the border (Gamage, 2009). In terms of the Ethiopia-Eritrea border commission which was overseen by the US, it awarded Eritrea with Badme. However, Ethiopia did not honour the agreement and the US, as a guarantor of the agreement did nothing to compel Ethiopia to implement the terms of the agreement.

Several factors explain this political situation. Cardinal among these is that the US sees Ethiopia as its strategic partner in the Horn of Africa in its global war on terror, due to Ethiopia's size and its influence in the region. Over and above, the US has a sour relationship with the Sudan and cannot have a strategic partnership with Somalia due to its instability. Although the US has good relationship with Djibouti and has military facilities in that country, Djibouti is small and could not become the pillar on which the US could build a regional strategy. The same applies to Eritrea. Eritrea is smaller than Ethiopia. It is therefore in this context that Eritrea resent the US for favouring Ethiopia in its border dispute in the Horn of Africa. Consequently, both countries have periodically remobilized troops along the border and tensions between the two countries have remained high. It is in this context that both countries have been supporting each other's enemies.

Since the end of the war between Eritrea and Ethiopia, both the United Nations and some Western countries accused Eritrea of providing arms and other support to the Islamic Court Union, al-Shabaab, and Hisbul Islam in Somalia, against the Ethiopian troops which invaded that county in 2006.In November 2006 a UN report stated that at least 2000 Eritrean troops were in Somalia supporting the Islamic Courts Union, a charge that Eritrea denied (www.BBCnews.co.uk/2/hi/Africa/8964939.stm). Instead, the Eritrean government condemned Ethiopia's intervention in Somalia. The Islamic Court Union is one of the major Islamic insurgents in Somalia and is one of the

major enemies of the Ethiopian government. The objective of the Eritrean government in assisting the Islamic Union, therefore, is to ensure the continued destabilization of the Islamic insurgents in Ethiopia, especially in the Ogaden region. This was seen as the main cause of Ethiopia's decision to enter Somalia in December 2006, primarily to send a clear warning to Eritrea.

Of great significance in this conflict were the pariah status that Eritrea gained in the eyes of the international community, on the one hand, and the international community's support for Ethiopia's cause, on the other. The US government, which supported both Eritrea and Ethiopia against Sudan, clearly favoured and supported Ethiopia against Eritrea. This was made clear by James Swan, the former US Deputy Assistant Secretary for African Affairs in the Bush administration when he stated:

Ethiopia's political leaders have committed themselves to a new collaborative relationship for the good of the enemy. Eritrea has chosen to support extremist elements, including the Al-Qaeda affiliated Al Shabaab militia in Somalia, in an effort to the political process. While the rest of the region and the international community have united behind a common strategy for achieving lasting peace and stability in Somalia, Eritrea has opted to support terrorists and spoilers while encouraging continued violence. There is no justification for such actions. The ruling cabal, to our great regret, has taken a wrong path towards increased domestic repression and hardships, and regional and international isolation (Swan, 2007).

A series of United Nations reports between 2007 and 2011 points fingers at Eritrea and condemns the country for sponsoring terrorism in the Horn of Africa. In July 2007, for instance, the United Nations Monitoring Group in Somalia blamed Eritrea for being a major weapon supplier. This accusation was based, first on the aircraft that made 13 flights from Eritrea's capital, Asmara, to Mogadishu and second on the importation of SA-18 surface-to-air missiles (Varney, 2007). The report alleged that the Eritrean government offered sanctuary to Sheik Hassan Dahir Aweys, the head of the Islamic Court Union, the major insurgent group in Somalia (Varney, 2007). It claims that Dahir Aweys lived in Asmara from 2007 until April 2009, before returning to Somalia. The report further alleges that Eritrea allowed a major gathering of figures opposed to Somalia's interim government to be held in Asmara in September 2007. They included a number of prominent Islamists, which formed the Alliance for the Re-Liberation of Somalia. It is alleged that President Isaias Afwerki openly backed the formation of this federation and that Sheik Hassan Dahir Aweys was also in attendance. This angered Jendayi Frazer, the former Assistant Secretary of State for Africa in the Bush administration, who observed:

… clearly the fact that Eritrea is providing sanctuary for terrorists is best illustrated by the report that Sheik Hassan Dahir Aweys was in Asmara yesterday (August 17, 2007) (Varney, 2007)

She threatened that Eritrea would be included by the Department of State in the list of states who sponsor terrorism. Notwithstanding, Eritrea was not included in the US list, which included states such as Syria, Iran, Cuba and North Korea. To be listed among states that sponsor terrorism attracts harsh economic sanctions.

