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HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF ISLAMIC  
MOVEMENTS IN THE HORN OF AFRICA

by

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The Horn of Africa, a multi-ethnic region, has a triple cultural influence - indigenous, sematic and Greco-Roman. The region also inherited three world religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Muslims first set foot in the region when companions of the Prophet Mohamed escaped the persecution of Arab polytheists and asked the christian king, Al-Nagashi, for refuge. The hospitality and the good treatment offered to these Muslim migrants ~~was~~ discouraged in later periods when Muslims were one of the world powers, ~~and were~~ <sup>to</sup> dispatching conquering expeditions to that area. Instead, Abyssinia later became the home for anyone who felt unsafe in the Muslim world. This tacit peace-pact was broken in the 16th century when the most damaging Muslim-Christian wars erupted and wrought such destruction that its scars and fear are still present today.

Since time immemorial, the Horn, with its tumultuous nature has had a history of constant inter-tribal feuds. In such an environment, the WARANLE (spear-man) wielded a weightier sword than the Wadaad (religious man) who played the role of intelligentsia as teachers, scholars, lawyers, judges, doctors etc. Nevertheless, the more learned Wadaads - the Sheikhs and Welis (saints) were the most revered personalities and showed the best skills of leadership in times of danger. However, political decisions were the domain of all adult males though the most respected elders - men of experience and age - had

the final say.

For centuries, sufism was widely practised in this region. Sufism is the name given to mysticism of Islam and the term sufi originates from the Greek word Sufiya, meaning wisdom - Hikmah - a meaning repeatedly mentioned in the Quran. The followers of the sufi path aim to achieve holiness through a constant yearning of the human spirit for personal communion with God, a long journey that very few are able to accomplish after committing their minds and hearts to the words of wisdom and sanctity. Writing about sufi orders of this region mainly involves discussing the exoteric dimension with little mention of the esoteric life - which is difficult to write about since the Dikral Khafi (secret remembrance) - continuous repetition of the name of God by the heart - is the central component of Sufi life of the area. For a long period, the Horn produced towering figures in the spiritual world gained through two main paths:

- a) a hierarchical (silsila) approach where the murid (disciple) goes through the path by the guidance of his sheikh with total dependence upon him. This dependence is usually recorded by the Qasaaid (praising poems) of the traveller to his sheikh;
- b) an independent approach where the follower of the path, at an early stage chooses his dikr (repetition of the name of God) practice which is a process that needs strong discipline and firm mental

concentration. Many who followed this path lost their senses or spoke inappropriately.

In the Muslim world, despite national and regional differences, and the internal enmities that have constantly torn the Muslims apart, there is a sense of brotherhood and an underlying sentiment for unity beyond the apparent disparities. Nevertheless, policy decisions of Muslim governments have generally been made in the light of national rather than Muslim considerations. The new phenomena of Islamic resurgence brought with them a Muslim intellectual creativity where a great deal of Islamic material has been produced calling for the implementation of Sharia and the restoration of the abolished Khalifate. Modern civilisation with its break-neck speed of technological innovation has increased the flow of information and what happens in one country becomes known in others more quickly than ever before. Numerous Islamic organisations and movements promoting the pan-Islam idea are on the increase. This paper will discuss how this new trend affected the Somali-inhabited areas of the Horn of Africa, namely, Somalia, Somaliland, Djibouti, Eastern Ethiopia and Northern Kenya. The paper will trace the historical development of the existing Islamic movements in this region.

Soon after independence, most of the Muslim states started their inner regeneration and development. Somalia took

another course of continuing the struggle for political freedom in its missing territories. But among the Somalis, there were those who thought that internal development should have priority. Among these were some religious scholars - the founders of the present Islamic movements. At present, there are many Islamic groups with different ideologies. But all of these new groups have splintered from two Islamic organisations:

- a) Wahdat Shabab al-Islami - Islamic Youth Unity founded at Hargeisa;
- b) Jama'at Ahlal Islami - Society of Islamic People founded in Mogadisho.

#### ISLAMIC YOUTH UNITY (WAXDA)

In August 1969, the Somali population were disillusioned with the alien multi-party democracy system applied in a clan-based society, fragmenting it into numerous subdivisions. As a result, a group of ulama (religious scholars) founded an Islamic organisation known as the Islamic Youth Unity (WAXDA). These ulama were also alarmed by the disruption of traditional life and values and the withering away of Islamic norms. As a religious charity, the organisation introduced religious education classes of Hadith, Quran and Salat (prayers) to the younger generation. It also provided evening classes of school subjects to students of Waxda members. After the military coup of 1969, all organisations that posed any sort of threat were banned, but the Waxda survived as the

regime saw it as a traditional Quranic School (Malcaamad). The guidance, advice and free evening classes gave the Waxda members an advantage over their fellow students and they scored the highest marks in every exam. Parents were keen to gain Waxda membership for their children. However, the receipt of new Islamic books from Kuwait dramatically altered the political outlook of Waxda members. These books were those of modern Muslim scholars such as Sayid Qutb, Said Hawa, Maududi, Nadawi, etc. The Waxda was transformed into an underground political organisation and new methods of political activity, similar to those of the Muslim Brotherhood were introduced. The Muslim Brotherhood is an Islamic organisation which was founded in Egypt by the school teacher Has Al-Banna (d. 1949) who preached about the implementation of Islamic principles and the restoration of the abolished Muslim Khalifate.

