

ERITREA: Johnnie Carson's shoddy diplomacy further sours US-relations

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The 11 November 2009 Wikileaks "Cable 09CAIRO2129, A/S CARSON AND EGIS CHIEF SOLIMAN'S OCTOBER 27" shows how Johnnie Carson, US Assistant Secretary for African Affairs and his incompetent team at the Bureau of African Affairs lack of adequate knowledge of the region and its people, have distorted the reasoning and analysis on Somalia and prevented the Obama Administration from crafting a coherent policy for the Horn region. The above cable reminded me of an article I wrote back in March of 2010. In that piece I addressed the many distortions by US Assistant Secretary for African Affairs, Johnnie Carson on issues relating to Eritrea and his rehearsed 5-point spill on Eritrea. As we shall see later, that spill was not limited to his speeches at various US institutions, but seems to be one that he uses in all his "diplomatic" interactions, in which he maligns the Eritrean leadership.

In the 11 November 2009 Cable from the US Embassy in Cairo, we find part of Johnnie Carson's rehearsed script again. Let us take a look at an excerpt from that cable:

"...A/S Carson met with EGIS chief Omar Soliman on October 27 to discuss Somalia and Sudan... Carson thanked Soliman for Egyptian efforts to bring peace to Somalia and noted that the U.S. and Egypt share the strategic goal of supporting the TFG and the Djibouti process... Carson said Isaias was "one of the most difficult leaders with whom he had interacted." He noted that Isaias had refused to accept the credentials of the U.S. Ambassador in Asmara, grant A/S Carson a visa, or accept a phone call from Secretary Clinton..."

For the record, allow me to state that Johnnie Carson has NEVER met H.E. President Isaias Afwerki (PIA), and from the way US-Eritrea relations are today, he probably never will. Jendayi E. Frazer, his vindictive and incompetent predecessor also left office without ever meeting the President of Eritrea in person. Had he pursued a personal engagement with PIA, he would have learned a lot from this seasoned statesman and intellectual. He would have had

an insight to the region that would have advanced US interests without alienating the populations. He would have seen the rare qualities of true blue leadership, something that is nonexistent in Africa or anywhere else in our world today. He would have learned the difference between fear and respect.

Neither Johnny Carson, nor his incompetent predecessor Jenday E. Frazer, has ever personally “interacted” with H. E. President Isaias Afwerki (PIA). I suppose by “interaction”, Johnnie Carson means gossiping about PIA. I suppose he takes his divisive and evil back room shenanigans as being diplomatic engagements. That may well work for Meles Zenawi and other mercenary regimes in the region; it will not work with the Honorable President of Eritrea. While PIA tolerates immaturity and naiveté, he abhors liars. He believes in respecting everyone, young or old. He believes in constructive engagement and partnership, not backstabbing, lies and bullying. He is not only an astute politician with a vision for his country and people, but he is an honest and incorruptible one, as Ambassador McMullen is forced to admit in one of his childish cables. Here is what McMullen wrote:

“...Although his portrait adorns many shops in Asmara, there is no cult of personality in Eritrea. Isaias often appears in the media clad casually in slacks, jacket, open-necked shirt, and sandals or loafers. He rarely travels in a motorcade...”

But Ambassador McMullen, who relied on street gossip and other “diplomats” for his information on the Eritrean President, was determined to portray PIA in the ugliest terms. That is not a reflection on PIA and the people of Eritrea; it is in fact a reflection of the US Ambassador and the institution he represents. PIA has earned the trust and respect of the Eritrean people-inside the country and in the Diaspora.

