

(I) Eritrean Independence: Is It Worth All the Sacrifice?

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As Eritreans from both the opposition and Highdef camps have just finished celebrating Independence Day for a “mission accomplished” and are now readying themselves to commemorate Martyrs’ Day, I thought it would only be appropriate to make a connection between these two days and assess the worth of independence in terms of the

sacrifices that have been paid so far – something that neither of these two camps wants to do. The only connection that they want to emphasize is that Independence Day is the day the martyrs’ dream has come true, without having any clue as to what that dream is all about. Regarding the nature of that dream they are all **in deep denial and utter confusion**. They would rather NOT hear about the most important connection that could be made between the two: **is independence worth all the sacrifice the Eritrean people have gone through the last five decades?** They desperately want to avoid this question because it raises uncomfortable questions regarding ghedli’s beginning (why it started), middle (how it was conducted) and end (what the end result is or will be); the fear being that such a query might lead to the conclusion that at one end of the connection, the deaths might have been futile; and at the other end, the much vaunted victory might have been pyrrhic.

The three questions that they desperately want to avoid are:

1. **The beginning:** Was the oppression on the Ethiopian side so brutal that it justified the kind of horrendous sacrifice that has been paid in the last five decades? Indeed, with all honesty, can we say it was it a case of colonialism? And if not, what are the real **non-nationalist** aspirations on the two camps – the Moslems and Christians – that motivated this revolution?

2. **The middle:** How was ghedli conducted? Was it conducted commensurate to the nationalist aspiration it professed to have motivated it? Or did it follow different strands that betray its religious, ethnic, regional and “urbanite” roots – all of which have to do with questions of questionable identities, none of which are nationalist by nature?
3. **The end:** Is the nation created out of this movement sustainable? Has nationalism come to Eritrea too late to make any difference in its people’s quality of life, especially since globalization and post-modernism have rendered it a poor imitation of its old robust self, if not totally obsolete? Could the divergent, and sometimes outright conflicting, aspirations of Moslem Eritrea and Christian Eritrea be accommodated to create one viable nation that could make it through the 21st century?

Instead, the ghedli apologists have come up with their own version of the beginning, middle and end that justifies whatever has happened during the 30 years of struggle as worth all the sacrifice the nation has gone through. Such a strained justification has been attempted by Saleh Younis in his article, “The Spark, The Fire and The Torch.” He looks at ghedli from an insider’s point of view, and confuses the beginning, middle and end of *the means* for all that there is to know. From where he stands, neither the conceptual beginnings of the revolution nor where it is heading for now fall into his field of vision. Let me provide an example:

All that you could see from your window is a man appearing around a corner of a block, running very fast throughout the length of that block, before he disappears around the corner at the end of the block. You may admire his running skill, but as to whether what you have just seen is a good or bad thing you cannot say. You need to know why he has been running and whether he has achieved what he set out to do with his running to reach that kind of judgment. If he happens to be a thief running away from those he has just victimized, it is a bad thing, But if he has been running fast to save a child from drowning that definitely would count as a good thing.

Saleh’s analysis amounts to reaching a judgment about the “running” of ghedli without having any clue as to its conceptual beginning and end-purpose of that running. He confuses the “spark”, the “fire” and the “torch” for the beginning, middle and end-goal of the revolution. He confuses the “spark” for a conceptual beginning and the liberation of the land for the creation of a viable nation, and thereby gets the middle totally wrong. Below, I will use his article as a foil to address the most important question that can be asked regarding the intimate connection between Independence Day and Martyrs’ Day: **is independence**

worth all the sacrifice the Eritrean people have gone through the last five decades if neither the Ethiopian occupation nor its future sustainability justifies it?

The above raised questions though make sense only when we look at the extent of sacrifice that has been paid so far. So let's do that first.

Counting the absent

On this subject matter, I once wrote (Eritrea and Terrorism: the Muddled Middle“):

“When people talk about the high price Eritrea has paid in its struggle for independence, the highest index that they use is that of the number of martyrs. This is, indeed, understandable; besides the emotional connotation it carries, it is also very tangible. It is easy for people to count real-life entities, dead or alive; all that one has to do then is extrapolate from one's loss of beloved ones. But to me, this is a poor way of assessing our nation's loss. What is missing is the much greater loss of *what could have been*. To give one example, **think of all the children that could have been born**. Not only will you have to include all the number of martyrs (and the families they could have raised), but also the number of all those who left the country (and the families they could have raised), the number of all the women who were left behind condemned to lead a life of spinsterhood (and the families they could have raised), and the number of all those who waited until middle age to get married – all consequences of the struggle.