The military regime became uneasy about the influence of students who openly and critically opposed the study of socialism which the government was introducing in schools at that time and which they condemned as anti-Islamic teaching. Sporadic imprisonments and detentions followed but the Waxda, unhindered by these measures, continued their activities and protested against the detentions through staging peaceful demonstrations at detention centres. This confrontation continued until at last the Waxda office was closed in 1978 and several hundred

members were imprisoned at Mandera. In the oral Somali society where written, factual information is almost absent, rumour and propaganda play an important role in shaping people's attitudes. The Somali government embarked on a new policy of isolating the Waxda by circulating false accusations and propaganda against Waxda members. This tactic was successful to a certain extent in driving a wedge between the Waxda and the population and a significant number were compelled by their parents not to have any further association with the Waxda. The organisation became unpopular and isolated from the inhabitants. However, contacts between Waxda and UFO (a group of Somaliland intellectuals imprisoned in 1981) reversed this trend. The UFO group which had close links with the local population exposed the false accusations against the Waxda and revealed the propaganda tactics of the government. This step saved the Waxda from extinction and a new lease of life was introduced into the organisation. Nevertheless, the imprisonment and harassment continued throughout the eighties.

After 1988, the Somaliland population settled in Eastern Ethiopia as refugees and Waxda made use of the golden chance of uninterrupted activity, and its membership skyrocketed. It opened schools for refugee children where no schools existed and after Siyad's downfall, Waxda, like the local population, returned to its former centres in Somaliland providing educational, welfare and voluntary

services as their contribution to rebuilding the destroyed country.

#### JAMAAT AHLAL ISLAM (AHLI)

This Islamic group was the brain-child of Sheikh Mohamed Moallin, a graduate of Azhar University. Before his studentship at Al-Azhar, Sheikh Mohamed gained his Islamic knowledge among the circles of the local Sufi, Qadiri Tariqaas, travelling extensively to different parts of the Horn of Africa. After his graduation and specialisation in the fundamentals of Islam, he returned to Somalia and initiated tafsir lessons at Abdilqadir Mosque. His approach to the exegesis of the Quran (Tafsir) - was similar to the approach of Sayid Qutb in his book "The Shades of the Quran". This approach was a shift from the traditional norm, being more modern and giving vivid examples to highlight contemporary issues. Naturally, this appeal was closer to the heart of the younger generation.

After the promulgation of the 1975 family law, the confrontation between the ulama and the military regime intensified and 10 leading Ulama who openly condemned the new law at mosques were executed. The population felt that the government was leading its citizens to atheism and large waves of new adherents joined the Islamic Circles of AHLI. The government was disquietened by this growing trend and launched a nationwide campaign against



active members. Unlike Waxda, the AHLI had no contingency plans for such a move. This caused disarray and fear among members and most of them fled abroad, mainly to Kenya and Saudi Arabia. The organisation splintered, new groups and sub-groups were born that brought with them changes in the order of ideas. Sheikh Mohamed Ahmed Gadhyaare who claimed to be the new leader, organised the fleeing members in Saudi Arabia and established a new organisation known as "JAMAT ISLAAX" (The Reform Group). This group, known as Islaax, not only adopted the Muslim Brotherhood style but joined the international organisation (TANZIM DUALI) of the movement, hence representing the Islamic movement in Somalia and monopolising all outside links with Muslim associations. Inside the country, some took an extreme and violent approach and adopted the Takfir Wal Hijra (Repentance and Flight) style - a movement whose presence was first signalled in 1971 in Egypt. This group condemned the government and its employees as non-believers and secretly campaigned for a violent and revolutionary approach. The rest maintained the original structure of disorganised and chaotic activities. By 1978, a flood of new returnees and young graduates from Saudi universities and influenced by the Wahabi doctrine became the backbone of a new group known as Salafi. The Wahabiya is named after its founder, Mohamed Ibnu Abduwahab (1703-1787) who followed the doctrine of Ibnu Hanbah, as interpreted by Ibnu Taimiya.

The Salafiya (fundamentals) like the Wahabite called for a return to the early pure origins of Islam and a striving to return to the pure tawhid (oneness of God). They condemned the belief in the Intercession of Saints and did not allow the use of the name of the prophet, saints and angels in prayer (Dua). Also, they regarded visiting and building shrines as an innovation (Bida') which must be dispelled from Islam. They rejected the authority of all medieval schools of law - MADHAB - and insisted on a new Ijtihad - fresh thinking.

