

U.S. Horn of Africa Policy: “Old Wine in a New Wineskin”

Ghidewon Abay Asmerom

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On Sunday, May 24, Eritreans all over the world will be celebrating the 18th anniversary of their hard-fought and won independence. May 24 is a day that proved one crucial fact: no matter how strong an enemy is, regardless of how numerous supporters he lines up, in spite of an abundant resources he has at his disposal, and regardless of the number of advanced modern weapons he deploys, he cannot prevail over a population united in purpose for a just cause. Eritreans prevailed over two brutal Ethiopian regimes, and two superpowers who weren't ready to see an independent Eritrea. These two superpowers, the USA and the former USSR (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics) were at opposite ends of the ideological spectrum and at each other's throats trying to destroy each other, and as a result were ready to use any “liberation movement” they thought would advance their interests as a pawn. The competition was fierce from Angola to Afghanistan and from Latin America to Indochina, however, when it came to denying Eritrea its legitimate right to decolonization they were on the same page.

The USSR's position on Eritrea had opportunistically changed back and forth from support to hostile antagonism; American policy towards Eritrea on the other hand had been consistently unjust and hostile. No one put this policy of injustice better than John Foster Dulles who shamelessly told the world in 1952: that

“From the point of view of justice, the opinions of the Eritrean people must receive consideration. Nevertheless, the strategic interests of the United States in the Red Sea Basin and considerations of security and world peace make it necessary that the country [Eritrea] be linked with our ally, Ethiopia.”

Sadly, six decades later nothing has changed vis-à-vis this unjust U.S. policy towards Eritrea. US administrations, from that of Truman to Bush, be they those of the left or those on the right Democrats or Republicans have acted the same. And no matter who the diplomats were: Dulles or Rice, white or black, male or female, in the pretext of “*strategic interests of the United States in the Red Sea*“, had continuously wronged the Eritrean people. Pre 1991, the attempts were to frustrate Eritrea' right to self-determination; these attempts continued all the way until the Eritrean People's Liberation Army (EPLA) marched in victory into Asmara on May 24, 1991 even into the London Conference that was organized by the Americans to save the despotic Mengistu regime. The two US administrations since Eritrea's independence (Clinton's and Bush's) had tried in many different ways to frustrate Eritrea's peaceful and harmonious existence. Now that Eritrea had once more prevailed over all evil intentions, the world is being put on notice once more, that the history of May 24 will be repeated. No matter what Eritrea's detractors do or dream to do to this “Oasis of Harmony and civility” along the Red Sea, it will once more prove the naysayers wrong by charting a successful and unique model of prosperous development anchored in social, political and economic justice. Just wait!

Currently the U.S. has an Administration that has promised the world to hope for “a believable change.” Indeed “change” in U.S. foreign policy is what the non-European world had been praying

and longing for years. It is only four months into the new Administration's life and some might say it's too early to give up on hope for change and it is not yet time to begin lamenting; fair enough! However, there is no encouraging sign in the horizon that change is coming. One part of the world that has been hoping and waiting for change in U.S. foreign policy is the Horn of Africa. Unfortunately, from what we have seen so far, U.S. policy for this part of the world smells the same spoiled old sour wine in a new policy skin. It seems to follow the same wrong and misguided policies of the Bush Administration. There is no better example for this than what President Obama's top diplomat for Africa, Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Johnnie Carson told a US Senate panel. It felt as if he was reading from the same Bush book on foreign policy. Mr. Carson, instead of admitting and disavowing like what his boss, is doing with a lot of President Bush's Domestic policies, the esteemed Assistant Secretary felt comfortable regurgitating fabricated stories on Somalia. Instead of admitting US policy towards Somalia, starting from the time of Siad Barre to this very day was wrong, the whole mess in Somalia is the making of Ethiopian regimes who do not want to see a united and stable Somalia, and promising to correct it, he seemed happy to apportion all the blame on Eritrea. Mr. Carson's words were eerily similar to those of his predecessor, Jendayi Frazer. As his predecessor tried to do, he stated that he had "clear" evidence that Eritrea is arming the forces that are opposing the transitional government in Somalia that was imposed on the Somali people by outsiders. The irony of it all is that less than a week ago Mr. Carson was quoted calling his "real evidence" as "circumstantial evidence." This shows how fast evidence morphs in Washington when officials try to give a facelift to their misguided policies. How credible can Mr. Carson's "circumstantial or real evidence" be? Only as bogus and forged as an earlier phantom "evidence" for a claim that stated Eritrea had "2000 soldiers in Somalia." This was later proved to be a fabrication and barefaced lie; a fabrication the U.S. and Ethiopia were not able to get an iota of evidence in its support, even after a joint invasion and two years of occupation.