“The result of this abstract addition is to be seen in non-abstract way in modern-day Eritrea: certain areas in Ethiopia that had similar population figures in the sixties have now **two to three million more people**. The loss then is by that much comparatively high: 65 thousand that were 'once present' as opposed to two million who have been rendered 'always absent.' And this process of 'counting the absent' needn't be confined to population figures only. It could be applied to education, health, culture, prosperity, nation-building and so forth.”

As a continuation of the legacy of ghedli, *this loss in absence* is now continuing at a dizzying pace under the rule of the Isaias regime – to provide just two examples, one demographic and the other in education: Think of the demographic ramifications that the loss of twenty thousand martyrs, hundreds of thousands of escapees, hundreds of thousands more stranded in the national service, and hundreds of thousands of women left behind (with little chance of

marriage) will have on the country. And when it comes to education, think of the fate of education under the hands of the PFDJ, where the whole system has been systematically dismantled and militarized. Given that this is the 21st century, where nations are fiercely competing at a breakneck pace to find their places in an increasingly globalized world, if we miss the boat now, we might never be able to catch up. And so on for every other aspect in Eritrean lives under PFDJ ...

In an exquisite series under the title of "Analyze Asmara", Gabriel Guangul tells us that the history of Asmara is the history of interruptions; every generation has to be uprooted before it finishes whatever it is that it has started. We can extend this metaphor to the whole of Eritrea, **where half a century of ghedli has been the greatest interruption of all**. And that interruption is still going on, with no end in sight. If we see this interruption not only in terms of human loss, but also in terms of demographic ramifications, educational regress, institutional destruction, cultural deterioration, moral degradation, societal fragmentation and, above all, family disintegration, it is easy to see that the nation has paid a prohibitive sacrifice for independence. And that interruption doesn't seem to have ended yet. Now the question is: is it worth it?

Confusion and denial: do Eritreans know what they want?

It is clear why Eritreans want to avoid the hard questions mentioned above because, among other things, they deal with the most sensitive issue in the land: the Moslem-Christian divide. But one cannot keep avoiding it because the problem has been the most recalcitrant of all other problems; not only has it out-survived the Ethiopian problem, it will also out-survive the Isaias problem.

Of course, both camps – the Moslems and Christians – pretend they don't have that deep divide. In fact, they have always blamed outsiders for their division: the British, the Ethiopians and, now, the Isaias regime. But the facts say otherwise; all that we have to do is look at how the EDA is evolving (or devolving) into two opposing camps to see the recalcitrant nature of this divide. And for those who claim that this is so at the leadership level only, all that we have to do is look at this problem at community level in places where no "enemies" are in position to divide us: at Diaspora. Where I live (in Southern California) these two communities don't even want to live near each other (in a city of ten million!) let alone talk to one another; they remain as strangers to one another as Eskimos and Tuaregs are to one another. **Given a choice then, they seem to prefer to have nothing to do with one another**. Now the question is: where the land forces them to live with one another, would they be able to create and sustain a

nation? And if not, why did the people have to go through so much sacrifice without conclusively figuring out if they can ever live together to create a viable nation?

Many say that the goal of the Eritrean revolution was attained when the land was liberated, as Saleh vehemently asserts. The closest that he comes to say anything about the objective is when he writes, "From 1961 to 1991, you could pick any Eritrean from any corner and ask: 'what are you fighting for?' and the answer would be the same: 'to liberate the land and the people from Ethiopian occupation.'" But this is a mid-objective (if it ever has been), for it says nothing about why they wanted to have a different nation in the first place. One of the non-answers given to justify the horrendous sacrifice is that we now have the country – the land – and now all that we need to make it complete is "*harnet*". That dubious distinction between *netsanet* and *harnet* is invoked to justify this explanation. To those who are obsessed with the "land", didn't Eritreans have their land when they were with Ethiopia? I didn't see any Amhara landlord making serfs out of the Eritrean peasants the way Shaebia is doing now. So if we are to strictly remain true to the definition of "land ownership", Eritreans used to own their land better during "Ethiopian occupation" than they are now. And if "land" is being invoked to justify the creation of a nation, who had indeed denied Eritreans to make a nation out of Ethiopia? But if it was the case that they wanted to have a nation all for themselves – one that they don't want to share with the rest of Ethiopians – then we are back to square one: why?