In 2009 the Barack Obama administration followed suit by criticizing and warning Eritrea against sponsoring terrorism in the Horn of Africa. During her visit to African in 2009, the US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, deplored Eritrea's support of Somali insurgents and the destabilization of Somalia. She warned that the US would take tough action if Eritrea continued to support the militants (BBC News on line, 2009). In response to Clinton's warning, the Eritrean Ambassador to Kenya, Salih Omar Abdu, branded the US accusations as a smear campaign aimed at discrediting the image of Eritrea internationally. In an interview with the BBC Network Africa Programme, he emphasized that:

This is a smear campaign against Eritrea under the pretext that Eritrea supplies arms, ammunition and finance to insurgents. But unfortunately this is not the case and Eritrea does not tolerate being an instrument to any country or any government. My county has a moral and legal obligation to support the Somalis. But it has no right to bring or establish a government for Somalis. We believe in a united Somalia. Not like our neighbours, who want to sub-divide it into cantons. Let Somalis solve their problems themselves (BBC News on line, 2009).

Despite such denials, the reports of the UN Monitoring group on Somalia and Eritrea showed that several militant groups operated from Eritrea after Ethiopia flushed them for Somalia, when Ethiopian troops invaded Somalia in 2006. In March 2009 Eritrea was accused by the AU of sponsoring Islamic insurgents in the Horn of Africa. As a result the AU called for sanctions against not only Eritrea, but also against the Islamic insurgents within and outside the region (www.BBC.co.uk/2/hi/africa/8064939.stm). According to the BBC News, this was the first time that the AU called for sanctions against one of its own members. The AU is normally reticent in any direct criticism of its membership. However, the AU was at pains to send 4000 troops to Somalia to support the fragile transitional government of Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed, which was constantly threatened by Eritrean-backed insurgents. The AU also called for the imposition of a no-fly zone and a blockade of sea ports, to prevent the entry of foreign elements into Somalia, as well as to prevent the flow of arms, where hard-line Islamists of Al-Shabaab and Hisbul-Islam are

still battling for control of Mogadishu, the capital of Somalia.

Likewise, the East African regional grouping, Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), called for sanctions against Eritrea and suspended it from IGAD. The Eritrean government dismissed the AU calls and described the organization as toothless. Its Information Minister, Ali Abdo, dismissed these accusations as 'a fabrication distributed by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) agents aimed at discrediting Eritrea.'(www.BBC.co.uk/2/hi/africa/8064939.stm) The BBC News quoted him as saying, 'We have suspended our membership because of irresponsible acts of the AU' (www.BBC.co.uk/2/hi/africa/8064939.stm).

However, Sheik Hassan Dahir Aweys, the spiritual leader of the Islamic insurgents in Somalia, acknowledged in the interview with the Reuters news agency that Eritrea supported their fight; according to him, 'Eritrea supports them because Ethiopia was their common enemy' (www.BBC.co.uk/2/hi/africa/8064939.stm). He went on to say, 'We once helped both countries, but Ethiopia did not reward us' (www.BBC.co.uk/2/hi/africa/8064939.stm) He made these remarks apparently in reference to the war against the dictatorship of Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam, which brought together a coalition of warriors from Eritrea, Somalia and Ethiopia. Eritrea was rewarded with independence in 1991. However, Somalia suffered fragmentation, as Islamic groups scrambled for state control and political power, leading to the disintegration of Somalia.

In July 2011 the UN Monitoring group on Somalia and Eritrea accused the Eritrean government of plotting to bomb the AU headquarters in Addis Ababa during the summit of African heads of state in January 2011. This accusation was based on the evidence presented by 14 convicted people jailed by the Supreme Court in Ethiopia for plotting to bomb the AU headquarters using a car bomb and to attack the area between the Prime Minister's office and the Sheraton Hotel (Clarke, 2011). Four defendants were sentenced to life sentences and six of them to 25-year terms. One of the four remaining convicts was sentenced to 14 years and three to nine years (Clarke, 2011). The court accused the plotters of receiving training in the use of explosives in Eritrea (Clarke, 2011). According to the UN investigators, one of the men arrested in Addis Ababa, namely Omar Idris Mohamed, confessed that the aim of the plot was to kill African leaders and to show that Ethiopia was not safe (Berhane, 2011). The report revealed that Omar was a member of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and was approached by an Eritrean colonel named Gemachew (Berhane, 2011). It states that Omar visited Eritrea in 2009 and 2010 and became the leader of the plot. The report included a letter from Romania, confirming the purchase of the rifle found in the possession of Omar by the Eritrean government in 2004 (Clarke, 2011). The report included copies of payments slips amounting to $80 000 from Eritrean officials in Kenya to the Somali rebel group Al Shabaab (Clarke, 2011). However, the Eritrean United Nations representative, Ambassador Araya Desta, slammed the claims as absurd and nonsensical, with no legal basis, and accused Ethiopian officials and the military of fabricating the case. He emphatically stated that:

Eritrea has never, never participated in any terrorist acts... There is no reason why we should send people to bomb the African Union, when we have just renewed our membership in the African Union this year, and while our representatives are in Addis Ababa. This is ridiculous and absurd (Clarke, 2011).

