The Grandchildren of Abraha

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From the very birth of Islam Muslims have had dual conceptualization of Ethiopia as a Christian-led state. On the one hand they quite uniquely accepted her legitimacy, on the other they aspired for her Islamization. The most radical expression of the latter was the ancient tradition that the Ethiopians are self-destined to destroy the Ka’aba. The December 2006 Ethiopian invasion and toppling of the Islamic radical government in Mogadisho put Ethiopia again, and most strongly on the agenda of the Muslim world. Voices from all over, it seems, tend to demonize her resorting to that tradition.

The process of Ethiopia’s redefinition, which began in the 1990s, is still in full momentum. Its two main inter-related aspects, ethnic decentralization and religious pluralization, are generating multidimensional changes and provoking all sorts of sensitivities. We are definitely witnessing a period of transformation. Its direction, however, is still blurred. In this short paper, I should like to address the Islamic dimension only, and from the prism of its current Middle Eastern aspects. I shall do so by examining Ethiopia’s image in the aftermath of her December 2006 invasion of Somalia, and the expulsion of the government of the Union of Islamic Courts from Mogadishu.

Islam’s Dual Conceptualization of Ethiopia

At the risk of repeating myself, let me briefly mention that, from its inception, Islam developed a dual conceptualization of Ethiopia. On one hand, it viewed her in positive terms as a neighbor deserving gratitude for saving the persecuted pioneers of Islam, the “sahaba” of the Prophet, and therefore a legitimate entity in spite of her Christian culture. On the other hand, Ethiopia has been conceived in negative terms: A country, which, already in the days of the Prophet, joined the “land of Islam,” but then revolted and returned to Christianity. Through that second prism, Ethiopia was a land of the ultimate heresy, Irtad; namely, being a Muslim and then betraying Islam. In the eyes of Islamic radicals, Ethiopia could therefore be redeemed only by full restoration as part of the land of Islam.

Throughout history, whenever Ethiopia appeared on Middle Eastern Muslims’ agenda, they discussed her in these dichotomous terms. This argument, needless to say, did not relate only to the Ethiopian “other,” but also to the Islamic “self.” The discussion of Ethiopia among Muslims is perhaps more heated today than ever before.

1 The research for this article was supported by the Israeli Science Foundation, Grant 613/06. I am also grateful to Dr. Avraham Hakim, Dr. Moshe Terdman, and Dr. Mustafa Kabha for their help.
2 Tel Aviv University and the Open University of Israel.
3 This paragraph is based on my three books, Ethiopia and the Middle East, Boulder 1994; The Cross and the River, Ethiopia, Egypt, and the Nile, Boulder 2003; Saudi Arabia and Ethiopia – Islam, Christianity and Politics Entwined, Boulder 2007.
Moreover, it is now spilling over into Ethiopia proper, having a direct impact on the country’s Muslims, and influencing their attitudes towards her redefinition.

The reservoir of Islamic concepts legitimizing Ethiopia, even as a Christian dominated state, is rich and unique. The legacy of the Christian “najashi” saving the “sahaba” has been canonized and recycled. Vast literature has been produced presenting and re-interpreting Ethiopia as a model of universal humanity and grace. One major aspect of this legacy is the notion that Muslims can live under non-Islamic governments, provided that these governments are just; namely, that they allow Muslims to freely observe their religion. In the eyes of many, the precedent of the Prophet’s ordering the first believers to live under the benevolent Christian king of Ethiopia today legitimizes living in Europe, the US, and even in Jewish Israel, provided, of course, that they are progressive and permissive towards Islam. It surely legitimizes living in Ethiopia proper, on condition that religious equality is implemented. For the sake of brevity, I shall refrain from dwelling here on this pragmatic, moderate interpretation of Islam and of Ethiopia. It should be emphasized, however, that the overwhelming majority of Muslims in Ethiopia apparently view the dialogue between their religion and their Ethiopian-ness in these flexible terms.

This is also not the place to elaborate on all the concepts of Ethiopia stemming from Islamic radicalism. Here again, examples are abundant, as the call for the victory of Islam in Ethiopia has been repeated throughout and from all quarters – from Arabia, Egypt, Sudan, and from within the Horn of Africa. The latest declaration of Jihad on Ethiopia was pronounced by the Islamic militants of the Union of Islamic Courts who took over the government of Somalia in June 2006.