Others tell us that the dream of martyrs was a free democratic nation. Even if we are to believe such implausible claim, that too doesn't say much, for one can argue if that is all they wanted they could have struggled for a free democratic Ethiopia. Or to put it more bluntly, the question that ghedli never asked was: what are the chances of building a functioning democratic nation out of the two population groups in Eritrea (as opposed with Ethiopia)?

So if neither the liberation of the land nor the aspiration for democracy explains the goal of the revolution, what could it have possibly been? After three decades of armed struggle and two decades of independence, that we are still at dark figuring out the purpose of ghedli (the revolution) is a testimony to its mute nature. Rudderless, without any vision to guide it, ghedli had been making up its goal as it marched along through years of trial and error without ever conclusively figuring out what it was that it actually wanted.

One clear sign that one has no clue as what he is doing is if he keeps doing what he has been doing even after he has supposedly achieved his goal. If someone

keeps running after he has reached the finishing line, it is either because he has no idea what a finishing line is or because he has had altogether a different end-goal in mind. Lately there has been an amusing phenomenon taking place among EDA member parties: after having been gravitating towards two opposing camps for some time, now they are clearly consolidating into two diametrically opposed groups, with nothing in between to hold them together. For lack of better words, let me call them "religion-based" and "secular-based" parties. The consolidation of the secular-based parties has been slowly evolving for some time. And recently, with the formation of Eritrean Solidarity Front, four Muslim parties came to be united into one, with two more hoped to join them soon – with none other than a fundamentalist Sheikh at the helm of leadership. **Neither camp is aware that they are repeating the same cycle that started 60 years ago when the political topography of Eritrea was neatly divided into two opposing camps between Muslims and Christians.** That fits the definition of insanity attributed to Albert Einstein, "Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results." There is something amiss in Eritrean revolution if the main players want to do it all over again by going all the way back to the starting point of 60 years ago. The case now is even worse since in between two events has caused the divide to go deeper than before: (a) the landscape of Islam in the neighborhood has been radically altered and there is no way Eritrea could escape that influence. (b) The brutal rule of Shaebia has radicalized many population groups and, deservedly or not, Shaebia is closely associated with Tigrignas with these groups.

To fight for liberating the land without having any clue as to what to do with that land would indeed be a form of insanity. That is why liberating the land can never be the end objective of the revolution. To me the measure of success of the Eritrean revolution is **whether its people are capable of creating a viable state** within that land that they couldn't have built within larger Ethiopia. So not only should they convince us that whatever they set out to do couldn't have been done within Ethiopia proper, but also that it can be achieved within Eritrea. Not only do they have to point out what is it that holds in common between them, but also that that commonality could not be had within Ethiopia; or, again, it wouldn't be worth all the sacrifice.

If the different factions mentioned above manage to pass this litmus test, it could only be because there is a huge overlap in their respective visions of what kind of nation they want to build. But so far, the verdict points to the opposite direction: Not only do they remain inarticulate in the kind of vision they have for the nation, but also whatever can be gleaned from their acts tells us that they have diametrically opposed visions of Eritrea in their minds with little or no overlap at

all; the one looks to Islam and the Arab world while the other looks to secularism and the West/Habesha for inspiration. Given their discordant visions, it makes one wonder why they even want to live under one roof. After all, if this marriage of convenience hasn't worked for the last 60 years, why do they expect it to work now – especially since they are restarting the process “all over again” – as Gabriel Guangul would have put it – all the way at the starting point?

