

Chasing Ghosts: Alex de Waal on the rise and fall of militant Islam in the Horn of Africa  
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Published on: Sep 01, 2005

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Three of the suspects in the attempted bombings in London on 21 July were born in the Horn of Africa. One, Yasin Hassan Omar, was born in Somalia; a second, Osman Hussein, in Ethiopia; and a third, Muktar Said Ibrahim, in Eritrea. Ten years ago, when Osama bin Laden lived in Khartoum, the Horn of Africa could plausibly have been described as both the headquarters and the front line of international jihadism. American analysts have argued that Africa's porous borders and ineffectual policing make the continent attractive to groups like al-Qaida, and the Pentagon has two major anti-terrorist operations in sub-Saharan Africa: a base in the tiny Red Sea state of Djibouti (sandwiched between Somalia and Eritrea) monitors the movements of suspected terrorists and the Pan Sahel Initiative is intended to hunt down jihadists in the Sahara. But they are chasing ghosts, mopping up the remnants of a jihad that had already failed in the late 1990s. It's unlikely that the attempted bombings alleged to have been committed by Yasin Hassan Omar, Osman Hussain and Muktar Said Ibrahim can be traced back to Islamism in their respective homelands. It is much more probable that their jihadism belongs to a new militant manifestation nurtured in European cities over the last few years.

The rise and wane of political Islam in the Horn has left deep imprints on the region and on jihadism itself. In 1990, as the anti-Saddam coalition triumphed in Kuwait, Islamists took solace from the collapse of three of the most disliked secular dictatorships in Africa: Hissène Habré in Chad in December 1990, Siad Barre in Somalia in January 1991 and Mengistu Haile Mariam in Ethiopia in May 1991 (precipitating Eritrea's secession). In the networks of the Islamist international, Sudan claimed credit for all this. Khartoum's new radical Islamist government had thrown open its doors to militants from across the Muslim world. They had counted on Islamist revolutions sweeping the Arab world in 1990, after Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait had dramatically shown up the rottenness and dependency of the Gulf monarchies, as they turned to America to save them. When this didn't happen, the jihadists instead congregated in Khartoum, where Islamists had staged a coup d'état in 1989, and their sheikh – Hassan al-Turabi – had created a Popular Arab and Islamic Congress to rival the conservative Organisation of Islamic States and the moribund Arab League. The PAIC meetings attracted people as disparate as the old leftist Palestinian George Habash, members of Hamas, Algerian jihadists and Iraqi Baathists – not to mention Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri.

Then, in December 1992, President Bush dispatched the US army to Somalia on what he described as a humanitarian mission. The Islamists didn't believe that for a moment: for them it was another invasion of a Muslim country. But Operation Restore Hope made them realise the importance of the African front in the struggle for a new caliphate. Bin Laden rented a villa in Khartoum, bought up several businesses and opened training camps. And Abu Ubaidah al-Banshiri, an Egyptian and a senior commander of al-Zawahiri's Tanzim al-Jihad, was sent to establish an African Muslim army, beginning in Somalia.

Years later, after 11 September, when the litany of al-Qaida terrorist outrages was compiled, the Black Hawk Down episode in Mogadishu in October 1993 was included. It shouldn't have been. Al-Banshiri's deputy, Mohammed Atef, was in town, but as a student of the Somali method of urban insurgency, not as a planner or instructor. He cheered on Aidid's militia, but they didn't need any help from him. (Atef later became al-Qaida's military commander in Afghanistan.) Al-Banshiri was said to have been impressed by the bravery and military prowess of the Somalis, but saddened by their factionalisation and unwillingness to acknowledge that Islam offered an alternative future for the country. Only the small outpost in Luuq, set up by Somalia's Islamist party, al-Itihaad al-Islaamiya ('The Islamic Union'), showed potential, and there the jihadists made their headquarters.

Luuq sits on a narrow neck of land between two horseshoe bends of the Jubba river. It's an old trading centre, founded in the Middle Ages by the first Muslim merchants in the Horn. The single gate to the town is flanked by steep riverbanks. The Jubba flows south from the Ethiopian highlands, a ribbon of blue and green in a flat reddish plain. Before Somalia's collapse in the late 1980s, the floodplains were farmed by the Gabwing, a small clan who had the misfortune to live next to the home district of the president, Siad Barre, whose Marehan clansmen greedily eyed the fertile alluvial land. In 1988, when the country was on the brink of civil war, I asked the chief of the Gabwing in Luuq about the workings of his customary court. Waiting until we were out of earshot of any government functionaries, he explained: 'No one comes to my court now. It is total war.' Week by week, his villagers were losing their land at gunpoint to well-connected Marehan merchants and army officers.

Five years later, in the depths of the civil war, I returned to the Jubba Valley. Most of the Gabwing villages along the banks of the river had vanished. Asked about the Gabwing, the Marehan warlords who now controlled the region laughed and denied that a people with such a name had ever lived there. But in Luuq it was different. Here, a recently arrived band of nervous young men was trying to run a local administration based on Koranic principles, without reference to clan distinction. Most were students; a few were teachers and professionals who had lived abroad. A few poorly armed militiamen guarded the town gate. Gabwing farmers had gathered on the land protected by the meanders of the river and were farming maize and tomatoes.