The literature de-legitimizing Ethiopia produced over the years by Islamic radicals is as diverse as the moderate publications. Christian Ethiopians were depicted as barbarous infidels, as enemies and oppressors of Islam and Muslims, and as “the worst of human beings in the eyes of God on the day of insurrection.” However, the most extreme demonization of Ethiopia was the story of Abraha and the Ka’aba.

**Destroyers of the Ka’aba – A Demonic, Marginal Image**

Aksumite Ethiopia occupied Yemen between 524 and 590. Its Ethiopian ruler, Abraha al-Ashram (Abraha, the “scar-face”), was said to have raided Mecca in 570 (the year the Prophet was born) in order to destroy the Ka’aba and to divert all attention to a church he had built in San’a. The Ka’aba, as attested by the “Sura of the Elephant” in the Koran, was miraculously saved from the Ethiopians as Allah “sent against them birds in flocks (abablis)...who hurled clay stones upon them.”

The image of the Ethiopians as the ultimate enemies of Islam was consequently preserved in a *hadith*, a saying attributed to the Prophet: “A lean-legged from among the Ethiopians [dhu al-suwayqatayn] will [eventually] destroy the Ka’aba.” This saying (though based on a historical twist, for the Ka’aba was a polytheistic shrine at that time)

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5 The Sura of the Elephant: “In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful / Hast thou not seen how Lord dealt with the army of the Elephant? / Did he not cause their stratagem to miscarry? / And he sent against them birds in flocks (abablis) / Clay stones did not hurl down upon them, / And he made them like stubble eaten down.”

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can be found all six traditional compilations of hadith, and, most importantly, in the earliest and the most revered ones, those of al-Bukhari and Muslim. It was therefore embedded in Islamic consciousness and widely accepted as absolutely authentic. However, probably because of its extreme message, the saying has mainly been quoted by radicals. The concept, it can be argued, reflected a hidden fear of mysterious, black Africans, as well as of the Day of Judgment that the Ethiopians’ disastrous destructiveness would herald.

A search of Islamic literature that recycled this tradition indeed reveals a chain of radicals. From a book composed in Baghdad in 844, *Kitab al-Fitan* (The Book of Heresies), by Nu’aym ibn Hammad, to Muhammad Zabiyan’s *Muslim Ethiopia*, Damascus 1937. From the Syrian medieval Islamic scholar, Taqi al-Din Ahmad ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328), the spiritual founder of Sunni fundamentalism and the father figure of today’s radicalism,9 to Egyptian Muhammad Rajab who stated in his 1985 book, *The Political Relations between the Muslims of Zayla and the Christians of Ethiopia in the Middle Ages*,8 that, in this saying, the Prophet warned the Muslims against Ethiopia and its anti-Muslim fanaticism (pp. 31-38). The semi-mythical story was repeated in Saudi school textbooks and recycled by various journalists. For example, on 20 July 1998, *al-`Alam al-Islami*, the weekly of the Muslim World League, the international, Mecca-based Saudi organization tasked with spreading and defending Islam, published a long article under the headline: “The biggest campaign of Christianizing Muslims in East Africa: Camps for the liquidation of Muslims’ faith in Ethiopia.” It opened with the narrative of the Ethiopians’ aborted sixth century attempt to destroy the Ka’aba and their ensuing betrayal of the Muslim Najashi.9

The polarized, intra-Islamic discussion of Ethiopia, as mentioned, has always been re-ignited by concrete international issues. From the Ahmad Gragn conquest of Ethiopia, to the modern conflicts with Khedival Egypt, from the Sudanese Mahdiyya, to the conquest of Mussolini, through the challenges of Nasserism, the Eritrean problem, the Ogaden War, etc. Time and again, the initial dichotomy, first molded during the formative period of the Prophet, was readdressed. While pragmatists and moderates advocated remembering the initial Ethiopian rescue of Islam, the militants preferred to remember the betrayal. However, it was only the most radical who mentioned the ultimate demonization, the tradition that the Ethiopians were destined to destroy the Ka’aba. Closer to our time, this was sometimes referred to by radical Islamists in their campaigns against the moderates. In October 2001, for example, an article on a Jihadi website argued that the moderate Muslims, namely those who were betraying the true Islam by following the infidels, would eventually try to destroy the Ka’aba. Their effort will herald the appearance of the “lean-legged Ethiopians” who will complete the destruction, “will leave no stone on the other, and will steal all that is in the Ka’aba until not even one believer is left and the Ka’aba will remain destroyed forever, as we were told in Al-Bukhari.”10 “All the infidels are one nation,” reasserted the Saudi, Muhammad al-Shidawi in October 2002, “from Abraha al-Asram to Bush and Sharon.”11 In April 2004, on another website, a Saudi writer warned against the Shiite Iranian threat. “The Zionists,” he stated, “are not the worst of enemies; those are the