Ambassador Desta's argument pointed to the complexity of the politics of the region. Some of the arguments presented in the UN reports lack understanding of the history and political dynamics of the region. It does not make sense that Eritrea could plot the bombing of the AU headquarters while its delegation was in attendance of the AU heads of state summit.

What makes Somalia particularly explosive are the links between Ethiopia and Eritrea and the Ethiopian-Eritrean conflict, which is being played out by proxy in Somalia. A critical look at this reveals that this is not the struggle between Islamic Somalia and non-Islamic Ethiopia that some might take it to be. Ethiopia, under the government of Menes Zenawi, is a secular country with a secular government. In fact, the chief of staff of the Ethiopian army, General Samora Yunus, the person who invaded Somalia, is himself Muslim. The population of Ethiopia of 70 million people is split evenly between Christianity and Islam. The same is true for Eritrea. Despite its support for the Islamic Courts Union and Al Shabaab in Somalia, Isaias Afwerki's government is a secular and a nationalist government. The Eritrean population of 4.5 million people is roughly half Moslem and half Christian, although Christians have traditionally dominated the political leadership. This suggests that a Moslem upheaval within Eritrea could pose a threat to Eritrea's current government. Eritrea would thus not want to be a breeding ground for Islamic fundamentalists. Two conclusions can be drawn from this: the first one is that the Eritrean Christian-dominated government supports Islamic opposition forces opposed to the Ethiopian Christian-dominated government and, interestingly, these happen to be Muslims; and the second is that the Eritrean secular government opposes the Ethiopian secular government, which is under Tigrean domination. What this means is that the conflict in the Horn of Africa is not about religious identity, but politics at its best. In the process, these countries harbour enemies of each side. In the 1990s, for instance, Eritrea accused the Sudan of harbouring the Islamic Extremists who posed a threat to the Christian-dominated Eritrean government. Today,

Eritrea stands accused of harbouring Al-Qaeda operatives and the Islamic Courts Union, which pose a threat to neighbouring states.

Al-Qaeda has taken advantage of these conflicts to expand its influence. The dual attacks against the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 2008 were planned in the region. More importantly, the second London bombing suspect, Muktar Said Ibrahim, came from Eritrea, which was at the time a less obvious base for terrorists. In spite of all this, Eritrea has been part of the US 'coalition of the willing', though neighbouring countries have consistently argued that Eritrea harbours several rebel groups, including the Sudan Liberation Army (SLA), which fights in Darfur. In fact, the SLA set up training camps within its borders. However, the turning point came when Ethiopia sent its troops into Somalia in pursuit of Islamic insurgents. It was only then that Eritrea was fingered as a source of arms for these insurgents.

HOW DOES ERITREA ATTEMPT TO IMPROVE ITS IMAGE ABROAD?

The image of the Eritrean government as a sponsor of terror has not yet improved. The United Nations Security Council imposed sanctions against Eritrea in December 2009 under resolution UNSCR 1907 (USA Department of State, 2012). These included embargo on the delivery of military equipments as well as travel bans and asset freezes on Eritrean political and military leaders. The sanctions also called on Eritrea to cease arming, training and equipping armed groups and their members including Al-Shabaab, which destabilize the region. Two of the six Eritrean officials that were slapped with sanctions included Brigadier General Taeme Abraham Goitoin, the director of an intelligent service and Colonel Tewoldel Habte Nagash, an intelligent officer who was alleged to have worked with Al-Shabaab for years through the Eritrean embassy in Kenya. Habte Nagash was alleged to be responsible for issuing of passports, funding, and training of Al-Shabaab and suicide bombers in explosives (Pecquet, 2012; Mauro, 2012). Commenting on the imposition of sanctions on these individuals, the US Ambassador to the United Nations Susan Rice reiterated that:

These individuals all have links to the terrorist organization Al-Shabaab, which remains one of the greatest obstacles to restoring stability in Somalia. The sanctions of the two Eritrean military officials underscore the ongoing concern about Eritrea's violations of Security Council resolutions. Thwarting Somalia's path to peace and creating regional discord will not be tolerated. The United Nations condemns, in the strongest terms, all acts that further destabilize Somalia and bring harm to innocent civilians (Pecquet, 2012).