The amusing part is that they still pretend to be concerned about each other's welfare, while always plotting to overwhelm one another. As pointed above, they have always claimed it is outsiders that divide us, while the reality has always been that **they have never figured out how or if they could live together**. The British who saw through them more than they saw through themselves, thought they will never make it together and decided that the Pakistani/Indian solution would be better. **Both groups would have none of it because each group thought it would eventually prevail against the other.** The whole ghedli experience is a failure in the experimentation of “living together”. Jebha, after traumatic trials and errors that lasted two decades, was the first to give up its hands and accept the inevitable by disbanding altogether in 1981. After that, all the splinter groups unabashedly went back to their ethnic or religious comfort zones, at last relieved to shed off the nationalist baggage they had been forced to carry for such a long time. Shaebia, which suppressed the problem rather than resolve it, is still pretending such a problem doesn't exist. And now the ghosts of the past are back again with vengeance.

This confusion at the leadership level is also to be seen at the followers' level. Many have been lauding this consolidation of the EDA parties into two camps either because they share their dubious aspirations or because they naively see it as a step forward in the workings of democracy (“The fewer parties we have, the better off we are”). I call the latter the politics of numerology, for all the merit they see is in the numbers; nothing else seems to matter to them.

In the rest of this article, I want to focus on Saleh's article, “The Spark, the Fire and the Torch”, as a foil to elaborate on the state of **confusion and denial** that has been afflicting the nation for the last six decades. What struck me most about the structure of his argument is that it closely follows the structure of the course of ghedli itself – all emphasis on the means of how to achieve the objective without ever bothering to find out the nature of that objective. But even if we believe that ghedli had a noble cause (without bothering to find out what it is), many of the qualities that he mentions happen to be outright false. Below, first, I will try to show that the positive attributes that he mentions, taken on their own, say nothing – that is, they are devoid of content; and, second, that even when

taken at their face value, most of them don't hold true.

Ghedli: form without content

Saleh mentions seven virtues that make the Eritrean revolution a success story. The odd thing about his criteria is that, left to stand on their own, they say nothing on whether they are desirable qualities or not. It is like someone asking you whether hot water is desirable or not. Absent the particular use the questioner has in mind, no one can provide a definite answer to such a question. If it is for drinking purposes, the answer might be no. If it is for washing purposes, the answer might be yes. All Saleh's virtues have this indeterminate nature in them [in the following, all within quotation marks are Saleh's]:

1. "[Ghedli] was purpose-driven": A criminal too could be purpose-driven, but that doesn't make the purpose right. What one needs to show first is whether the purpose is worthy of the sacrifice it demands. And to say that the purpose for the struggle for independence was "to liberate the land and the people from Ethiopian occupation" doesn't say anything at all. The true criteria ought to be: Why did they want independence from Ethiopia? And if they did really know what they wanted, was it desirable? And if so, did they ever achieve it; and if not, will they ever achieve it?
2. "It had organic leadership": That probably is the most absurd one. The Isaiases and Abdella Idrisis are indeed as organic as could be, but I would rather have an Italian company (let alone an Eritrean from Diaspora) run the nation than these two monsters. I would even go further than that: I would rather have Haile Selassie (dead or alive) rule Eritrea than our home-grown toxic criminals. All that I have to do is compare the Asmara of today with the Asmara of 60's to see the stark difference that makes me prefer the latter.
3. "It was not a proxy war for any other power": Again, if a war is proxy or not doesn't say anything about its justness or viability. One can have a proxy war that happens to be just or a war that is not proxy and yet remains unjust. Behind Saleh's rationale is that naïve search for a "genuine" Eritrean revolution, unadulterated with foreign influence – as only the romantics would insist. To the contrary, I wouldn't have minded the war in Eritrea being a proxy one if that could have shortened the cycle of violence that lasted decades.
4. "It prevailed": Again, "success" is no substitute for a just cause. Many a just cause in history has failed, and many dubious causes have triumphed. The history of the world is full of carcasses of people gone extinct through no fault of theirs (ex: Red Indians, Australian aborigines, etc.). The Taliban did

prevail against the Soviets, but they took the nation back into the Stone Age. Success is mute when it comes to justification. And if "success" is to be given the way Saleh wants it to have, neither Jebha nor its founder would fare well under this criterion.