Unlike Johnnie Carson’s friends in the region, PIA bears no ill feelings towards his neighbors and has worked his entire life to improve the lives not just of the Eritrean people, but all peoples in the region. What has Johnnie Carson done in his life that can even compare with a single day in the life of PIA? In my humble opinion, globe trotting to various African capitals, encouraging leaders to take stab at their colleagues, spill state secrets and sow discord and enmity amongst populations is not diplomacy or friendship. That is the work of enemies and morally corrupt personalities

At the risk of repeating myself-Carson gives me no other choice, I will re-post my comments from March 2010 so that the readers will understand how and why US-Eritrea relations have soured to a point of no return. In that post I addressed Johnnie Carson's rehearsed spill on Eritrea. I believe they will also address the issue he raised in that 11 November cable from the US Embassy in Cairo. It will take years to cover all the other cables, but Eritrean Americans such as myself, will endeavor to address them as they come. It is important to set the record straight. So let me address the script once again.

Rehearsed script-speak item #1- Refused to "accept a phone call from Secretary Clinton"

On several occasions, and as we have seen in the above cable, Johnnie Carson has said that Hillary Clinton's attempts to reach out to Eritrea were "rebuffed". Supposedly, she wanted to reach President Isaias Afwerki over the phone and he was not available to speak to her. Considering the strained US-Eritrea relations, is that the best she could do? Eritrea is not a strange country for Clinton and when she visited Eritrea as First Lady, she was warmly welcomed by the President of Eritrea and the people of Eritrea. If Hillary Clinton can criss-cross the world's oceans to "sanction" and "isolate" countries, I think she can make a little effort to make peace with the people of Eritrea...assuming that is what she really wants. This is a flimsy excuse for not engaging Eritrea and says a lot about US diplomacy and the Obama Administration. It also shows that US-Africa policy remains a low priority for the Obama Administration, hence handling of the Horn region is left to incompetent bureaucrats and Meles Zenawi's "skirted friends".

It should be recalled that even though Jendayi E. Frazer left the Bureau of African Affairs when Bush left the White House, Meles Zenawi's still unfettered access to US Administration officials as well as diplomatic and political shield and cover which Jendayi E. Frazer provided whilst she was in office. She was there to defend this "staunch US ally" as he committed genocides in the Gambela, Ogaden and Oromia regions of Ethiopia, refused to abide by the Border Commission's rulings, refused to abide by over two dozen UN Security Council resolutions, rigged the 2005 Ethiopian elections, detained over 40,000 Ethiopians for voting him out of office, massacred over 200 people in cold blood on the streets of Addis Abeba for marching in protest against his regime's vote rigging and when his marauding US-backed forces invaded and occupied Somalia in 2006. Today, the same personalities are in the Obama Administration cuddling Africa's genocidaire.

Susan E. Rice, now US Ambassador to the United Nations served as US Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs in the Clinton Administration. She was Johnnie Carson's boss while Carson served as US Ambassador to Kenya. Rice mishandled the Eritrea Ethiopia border conflict. Her diplomatic faux pas resulted in emboldening Meles Zenawi to launch successive offensives against Eritrea. The Eritrea Ethiopia border conflict resulted in the deaths of over 120,000 Ethiopians who were used as cannon fodder and minesweepers in Meles Zenawi's aggressive war of expansion and invasion. It was during her tenure that the Algiers Agreements were signed, yet today, 11 years later, Meles Zenawi refuses to abide by that Agreement and is militarily occupying sovereign Eritrean territories, including Badme. Instead of taking punitive actions against Meles Zenawi, Rice has chosen to provide him with diplomatic and political shield and cover as he creates havoc in the Horn region.

Vicki Huddleston, who served as US Charge D'Affaires in Ethiopia was instrumental in providing Meles Zenawi's mercenary regime the diplomatic and political shield needed as he invaded and occupied Somalia at the behest of Washington in order to "prop up" the illegitimate transitional national government of Somalia led by Abdulahi Yusuf and Ali Mohammed Ghedi. After leaving Ethiopia, she continued to speak up on behalf of the belligerent regime and has authored several articles in its defense. Today Huddleston is in Charge of African Affairs at the Pentagon...