Contacts between the Islamic groups in an effort to make a unified front began in earnest in 1982. By this time, there were five groups: WAXDA, AHLI, ISLAAX, TAKFIR and SALAFI. There were significant differences in their political thoughts, with the Waxda playing the mediatory role trying to bridge these ideological differences.

Three groups, Ahli, Salafi and Waxda, were ready to sign the union pact. The Takfir and Islaax, both outnumbered, disagreed with the union terms. Islaax's monopoly on all international Muslim contacts and fragile power base, also encouraged it to distance itself from any union. An unprecedented pressure on the Waxda from its members, especially those outside the country compelled its leadership to change its mind and boycott the union agreement.

Ahli and Salafi signed the union pact and formed Hizal

Itixad al Islaami (Islamic Union Party). The absence of northern areas from the union was balanced by the northern residents at Mogadisho who participated in the agreement. The union was a marriage of Muslim Brotherhood and Wahabite doctrine, a unique marriage indeed, and the union represented all Somali territories.

In the 80s, armed opposition movements based in Ethiopia challenged Siyad's regime. These Islamic groups - with the exception of Waxda which openly supported SNM - condemned the armed insurgence as much as they opposed Siyad's regime. This act isolated the government but had no effect on the opposition movements. The military regime, uneasy with this damaging propaganda campaign, imprisoned the influential members of the Islamic groups in 1986. This act further isolated the government inside the country and damaged its credibility in the Muslim world. Further measures were taken in 1989 at the height of its war against the north and the prominent Imams of Mogadisho mosques were imprisoned. This was followed by mass demonstrations and the government responded by firing at the demonstrators. Hundreds of civilians were shot at in the streets, an act that highlighted the bad human rights record and blocked badly needed aid.

In January 1991, a joint operation of three armed opposition movements of SNM, USC and SPM precipitated the military regime's downfall when its army was defeated.

The remnants of the defeated force regrouped at Kismayo. Among all the Islamic groups, the Itixad that outnumbered others and was less affected by the previous imprisonments, decided to take up arms after Siyad's downfall. They established their base at Kismayo, ironically, side by side with the forces of General Morgan, the son-in-law of the ousted dictator. The untrained recruits were easily defeated by the guerilla-hardened force of General Aideed. This made many members of Itixad raise questions about the new policy of taking up arms. Those who were not convinced by the answers given by the leadership broke away and established a new organisation known as Ansaar Sunna (Defenders of Prophetic Tradition). This was followed by the disintegration of the Itixad on clan lines as each group preferred to ally to one or the other fighting factions. Some settled at Mecca while others moved to the north, by-passing wherever they felt strong resistance to them and ultimately conquered the strategic port of Bosaso. This move precipitated a new confrontation with the SSDF, followed by heavy fighting between the two movements. Itixad lost the war badly, a large number of its backbone members being killed. This was a semi-fatal blow. Asking one of the Itixad leaders how he viewed the civil war, he answered: "It was a Jihad similar to that of UHUD where a brother fought against a brother and a son against a son". Itixad tried to make a final attempt to reconquer Bosaso

at the end of 1992 and regrouped all its forces from different territories at Las Kovey. The scheduled offensive was diffused by a Somaliland mediation attempt that pressured the Itixad to stop any planned offensive. During the deployment of American forces in December 1992 in Somalia, none of the Islamic groups showed the signs of armed resistance, though some voices raised their concern and opposition. This policy was reversed when the Aideed faction of USC opposed the U.N. force in 1993, and most of the Islamic groups encouraged General Aideed and participated in the armed activities.

Are these Islamic groups posing a new threat to the traditional structure? Are they a prelude to external change? Are there some new Islamic beliefs? Somalis have been staunch believers of Islam for centuries and there has been no change in their belief either in the six pillars of faith or the five pillars of Islam. What has changed is the political thought, ~~in~~ the most active areas of Muslim intellectual life over the last two centuries. The ideas of modern scholars and organisations from some Muslim countries found fertile ground for their message and created a new generation of Somalis eager to propagate a particular approach of one scholar or the other. Muslim scholars interpret the Quran and the prophetic sayings differently, largely due to their depth of understanding, historic background and circumstances of that moment. So, there has always been more than one political language of

Islam. Despite these obvious differences, some common features are also present. They have the common objective of establishing a new Islamic order run on the principles of Sharia. These new movements aim as a first target, to establish an Islamic state in the Somali territories by cooperating with similar movements in the Muslim world. They see themselves as the guardians of Islam and are real contenders for power. All groups are elitist and urban-centred, with no power base in the rural areas and no influence on the masses. They call for Islamic law but none of these Islamic groups envisage a clear programme for how the Sharia will be implemented nor have they prepared for the difficult job of thinking about the required Islamic laws for a modern society. However, there is always the simple argument that Islam will solve all our problems.