5. "It had genuine popular participation": Behind this criterion is that absolutist view that popular participation makes a cause right. A whole people can share a cause and that cause could be dead wrong. Nazism was a popular movement in Germany, but no one in his right mind would now say it was a just cause. Besides, there is a reason why popular participation should be confined to a democratic context: though the popular participation remains constant, the cause keeps changing. No such evolving cause is possible under the barrel of the gun.
6. "It was swimming against the tides of history": Again, this says nothing at all about the justness or viability of the cause. A criminal movement could swim against the tides of history and triumph. That is to say there are many instances in history where a disaster could have easily been prevented if this or that had been done. So swimming against the tide of history is something that both just and unjust causes have accomplished at one time or another.
7. "It was fought using conventions of war": It is also easy to imagine a war conducted flawlessly – that is, according to the conventions of war – but nevertheless an aimless one. One can imagine the US conducting a flawless war in Iraq so as to disarm Saddam Hussein of its weapons of mass destruction. If there were no such weapons to be found, that war would remain unjust even if it was fought according to conventions of war. That is to say, the way the war is fought, by itself, would tell us nothing about its justification.

The problem with Saleh's criteria is they are secondary qualities; they are not qualities that could be made to stand on their own. That is why one can come up with a revolution that fulfills all these criteria and yet end up with one of the lousiest revolutions in history; all these criteria added up do not necessarily make a revolution just, worthy of its sacrifice or its results sustainable. And so it goes with every other criterion he mentions. It is not that some of the characterizations of the revolution are not undesirable, but that their desirability is parasitic on the nature of the cause itself. It is only if the cause is justified independent of these qualities that it would be considered the right thing to do for the revolution to seek out some of the qualities that he mentions. So let's assume that, for the sake

of argument, the Eritrean cause was just and achievable, and see if the evidence supports his claims.

[There is an excellent article written by Yebio Woldemariam (“Unfettered Romanticizing of Ghedli”) that addresses the seven qualities of ghedli that Saleh mentions. Below, I will deal with four of them. And as best as I can I will try to avoid repetition, but at certain junctures overlap cannot be avoided.]

“It was not a proxy war for any other power”:

First, let’s assume – for argument’s sake – that to conduct a proxy war is an undesirable quality for a revolution to have, as Saleh wants us to believe. Given the absolutist belief that all proxy wars are intrinsically evil that he adheres to, I am sure that he believes that not only should Eritrea not fight others’ wars but also it shouldn’t let others fight for its war. But the Eritrean case fails on both counts.

Saleh wants us to believe that Arab help was minimal. Well, let me stick to one case only to cast doubt on this assertion: the case of decades of Sudan’s role in Eritrea’s revolution. Let me put it bluntly: **without Sudan’s help, the Eritrean revolution would have never existed in the scope and duration it did; and, consequently, Eritrean independence would have never materialized without that critical help.** This is especially true in the last two decades of the revolution (the 70’s and 80’s) where a movement that had tens of thousands of armed guerrillas wouldn’t have made it for a single month, let alone for years, without the logistical support of Sudan.

And Sudan’s action was not simply altruistic. Besides serving the cause of pan-Arabism, this was part of the tit-for-tat game that Sudan was playing with Ethiopia in its war with the South. What might have confused Saleh is the fact that the Eritrean fighters considered themselves to be so independent that they might have never thought that at times they were involved in proxy wars. But for a war to be identified as proxy, such identification doesn’t necessarily have to come from those who are fighting it. It is the facts themselves that determine the nature of the war that one is involved in.

How about letting others fight Eritrea’s war? Again, let me stick to one case to make my point: the case of TPLF. Let me also put it bluntly: without each others’ help, there is no way that either of them (TPLF or EPLF) could have achieved their respective goals. Let me mention three cases where the help of TPLF was critical to the very existence of Shaebia: (a) Without the help of TPLF, it wouldn’t have been able to push ELF all the way to Sudan. (b) In the early 80’s, the thinning out

of Shaebia's army in the trenches of Sahel had put its sustainability to serious doubt. This thinning out occurred for three reasons: First, the relentless assaults from Ethiopia's army (from late 70s and early 80s) led to tens of thousands of casualties and thousands of defections (to Ethiopia, Jebha and Sudan). Second, the civil war with Jebha also took a huge toll. And third, after the retreat of the late 70s, the influx of new recruits turned into a trickle. With rapid depletion of its army and with no new recruits to fill the gap, Shaebia was in existential crisis. It was at this critical time that thousands of TPLF guerrillas came to help Shaebia defend its base, without which the survival of both EPLF and TPLF would have been put into serious doubt. (c) After the demolition of Nadow, neither of these two movements would have made it to their respective capitals had they not closely collaborated with one another. This point can be made poignant if we realize that the margin of error that Shaebia was working with at this critical time was very slim. Given the above, we could easily say that these two fronts succeeded because they were willing to make proxy out of one another.