Furthermore, in December 2011, the Security Council adopted another resolution UNSCR 2023 to strengthen the provisions of the earlier resolutions. This resolution established guidelines for use of the 'Diaspora tax' that government levies on Eritreans living abroad as one measure of countering funding of terrorists. This was necessary because of several reasons: first, Eritrea is not a member of any Financial Action Task force-style regional body, as such its general lack of transparency on banking, financial and economics matters made gathering of information difficult (USA Department of State, 2012). Second, Eritrea does not adhere to international standards for monitoring or regulations of remittance services, but instead monitors remittance and money transfer of the Eritrean in Diaspora, who are required to pay a 2% foreign income tax to the government to receive passport and other services (USA Department of State, 2012). Third, Eritrea extensively monitors money transfers out of the nation to ensure that an artificially huge exchange rate is not undercut by black market exchanges (USA Department of State, 2012). Finally, Eritrea does not require data collection for electronic transfer of money for tracking the Diaspora tax and hard currency outflow for counterterrorism (USA Department of State, 2012).

In 2012, further sanctions were recommended by the UN monitoring group in the Horn of Africa, however, the former US Ambassador to the UN, Susan Rice expressed reservations to do so, citing lack of sufficient evidence to warrant further sanctions against Eritrea (Mauro, 2012). She voiced concern that further sanctions could harm the people of Eritrea who were already suffering severely under the UN Security Council's embargo. The suffering of the Eritreans was compounded by severe drought which affected the entire of the Horn of Africa; forcing more than 61 000 Eritreans to seek refuge in Ethiopia (Mauro, 2012).

In 2012, the US and Eritrea held little dialogue on the issue of terrorism. Eritrea expressed its willingness to cooperate with the US in international counterterrorism and in providing over-flight clearance to US military aircraft engaged in regional security missions. However, several factors led to the collapse of the dialogue. These include (i) poor relationship between Eritrea and the US as well as other potential African partners; (ii) Eritrea's lack of transparency on governing structures and methods of tracking terrorists and safeguarding its citizens; and (iii) the refusal by the Eritrean police to meet with the security officials of western countries (USA Department of State, 2012). This cut off the opportunity for information sharing and dialogue. Eritrea's refusal to cooperate with western countries was based on its principle and national doctrine of self-reliance. Subsequently, Eritrea lost out the opportunity to receive international assistance such as, training, technology and other counterterrorism assistance from other countries such as the US.

This led the US to re-certify Eritrea under Section 40A

of the Arms Export and Control Act as amended, as a country that does not cooperating fully with the US international counterterrorism efforts. This was mainly based on the fact that while Eritrea scrutinizes travelling documents of visitors and closely monitors passengers and flights at Asmara International Airport, it does not take finger prints or share information gathering at ports of entry with the US. The US also noted that although Eritrea tightly controls its borders with Ethiopia and Djibouti, its borders with Sudan remained porous in many places, resulting in considerable movements of people who pass in and out of the borders unrecorded (USA Department of State, 2012).

However Eritrea resent being placed under economic sanctions and accuses the UN monitoring group in the Horn of Africa of bias and inadequacy.

CONCLUSION

The rise of Islamic extremism in Eritrea has both domestic and international dimensions. The internal political problems provide a gap for international organizations to infiltrate the Eritrean Islamic groups, which have now become part of the international jihad movement. The government's exclusion of these groups in state structures was used as a justification to become involved in an international network. Similar to all international Islamist groups, the objective of the Eritrean Islamic groups is to strive to establish a strictly Islamic state. At the same time, the attitudes and expansion of Islamist extremism makes it hard to reconcile with the existing multi-cultural diversities in that country. The government's brutal suppression of the rise of domestic Islamic extremists and its support for Islamic insurgents in neighbouring countries, especially Somalia, has put Eritrea on the world map, making it difficult for states in the Horn of Africa to fight against Islamic extremism jointly and militarily from the outside. This is partly because of the state-sponsored terrorism that is committed in other countries (external), and partly because of 'home grown' (internal) terrorism. Internal terrorism is even more dangerous, since it is embedded in religious extremism, which relies on sentiments that reside in the minds and beliefs of the people. Co-operation among states in this region could have enabled collective efforts and commitments to deal with internal terrorism through political, religious and social action, both by people and governments. A regional or global consortium of religious leaders and governments could have been useful in developing a common approach and appeal to fight extremism in the various countries. Good relationships and/or international co-operation could have led to an exchange of ideas and experience, and to learning from each other and therefore adopting common approaches in addressing these problems collectively. Such co-operation could have been beneficial not only to Eritrea and to Eritreans, but also to other countries in the

region, had the government of Eritrea worked on the issue of good neighbourliness. Eritrea is closely linked to its neighbours (the Sudan, Ethiopia, Djibouti, Yemen, Saudi Arabia and others) in history, economic co-operation and political relations. These relations are crucial if Eritrea is to have peace, stability and sustainable growth in an era of worldwide terrorism and globalization.