Gayle Smith is another one of Meles Zenawi's "skirted friends". Peter Rosenblum in his 2002 article "Irrational Exuberance-The Clinton Administration in Africa" describes Smith as a "confidante of the Tigrean leadership" and a "booster for Meles". Another American writer said that Gayle Smith was a "close confidant to the leadership of the TPLF, and that she spent "the decade of the 1980s as the liaison between the CIA and Meles Zenawi". Gayle Smith who served in the Clinton Administration with Susan Rice is today serving as Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director at the National Security Council.

I suppose we can now add Ms. Hillary to his list of "skirted friends".

Rehearsed script-speak item #2- Embassy of Eritrea refused to issue Johnny Carson a visa

Whenever he is approached by Eritrean-Americans and questioned about US policy for Eritrea, Johnnie Carson begins his rehearsed script-speak by telling them that the Eritrean Ambassador refused to grant him a visa. As we have seen in the cable above, he tells the Egyptian official the same lie. No matter how

many times he repeats the lie, it is still a lie and will not change to fact. I don't know how a grown man can lie with such ease. This issue has also been addressed, but Carson is not willing to drop it from his script and so it will be used repeatedly and so it needs to be explained repeatedly. The Government of Eritrea does not have the time to address such shameful issues, so it will have to be done by folks like me, who are interested in setting the record straight.

Johnnie Carson's passport was at the Eritrean Embassy for less than 10 minutes. The person, who brought it, took it back to fill out the necessary forms and never came back.

On 18 June 2009, Voice of America reported the following about Johnny Carson:

"... I met with the Eritrean ambassador and asked to meet with President Isaias Afewerki. If he will give me a visa, I will be there." However, after Carson left his passport with the Eritrean embassy "for an extended period" he was surprised to find it returned "without a visa in it...If relations are not improved it will not be because we're not trying to act as a respected partner..."

The Eritrean Ambassador to the United States, H.E. Ghirmai Ghebremariam clarified the issue in an interview with Voice of America. He at no time denied Carson a visa. Carson had expressed his desire to visit Eritrea, but did not specify any date. Eritrea's Ambassador to the United States advised Mr. Carson that the Eritrean officials that he wanted to meet with were not going to be available; they were on travel out of the country. The Eritrean Ambassador told him that his visa would be issued within minutes when he had fixed his travel date to Asmara. Since he was going to attend the African Union summit in Libya, Mr. Carson said that he needed to get a visa and that he would send someone to pick up his visa from the Eritrean Embassy, and that is what he did.

Soon after he picked up his passport, Voice of America reported that Eritrea had refused to issue Mr. Carson a visa. Repeating this rehearsed script says more about Carson's diplomatic skills than it does about Eritrea's desire to engage the US constructively. Wining and lying about not getting a visa is not "respectful" and it certainly is not diplomatic. Johnnie Carson does not want to engage with Eritrea and this is yet another excuse for not doing so.

Well, the issue is now moot. Johnnie Carson is now considered persona non grata in Eritrea. Now he can tell the whole world that he is not welcomed in Eritrea and he would not be lying!

Rehearsed script-speak item #3-Eritrea has refused to accept the credentials of the US Ambassador to Eritrea

This is a moot issue now, since the Ambassador Ronald McMullen has since left his post in Eritrea, but in order to set the record straight, I will repeat what I said back in March 2010. In Eritrea, as in all other countries, precedence is regulated by seniority, dating from the notification of the arrival of the envoy and is scheduled in groups. When Ambassador McMullen and those in his batch were called to present their letters of credentials to H.E. President Isaias Afwerki, he was not available; he chose to leave the country, even though he was notified almost a month earlier. If Eritrea did not want him to present his credentials, they would not have scheduled him to do so in the first place. Eritreans are not shy at expressing themselves. This excuse used by Johnnie Carson is a ruse, another self-fulfilling act used to justify deliberate US disengagement with Eritrea.