Given that the proxy-ness of Eritrean revolution is to be found at both ends of its pragmatic approach, it beats me where Saleh got this purist idea that intends to take the "proxy war" variable out of the revolution.

"It prevailed":

Did the Taliban prevail in Afghanistan? Well yes, for just few years after the Soviets left in defeat. But their fundamentalist views, with the absolutist conviction that certain "truths" have to be relentlessly pursued irrespective of the context, led them to their demise. The Taliban are known for their fighting skill and bravery, but so are they for their immense stupidity. The idea that somehow they could prevail after 9/11 simply because they had the "truth" on their side could only originate from a worldview so isolated that it has become totally incapable of factoring in outside variables in its survival strategy. So has been the case of Eritrea, where the "truth" is supposed to prevail irrespective of outside forces closing in.

It seems to me it is too early for Eritrea to claim a victory in its independence, as Saleh is obviously doing. **Eritrea's days of peaceful independence lasted just seven years.** Since then, the whole nation has been living behind the trenches. All that is different from the days of ghedli is that the trenches of Sahel have been moved further out to the borders. Aside from that, the nation is still fighting for its "territorial integrity". Here is an example I provided at one time to elucidate on this precarious condition: A football player who catches the ball for a blip of a second before it slips through his hands to touch the ground cannot be said to

have “prevailed”; no referee would give the team a point for its player “almost catching the ball”; one either catches or doesn’t catch a ball. Similarly, seven years in a nation’s history is a blip of a second. **The judgment of whether Eritrea has prevailed requires a historical distance in timing which is not available to us now.** It is too early to tell whether the ball is conclusively in Eritrea’s hands or is slipping, on its way to touch the ground. And I am not even talking of internal variables set to tear it apart, religious and ethnic strife being the most prominent ones. So I would advise Saleh not to be so sanguine on this point.

The Isaias regime, like its Taliban counterpart, is known not only for its immense brutality but also for its immense stupidity. Given that it has always been working with the slightest margin of error, the history of Shaebia is a history of bouncing back from the edges of disaster. Unfortunately, this has instilled a sense of invincibility in it – one that has been driving it from one misadventure to another. But those adventurous ones who make a habit of returning from the edges of disaster often perish in a single disaster.

“It had genuine popular participation”:

This probably is the most misstated part of the revolution that one can put in the form of paradox to point at its fallacy: **ghedli was most popular with those who least paid for it, mainly the urban population (and now among Diaspora Eritreans), and remained least popular among those who paid the most, mainly the peasants.** If so, it is precisely because ghedli had been primarily looked through the eyes of urban Eritrea that it seemed to have been a result of genuine popular participation. In fact, one can come up with a rough formula how this perception worked: the more distanced one is from the day-to-day reality of ghedli, the more glamour it had for him – as all kinds of romanticizing go. So far as the urbanites looked at ghedli from a safe distance, they were all for it. As urban Eritrea came under the rule of ghedli with independence, all the romance went out through the window. But for the peasants, who had been living with ghedli for years before independence, the romance was dead long before it showed up in urban Eritrea. And as for Diaspora Eritreans, who are the most distanced of all, the romance still remains as potent as ever.

But the best measurement of “popular participation” would be **joining the Fronts.** So let us look at the so-called *voluntary* nature of the struggle: those who were forced to join the struggle; those who changed their minds after joining the struggle; and those who decided to oppose the struggle.