Domestically, the government of Eritrea and the Eritrean Islamist groups distrust and dislike each other. The government perceives the Islamist groups as external agents that have no right to local support. It depicts the Islamic groups as composed of politically bankrupt Eritrean politicians. For their part, the Islamist groups and the jihad movements claim to be pursuing a changing and developing programme, which sometimes renders their political stand difficult to assess. Their changing nature can be viewed as evidence that their commitment to this principle is not absolute and they are likely to compromise if they are offered a share of power. However, the question of whether or not there is any genuine commitment to incorporating the Eritrean Islamist groups in the government of the country remains unanswered. Has any genuine political attempt been made to approach these groups? Is there any possibility of incorporating these groups into the political system of their country that might help to reduce the threat they pose? There are no clear answers to these questions, in that the government of Eritrea has been adamant in its refusal to enter into any dialogue with the opposition. This intransigence on the side of government has led to a parallel stubbornness in the opposition. Furthermore, the Eritrean Islamist groups have been unable to convince the majority of the merits of their cause. They are strongly influenced by extremist ideas from external forces. They fail to take into consideration that Eritrea is not a country of a single religious group, but of different religions. They resort to violence and support international 'terrorist' networks, such as Al-Qaeda, in order to fulfil their political ambition, to come to power in the name of Islam. These developments reflect the outcome of religious intolerance by the government and the Islamic groups. The advocates of the Islamist groups are motivated by international religious revivalism and Eritrean national politics. Indeed, the influence of Islamist movements' opposition to secular political systems in the Middle East changed the internal conflict in Eritrea and has given it the appearance of a religious struggle. The deputy secretary of the Eritrean Islamic Jihad Movement (EIJM) claimed that the incumbent government of Eritrea is oppressing the Muslim population. This perception is not entirely true, since religious misunderstandings do exist in Eritrea. The gist of the matter lies in Aba-Arre's argument that the ultimate goal of the Eritrean Islamist groups is political power rather than religious domination. Their agenda is to seize political power in the name of Islam.

There is no solution to eradicating Islamic extremism since this is embedded in the minds and faith of

individuals. Human beings if educated can be rational, but there is a need for recognition and for strong commitment to religious coexistence in Eritrea. This commitment should be manifest by mutual knowledge and constant respect for the various religions. This can be achieved through careful and insightful initiatives by religious leaders, because religious leaders have played a vital role in Eritrean history through their ability to mobilize their societies. In the 1940s and 1950s, for instance, the Ethiopian Emperor, Haile Selassie, worked through the Christian Churches in Eritrea to convince the people that unity with Ethiopia was the best option. His policy was effective because the religious leaders worked hard to conform to the desires of the king. Similarly, Muslim religious leaders played an important role in mobilizing the people to strive for independence. It is highly recommended that religious leaders play a leading role in creating a tolerant environment for members of the various religions in Eritrea to live in harmony.

Furthermore, effective exercise of all political, socio-economic and cultural rights is imperative in order to preserve Eritrean national unity, despite the diverse nature of the country. This entails a civic, non-ethnic and non-religious based categorization of the nation and its citizens. This requires, among other conditions, absolute equality of individuals before the law and a clear distinction between the public and private spheres, as well as a representative government. NGOs, unions, religious institutions/organizations, can play key roles and become a means of managing political diversity and dilemmas in Eritrea. This entails the broadening of participation, creating an environment of opportunities for citizens, which enables them to be empowered in their political and economic lives, enhancing accountability and empowering all members of the community.

Eritrea is a newly emerging country. It has passed through decades of war that resulted in a tragic loss of life and the destruction of the economy. It was plunged into a disastrous border war (1998 to 2000) with its neighbour, Ethiopia. These, along with recurrent drought, make Eritrea one of the poorest and most underdeveloped countries in the world. Competition between religious groups on the one hand and a tyrannical government on the other exacerbates the problems of Eritrea. Internal instability such as that which leads to the creation of religious extremists cannot be confined to the internal affairs of the nation, but can grow to be a problem for international peace. It should be stressed that the failure of the Eritrean national political system to incorporate dissidents such as the Eritrean Islamist groups, and its consequence, a possible threat to world peace, needs further study.

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