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8 See discussion of this in *Ethiopia and the Middle East*, pp. 17, 18, 26, 29.
9 See *Saudi Arabia and Ethiopia*, pp. 193 and pp. 200-201.
10 www.almowa.net/index.php?option=content&task=view&idItemid=0
Iranians who, like the Ethiopians, will eventually destroy the Ka`aba. For we know that the Prophet told us that the Ka`aba will be destroyed by the lean-legged, and that those Ethiopians, who are destroyers and terrorists, will do so systematically, leaving no stone on the other. And indeed, all enemies of Islam are united – Ethiopians, Iranians, Zionists.”

Restoring and Recycling Demonization – the Radicals

In December 2006, an Ethiopian army invaded Somalia and destroyed the government of the Union of the Islamic Courts in Mogadishu. The concrete issue, its background and strategic implications are beyond our scope here. We shall confine ourselves here to a mere observation as to its historical significance and the first responses in the Muslim world.

Whatever the circumstances or the consequences, the Ethiopian campaign in Somalia will probably be considered one of the major events in Ethiopian-Islamic relations. The history of these relations includes significant landmarks. Many of these junctures were manifestations of mutual aggression. Nothing, however, seems comparable to the new drama surrounding Mogadishu. Though Ethiopia was invaded in the past by Sudanese, Egyptians, Somalis and others, and though the Christian empire conquered and harassed local Islamic communities, the December 2006 Ethiopian invasion is exceptional. It is the first time since the re-emergence of modern Islamic radicalism that Ethiopia provoked political Islam so openly by invading the capital of a modern Islamic state.

The Islamic radicals from all over the world indeed responded harshly. Their actions will not be discussed here, only their words. They began to resort frequently to the ultimate demonization of Ethiopia, namely by recycling of the story of Abraha and the Ka`aba. Their publications and websites are replete with such sentences as: “God, do defeat the aggressors like you destroyed…Abraha… like you destroyed Pharaoh.”

Ibn al-Islam, a Saudi, wrote: “The Arabs should beware and pay attention to the danger exposed by this invasion. The Prophet told us that the Ka`aba would be destroyed by the lean-legged Ethiopians, and I think that Ethiopia’s war against the freedom fighters and the lions of Mogadishu is only the beginning of an Ethiopian threat that will be dangerous, especially to Saudi Arabia. Though the Saudis are focusing on the danger from Iran, the greatest danger, as God told us, is from Ethiopia.”

Another contributor to an Islamist forum wrote: “The picture is clear… the cursed triangle of infidels, crusaders, and Jews continues to threaten our nation at all times and everywhere. In the past, the crusader Abraha al-Ashram threatened the Ka`aba. Later the Jews and the crusaders conquered Jerusalem, today the USA occupies Afghanistan and Iraq and the Zionists occupy the Holy Land. The grandchildren of Abraha invaded Somalia after having been given a green light by the Americans. They aimed at liquidating the Islamic Courts that were about to unite the hitherto divided Somalis.”

The Al-Qaida website, the Reform Forum (Muntada al-tajdid) is full of articles and responses in this spirit. Ethiopia is portrayed as a vengeful, crusading state that has collaborated with European imperialism against Islam from the days of Menelik. Ayman al-Zawahiri, Bin Laden’s deputy, declared a Jihad against Ethiopia and called for volunteers from all over the Islamic world to join forces in Somalia. Another al-

12  www.alquma.net/vb/showthread.php?t=197024
14  www.alarabiya.net/Articles/2006/12/25/30216.htm
Qaida leader, writing under the name of “The Lion of the Sons of Islam,” added, on the same website: “Oh Muslims, the road to Somalia to face little Abraha is open for you…. Know that Meles Zenawi is a descendant of Abraha, for he comes from Tigré, from the same tribe.” Al-Qaida’s campaign to fly the volunteers to Somalia was accordingly called “The road of the birds in flocks (abablis),” the birds which killed Abraha’s elephant.  