Let me first raise the issue of forced conscription which, by definition, happens to be just the opposite of popular participation. As a matter of statistics, the 60's input in popular participation is almost negligible. When both Fronts showed up in force in Kebessa in the early 70s, Jebha had a few thousands and Shaebia didn't even muster one thousand. The first massive flow of recruits came soon after that, when students and other urbanites flocked to the Fronts in their thousands. And the heavy battles in densely populated areas, and the abuse of Ethiopian soldiers that followed them, were excellent recruiting means of peasants – a fact that was not lost on Shaebia, that skillfully exploited it by choosing the place of conflicts. This flow continued to the late 70s, until the retreat of 78, when it abruptly came to a screeching halt. **People don't realize that the popular participation that they often talk about lasted for only about 5 years!** After the retreat, not only did the voluntary conscription from both the urban and rural areas come to a dead halt, many of those who had already joined were defecting in thousands. There were two main reasons for this: first, with the retreat, the revolution was losing its luster; and, second, more importantly, those who had met ghedli first hand were disillusioned by what they had seen.

But the Ethiopian *wereeras* were going on relentlessly, incrementally taking their toll to an unsustainable level. As the number of combatants kept dwindling without any hope of replenishing them with voluntary recruits, the Fronts saw no other option but to resort to forced conscription. In fact Jebha, where the disillusionment factor came to materialize earlier to make it less appealing, had already started *giffa* by the mid-70s. Shaebia, which used to deride Jebha for resorting to *giffa*, followed soon. For about fifteen years, the peasants of Eritrea were subjected to this ruthless *giffa* in its most inhumane form. In Shaebia's case, it was pure horror; it didn't spare underage, women and old. It was these peasants that were used as fodder in the consecutive onslaughts of Sahel by the Ethiopian army that lasted for more than a decade. Each of these *wereeras* involved tens of thousands of soldiers and hence exacted huge losses. If we are to look at the table of the martyred, I have no doubt that the overwhelming majority are peasants. This fact alone would put serious doubt to the voluntary ("popular participation") nature of ghedli.

It is said that by the mid-80s, not even 10 percent of Shaebia's army was voluntary [in comparison, the TPLF's army was almost made up of voluntary army from the beginning to the end]. But even with the "voluntary" component, it might have not been that voluntary. There is that wrong perception that if you

join ghedli voluntarily, your act will be counted as “popular participation”. As thousands of defections, desertions, imprisonments and killings attest, it didn’t take long for many of those who joined ghedli to change their minds. It is not for nothing that Shaebia was diligently guarding its combatants as it is doing today, if not more so. At one time, those who defected to Ethiopia were in thousands; and thousands more escaped to Sudan. Shaebia’s underground prisons were as full then as they are today. The shoot-at-sight policy at border crossings that is a cause of outrage now is only a pale imitation of the horrors of the past.

Then there are those who were so disappointed by the nature of the Fronts that they rose up in rebellion against them. For instance, the Falul uprising consisted of at least 5,000 teghadelti – almost a fifth of what used to constitute Jebha – of which about half were killed and the rest escaped to Sudan and Ethiopia. There were also others like Menkae, Yemin and individual dissenters that perished in similar fashion.

Add to all this, all of those who served quietly because they saw no way out of their predicament, many of whom thought it was the least evil of the choices available to them then, then you will see how the coercive part played a great role in ghedli. A good example would be to see how Jebha teghadelti acted when they were pushed into Sudan. Given their high disappointment with the state of ghedli, most of them preferred to disband rather than return to mieda.

“It was fought using conventions of war”:

If Saleh was referring to the Geneva Conventions of War on how ghedli treated its enemy combatants, there is an ambiguous record on that. If you take Jebha, for instance, during the retreat of the late 70s, in an uncalled for barbaric move it killed all its Ethiopian prisoners – hundreds of them. But the fact that it had by then only hundreds of them (Shaebia had thousands by that time), after many years of large scale battles and capturing of towns, attests to the fact that it was killing most of its captured prisoners all along. Regarding the handling of captured soldiers, Shaebia had a better record but not as rosy as it makes it seem.

But Saleh might be referring only to the way they treated the civilian population when he said this: “This is truly what distinguishes the Eritrean revolution from all the rest. You will be hard pressed to find a single case where the ELF or EPLF actually targeted civilians.” When I read this, I thought it was some kind of a joke. Was he, like Rip Van Winkle, sleeping throughout the ghedli era of three decades? How about the thousands of civilians that perished starting with Awate

himself when he brutally assaulted the Kunamas to just after the independence when Shaebia massacred hundreds of Kohayin militias that had already surrendered, with a long trail of civilian blood in between? Not a single case! Can't he even remember what has happened in Keren when many retired policemen ("Police Abbay"), respected citizens of the town, were taken on suspicion simply because they used to go to Asmara to collect their monthly retirement salary (as everyone else did) and summarily executed, never to be heard of again.