Mr. Carson told the Senate Committee

"In 2006, the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) [sic] defeated an alliance of militias known as the Alliance for the Restoration of Peace and Counter-Terrorism and became the first entity since the collapse of the Barre regime to exert control over most of South-Central Somalia. This change in the balance of power in Somalia was significant, as we faced a government in Somalia that was unfriendly to the United States and harbored and provided sanctuary to a number of known terrorists. Given the threats posed by the ICU's harboring of terrorists, the USG's Somalia strategy focused on the immediate terrorist threats."

This statement sounds credible, except the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC) that is being blamed for all latest ills in Somalia here was lead by the very same person, Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed, that Mr. Carson is now trying to save. When did Sheikh Sharif, who in 2006, as a leader of a government which in Mr. Carson's words was "unfriendly to the United States and harbored and provided sanctuary to a number of known terrorists," had his Damascus Road experience? Was it before the U.S. coordinated invasion of Somalia and Sharif's subsequent capture, or after wards? If before, then why did the U.S. tried to orchestrate an invasion and occupation of Somalia to depose its own friend? If after, then how come he was not brought to justice for harboring terrorists? Does it mean

the hundreds of Africans who died in the Nairobi and Dar es Salaam terrorist bombings of 1998 do not matter? If U.S. Administrators are willing to bring a 17-year old Somali pirate to New York for trial, how come a leader of a government that “harbored and provided sanctuary to a number of known terrorists” was set to go free? Doesn’t it sound fishy? You bet it does! These are some of the many questions that Mr. Carson should have thought of before he decided to read verbatim from the Bush Book of foreign policy.

An interesting twist to this drama is that the new Somali government was “fathered” into existence in Djibouti through the “good efforts” of Ambassador Ould Abdallah. The official cover for Mr. Ould Abdallah of course is that he is UN Special Representative for Somalia, but some could say there is, “clear” evidence, (of course it could be “circumstantial”, or an “imagined” evidence) on whose behalf Ould Abdallah is working. It is appropriate here to read from Ould Abdallah’s performance file. This Mauritanian diplomat was first introduced to the world in a different light by his former boss, Boutros Boutros-Ghali (UN Secretary General 1992-1997). Here is what Boutros-Ghali had said about Ould Abdallah in his 1999 book, “Unvanquished: U.S. –U.N. Saga”

“After a late-Saturday-night arrival in early July in Yaoundé, the capital of Cameroon and the host city for the OAU summit, I began to seek support among the delegates early Sunday morning. Although warned that the Americans were on the scene in force, I was shocked to find such a high-powered U.S. team of officials working so intensely to discredit me. There, in the hotel lobby, I realized for the first time the full meaning of the American term “lobbying.” Countless young American diplomats seemed to be constantly rushing from one part of the hotel to another. Every time I stepped into the elevator, I would encounter a sweating American Foreign Service officer on his or her way to meetings with African leaders.

“Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs George Moose was there. With him was the man who had held that same job during the Bush Administration, Herman “Hank” Cohen, now director of a foundation dealing with Africa. I knew both men, because we had often worked together on African issues. *Strangest of all to me was the presence of Ahmedou Ould Abdallah, a Mauritanian I had appointed as my special representative for Burundi. Ould Abdallah had slipped into the American camp like an eel, perhaps because he had suddenly left the United Nations to become the new head of Cohen’s foundation.* My aide Fayza Abulnaga cornered Ould Abdallah with feline fury in a hotel corridor and denounced him as a despicable turncoat.” -- Unvanquished p. 279 (emphasis mine)

Dear readers it is this same “eel who slipped into the American camp” who was chosen to return Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed back to power, a power Sharif was denied by the occupying Ethiopian and American forces two years ago. It is also amazing to see how the same forces who condemned Sheikh Sharif and his government as “unrepentant sinners” two years ago are now lauding them as saints ready for the “western heaven of governance”. The same Sharia rule that was condemned as a fertile womb for terrorism in 2007 is now being promoted as a hope for Somalia’s bright future. The irony: Eritrea was blamed for supporting Sheikh Sharif when the U.S. was stoning his government into non-existence (read bombing) and as a result of this inhumane bombing thousands of innocent Somalis and their villages “were vaporized” and nobody in the so called “civilized and Christian west” cared to speak on their behalf as if they were not people, and now the same “black sheep” (or as Eritreans would say it, “white ox”), Eritrea, is being blamed as the U.S.

and its allies try to beatify Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed towards Sainthood. What a tragedy! One thing is certain, if this was not happening in Africa and on Africans, all the quick mouths in the US Senate, House and Washington policy watchdogs and media pundits would have called for a thorough investigation into the whole matter on how in the world a guy who allegedly was “harboring and giving sanctuary to terrorists” was spared a one-way flight to Guantanamo and is now the U.S. poster child for a stable Somalia. How come nobody was willing to pause and think when some in the region were telling them that Sheikh Sharif and his UIC were the best hope for the reconstitution of Somalia? Which one was it, ignorance or arrogance, and how come they are still unwilling to pause and consider that the process they are going about it reckless as well?