Demonization – Penetrating the Mainstream?

The voice of the radicals is far from dominant. Most governments and political establishments in the Middle East are primarily worried about Islamic militancy. They are not at all sorry about the fall of the Islamic Courts’ regime in Somalia. Most leaders of Sunni communities view Iran and her Shiite allies as the ultimate danger, and would not be tempted to divert their attention to Ethiopia. For many Arab and Islamic pragmatists, Ethiopia is more a partner than an enemy. Her significant contribution to the fight against radicalism may well solidify the already momentous process of Ethiopia’s re-joining the Middle East.

Public opinion in the Islamic world is apparently split on Ethiopia. The discussion, (by no means central in today’s Middle East) runs between the two polarized ancient concepts, that of the descendants of the righteous Najashi, the savior of Islam, and that of descendants of Abraha, its would-be destroyer. However, the precedent of Ethiopia’s virtually invading and destroying an Islamic government, the magnitude of the event silhouetted against embedded traditions, seems bound to have a lasting impact. It is not difficult to discern a modicum of offense and anger among many shapers of public opinion, including those who cannot be said to be Islamic radicals.

Moderate Muslims used to follow the spirit of the more famous hadith, “Leave the Ethiopians alone as long as they leave you alone.” This hadith was indeed the key formula for the majority of scholars and statesmen throughout history. Namely, be tolerant toward Ethiopia in spite of her Christianity, provided she is not aggressive toward Muslims. From Ahmad Gragn, to the Sudanese Khalifa, through Mussolini’s admirer Shakib Arslan, the waging of war against Ethiopia had to be legitimized by accusing her of anti-Islamic policy, actual or alleged. Today’s invasion of Somalia, whatever its reason, depicts Ethiopia in the eyes of many as an active enemy of Islam. For example, the established journalist Muwaffaq Muhadin, a columnist for one of Jordan’s leading newspapers, a writer considered a liberal with some Marxist tendencies, wrote the following on what is by no means an Islamist website: “From Abraha to Zenawi. Who does not remember the year of the elephant, Abraha, the Ethiopian storming of Mecca and his failure… The same story repeats itself as the new Abraha, namely Zenawi, invaded Somalia armed with hundreds of iron elephants and supported by a traitorous collaborating local government. Abraha the first was an agent of the Romans and the present Abraha is an agent of the Americans, who are the modern Romans. In both cases, the two Abrahas fight against Arabs and their religious culture. The first time, against the Ka’aba; now against the Union of the Islamic Courts… I am a person of socialist and secular convictions. I believe in the saying “religion is to God and the motherland is for all.” But I see this [Ethiopian] aggression against the [Islamic] nation as part of the Christian-Jewish war waged directly in Iraq and Afghanistan and indirectly through agents in Lebanon and Somalia. I never
identified with the Taliban when they destroyed the statues of Buddha, nor with the Union of Islamic courts in Somalia when they confiscated musical instruments... I knew they would not last. But the American invasion of Iraq and that of their agents of Somalia are not for music and liberty. They will end like the war elephants of Abraha who came only to sow fear and destruction. \(^{17}\)

The whole issue of the Ethiopian invasion of Somalia is still fresh and far from finished. This is not the time to even begin to appreciate its strategic significance. One aspect, however, is already quite visible. It touched a very sensitive cord in Islamic publics. In the spheres of concepts and images, what used to be a rather marginal symbol of extreme demonization, now penetrates to the very center. This is a process liable to acquire a momentum of its own. It is not improbable that the whole episode will be canonized through the imagined, analogical symbolism of a Ka‘aba in Mogadishu demolished by an Abraha Zenawi. Nor it is improbable that, for many, that episode will acquire a different meaning – that of Ethiopia, by combating the fanatics, again helping Islam. For the present, all we can say is that these dilemmas are being sharpened. They challenge Muslims around the globe, and most particularly – the Muslims of Ethiopia.

\(^{17}\) www.alkader.net/jan/mahdeen_070107.htm