Shaebia's principle had been, "When in doubt, kill." They always preferred to err on the killing side; to them, it would be unforgivable to find out that someone who had slipped through their justice system turned out to be a spy. But it is forgivable to find out that someone that they had executed turned out to be innocent. According to their "conventions of war", the revolution can afford the latter but not the former. In the eighties, when almost all the recruits were results of *giffa*, the atmosphere of suspicion was so high that the death squads of Shaebia were working overtime in killing peasants suspected of spying or planning to flee. That was especially the case if the peasants happened to be former militias. And many peasants that managed to escape and join their families were relentlessly pursued to their villages and killed.

And whenever the Fronts felt that certain population groups were resisting their incursions, bloodbaths followed (Kunama, Kohayin, Dembelas, etc). Pitched battles were conducted that over time took thousands of lives. When Jebha finally overwhelmed Kohayin, after two years of resistance, and pushed the militias across Mereb to Tigray, the first thing it did was to confiscate the cattle of the militias' families and feed its army ["reconciliation" Jebha style]. If now we are wondering why Shaebia penalizes parents of deserters, you can easily find precedence in the past. And a few years later when Kohayin militias successfully rebuffed Shaebia's incursions to their stronghold in the hills of Kohayin, the Front's frustrated response was to burn their harvest (*'kumitto*) in the unprotected *bere'ka*.

Even the response to refusal of collaboration, such as refusing to pay a fee, was met brutally with executions (mafia style) – as the numerous assassinations in the urban areas attest. For instance, when Shaebia returned to *kebessa* Hamassien in the eighties, the land was under total control of Derghi, and many of those who were forced to work in *'kebelies* refused to collaborate with the Front for fear of their lives (under the hands of Derghi) and as a result paid dearly with their lives (under the hands of ghedli). There were hundreds of such assassinations all over Eritrea. And then there were many others who were killed because they were

suspected of having sympathies with Ethiopia, even though they were in no way involved in violent acts.

Saleh believes that compared with other fronts, the Eritrean movements were saints. Well, I will do him a favor and instead compare the crimes of ghedli against their own people with the crimes of the much dreaded enemy – Ethiopia! How many of those who were imprisoned by Ethiopia suspected for collaborating with ghedli or subversion ended up dead? Few of them! And how many of those imprisoned by ghedli suspected of collaborating with Ethiopia ended up dead? Almost all of them! And how many of those suspected of subversion in ghedli ended up dead? Thousands of them! Shaebia alone is supposed to have killed 5,000 of them, and that number doesn't include those that it killed indirectly as in the case of Falul. And all of this is among its combatants. It doesn't include the thousands that perished in clashes with militias and the random assassinations the guerrillas conducted. Often, when the atrocities of the Ethiopian army are remembered it is the massacres like Shiib, 'Una, Mul'ki and Wekidiba that are mentioned. But, despite their monstrosity, if you add the numbers, they won't even be a fraction of what ghedli killed.

Not a single case! Is this guy for real? I am beginning to believe he actually believes what he says. Talk about romanticizing ghedli! If such a bright fellow remains a prisoner to a fantasy of his own making, it doesn't bode well for Eritrea.

Conclusion

As I mentioned above, Saleh's analysis has been dead wrong not only on the seven "virtues" of ghedli, but also on its conceptual beginnings and end-goal. He rather settles for their technical counterparts. Since to talk about the end-goal of ghedli is to talk about its conceptual beginnings and whether they have been realized or not, the two cannot be separated from one another. In a posting on this issue, I will argue that the two conceptual beginnings of ghedli - one from the Moslem and the other from the Christian side – had nothing to do with nationalism and that they could only be carried out by adopting **defensive identities** alien to the people. The sensitive issue of the Muslim-Christian divide will have to be explored extensively and honestly if we are to make any headway on this subject matter – and this is what I intend to do.

If I can put the aim of the posting that will deal with the conceptual beginnings of ghedli and its end-goal in one question, it would be: **what is the nature of**

Moslem-Christian divide and is there a way of bridging it within proper Eritrea?