One fundamental question that Mr. Carson and his team need to seek an answer before they blindly forge ahead with getting a “comprehensive and sustainable” solution for a stable Somalia is this: which among the nations in the Horn has the motive to see Somalia descend into a perpetual chaos? The answer is easy if they figure which one country:

- 1) had a nearly six-decade territorial dispute with Somalia;
- 2) had been repeatedly lying to the world that it is “an island of Christianity in a sea of Islam;”
- 3) had openly told an Assembly of African heads of States that *“Ethiopia has always existed in history for centuries as an independent state and as a nation for more than 3000 years. That is a fact. Second fact: the historical frontiers of Ethiopia stretched from the Red Sea to the Indian Ocean, including all the territory between them. Third fact: there is no record in history either of a Somali State or a Somali nation. That too is a fact.”* –Prime Minister Aklilu Habtewold, founding Summit of the OAU, May 1963 (emphasis mine);
- 4) has a continuous history of invading Somalia and whose leaders are fraught with a naked phobia towards anything Islamic;
- 5) is working hand and glove with the breakaway region of Somalia, Puntland, that is now the main hub of most of the sea piracy that is taking place off the Somali coast;
- 6) had recently occupied Somalia for two years and whose occupying forces were responsible for what the EU had called “crimes against humanity;”
- 7) whose troops are now reportedly back in Somalia three months after the World was told they have withdrawn.

This country definitely is not Eritrea! It is Ethiopia. First, it must be known that the current affairs of Somalia predates the often blamed Eritrea-Ethiopia border war by nine years. Second, for anyone who can think, even at a basic level, Eritrea’s interests are better served by having a united not a chaotic and fragmented Somalia. However, Eritrea’s noble desire for Somalia and the Somali people is not out of its wish so that a strong and united Somalia would serve as a thorn on Ethiopia’s side, but out of a genuine wish for the people of Somalia, who were a 100% on the side of the people of Eritrea when no one was on Eritrea’s side, for a peaceful life. Eritreans have always lamented the sad fact that Somalis were forced into a chaotic life imposed by Ethiopia the same year Eritreans began breathing an air of freedom by defeating Ethiopian tyranny. So is the desire of Mr. Carson and his team is to see Somalia continue in the sad affairs it currently is in, or to genuinely help the

Somalis live in peace and harmony? If the latter, then they better think carefully on who can serve them as a genuine partner in this noble endeavor, there would not be any better partner than Eritrea. On the other hand, if the former is their hidden choice, then they will continue to buy fabricated and distorted intelligence on Somalia and pass it to the U.S. Congress and shape American policy towards the region accordingly and if 18 years is any indication they will make no progress. It is not too late to make the right choice.

In addition, who is really pouring weapons into the Somali's war? First, we have established above that Ethiopia has all the motive to do so. Secondly, intentionally or unintentionally, Mr. Carson has admitted that "the United States has contributed hundreds of millions of dollars to support security needs in Somalia." It would be wise to make sure none of this money is being used to supply weapons. It might be hard but Mr. Carson must guarantee that these weapons are not making it to the famous "*Suuqa Bakaaraha*", the open market in the center of Mogadishu. Thirdly, Peacekeepers, wherever they are deployed are infamous for an illegal commerce, including that of illegal drugs, sex, human trafficking and weapons, what assurance does Mr. Carson have this is not what is happening in Somalia? Fourth, is Mr. Carson telling the world, all the U.S. military presence in Djibouti, together with the U.S. Navy fleet that is deployed in the Somali waters is incapable of detecting and intercepting when illegal flights are being made to Somalia to supply weapons? Unintentionally he is either trying to insult the competence of the U.S. Army and Navy, or he is telling the world that these armed forces are not doing their job right.

Finally, Mr. Carson should remember that as he tries to point his finger towards innocent Eritrea, three of his fingers are pointing towards him. It is time for him to have a candid assessment of past U.S. policies towards the region in order to come up with a genuine "comprehensive and sustainable" approach that will serve to usher a stable and peaceful Somalia and then and only then will he be able to serve the President that appointed him bring genuine change to the way the U.S. has been doing business. Meanwhile, Mr. Carson and his team should stop peddling intelligence and analysis of the Horn they acquired from Ethiopia; it is certain to be fabricated if not deliberately distorted.