The Wikileaks cables from the US Embassy in Eritrea show Ambassador McMullen's contempt for the people of Eritrea and his evil intentions towards PIA and the Eritrean leadership. He will be remembered in Eritrea for his boisterous bullying tactics and threats, distorted news items published by Reuters stringers who seemed to be in his employ, and the many Embassy notices that he published insulting the Government and people of Eritrea. In a way, I am glad that he didn't get a chance to represent the US in any official capacity whilst he was there. The Government and people of Eritrea would not have suspected that he had ugly ulterior motives, and judging from his tantrums on Wikileaks, he meant to disrupt Eritrea's exemplary ethnic and religious harmony and respect, and sought to corrupt Eritrea's youth as well as members of the Eritrean armed forces. Fortunately, he failed at both...

I, along with other Eritrean Americans met with Ambassador McMullen before he left for Eritrea and I left that meeting feeling very uncomfortable with his attitude and arrogance. At the meeting, when he pulled out a map of Eritrea and Ethiopia and circled areas that he wanted to "adjust", I knew that the relationship was going to be a contentious one. I told him then that if he really wanted to improve relations with Eritrea, he should not tamper with the final and binding delimitation and demarcation decisions of the independent Eritrea Ethiopia Boundary Commission (EEBC). Judging from what US Ambassador John Bolton wrote in his book, McMullen and his partners worked instead, to "revise" the decision in order to appease Meles Zenawi, the genocidal, vote rigging, flip flopping leader of the minority regime in Ethiopia, a "staunch US ally". So much for respecting the rule of law!

Johnnie Carson and his incompetent Bureau of Africa team are incapable of resolving the very serious outstanding issues that divide the US and Eritrea. In my opinion, this is an unfortunate reflection of Obama Administration's inability to act effectively in the strategically important Horn region. No doubt the further deteriorating situation in Somalia will greatly impact US credibility, integrity and reputation, both regionally and internationally and with it US-Eritrea relations. The souring of relations will have a detrimental effect on America's influence in the Horn region and the Middle East in general, relative to other external players, particularly China, India and Russia. Whether the US acknowledges Eritrea's pivotal role in the region or not, more so than in the past, diplomatic stasis between the United States and Eritrea, with the US "sidelining", "isolating" and "sanctioning" Eritrea will not promote US' long term strategic and political interests in the region.

Every single US Ambassadors to Eritrea abused the magnanimity and respect of the Government and people of Eritrea. Without exception, each one worked to plant seeds of discord and hatred and contributed to the progressively souring of US-Eritrea relations. Looking back, with or without Wikileaks, I find their tenures in Eritrea to be a glaring example of incompetence and diplomatic blunder, not to mention a gross disservice and embarrassment to the American people whom they purport to represent.

The 20-post independence years in Eritrea have seen a string of unprovoked hostilities by the US State Department. From undermining Eritrea's economic development, to sowing discord amongst its otherwise peace, respectful and harmonious ethnic and religious populations, to supporting "human rights" and "democracy" groups to undermine the unity of the population-both in Eritrea and in the Diaspora, to incessantly campaigning to diplomatically and politically isolate Eritrea, to sanctioning Eritrea-officially and unofficially etc. etc. As the record will show and as we have seen in the Wikileaked cables, the US is not ready for a meaningful long term relationship with Eritrea. According to Ambassador McMullen's 9 February 2009 cable, "ASMARA47, AN ERITREAN OVERTURE TO THE UNITED STATES", Eritrea's attempts to repair Eritrea-US relations remain futile as the US' "regime change" policy remains. The cable says:

"...We have seen no serious cracks in its loyalty... but we will step up our efforts to cultivate cordial relations with key military leaders as circumstances permit..."

Further souring of relations is inevitable, and if the US does not change its policies, they will remain irrevocable. As they say, with friends like these who needs enemies?

The rule of law must prevail over the law of the jungle!