In the chaos after Siad Barre was overthrown in January 1991, the Islamists had made several attempts to gain a foothold in Somalia. But the country's major clans were heavily armed and determinedly independent and none would cede any territory. So the cadres of al-Itihaad targeted the leftover places, those belonging to the forgotten minorities who were the main victims in the war. The Itihaad followers were a mixed lot: some idealistic students, some criminals and mercenaries, a couple of businessmen with links to Arab countries, militiamen aggrieved by land seizures and exclusion from local power. Their first base was the seaport of Merca, just south of Mogadishu, where the local Hamar people were traders with a long urban history and no militia. They welcomed the earnest young men who came promising honesty, equality and respect for women. When the US marines of Operation Restore Hope fanned out from Mogadishu in January 1993, however, the Islamists thought it wise to leave Merca, and headed for Luuq. The Americans wouldn't go to the remote Jubba Valley.

For al-Banshiri, its attractions included its proximity to Ethiopia and Kenya, where al-Qaida's next operations were planned. Al-Banshiri drowned in a ferry accident on Lake Victoria in May 1996, while trying to set up a Ugandan battalion, but not before he had established a cell in Nairobi. Run by a Lebanese American and a man from the Comoros Islands, and made up

mainly of disaffected Kenyan Muslim youths, this cell went on to bomb the US embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam in August 1998, killing 225 people. The Luuq outpost also channelled arms to Somali insurgents in south-eastern Ethiopia who were fighting under the banner of the Ogaden National Liberation Front, piggybacking the jihadist agenda on the age-old grievance of Muslim lowlanders against the Christian highland domination of the country.

There are as many Muslims in Ethiopia and Eritrea as there are Christians, and they have been there since the beginnings of Islam. One of Islam's holiest cities, Harar, lies on the eastern slopes of the Ethiopian highlands – though it has never been the site of religious conflict. There are also substantial Muslim minorities in the other East African countries, populations not discovered by Islamic intellectuals until the 1970s. Further to the west, Islam has dominated the Sahel and savanna for centuries, and extremist Islamist political groups have recently emerged in northern Nigeria. All these Muslims are overwhelmingly Sufi, and their version of Islam incorporates mysticism and the cult of saints. Puritan evangelists and political Islamists have long tried to make African Muslims more orthodox, pressing for adherence to Islamic law and female dress codes and trying to end such 'un-Islamic' practices as drinking alcohol and building tombs.

Two months after al-Banshiri's death, assassins trained in Luuq loitered outside the central post office in Addis Ababa. Their target was Ethiopia's minister of transport and communications, Abdul Mejid Hussein. An ethnic Somali and veteran of Ethiopia's left-leaning student movement, Hussein symbolised the new Ethiopian government's commitment to ethnic and religious pluralism. He was also leading painstaking efforts to resolve the extraordinarily complicated internal conflicts that were preventing the ethnic Somali region of Ethiopia from achieving stability. Leaving his office next to the post office, Hussein took six bullets but survived. One of his bodyguards was killed.

Ethiopia's retribution was swift. In August 1996, helicopters supported by armoured columns crossed the border and attacked Luuq. The overwhelmed al-Itihaad militia ran for it, but 18 foreign al-Qaida members – suspected to be Pakistanis and Egyptians – fought to the last man, who drowned himself in the Jubba river rather than surrender when his ammunition ran out. The Ethiopians captured thousands of documents, which they handed over to the Americans, although the Americans, short of Arabic translators, didn't begin to examine them for 18 months. Ethiopia's chief of staff warned the Somali factions that if there was another terrorist attack traced to them, he would not hesitate to go as far as Mogadishu. Further smaller raids drove the point home.

Since the Ethiopian attacks, al-Qaida has had no military base in the Horn. Chastened, al-Itihaad dismantled its militia and its attempt to build an Islamic micro-state, focusing instead on setting up Islamic law courts and schools, and buying influence with the main clan factions. A civil Islamism is alive and well in Somalia. The Islamists run most of the schools and clinics, and Islamic law is enforced in many courts. Women cover themselves far more than their mothers ever did.

For a while Somali jihadists continued to take whatever chances came their way, acquiring arms from Eritrea during its bloody border war with Ethiopia, for example, and shipping them on to its affiliates inside Ethiopia. Other radical Islamist groups have cropped up on the margins of Somalia's factional politics, occasionally sparking rumours of secret training camps for international terrorists. The Ethiopians use these stories to justify their continuing

interventions. Such lurid claims tend to become less credible the closer one gets to them. After 9/11, the State Department, bemused about how to handle this stateless territory, stumbled on the simplest and most effective measure: it published the names of those it suspected of al-Qaida links. Every political leader in Somalia is also a businessman, and all business there involves financial and trade links with East Africa, the Arabian Gulf, Europe and America, so even a hint that assets might be frozen or money transfers blocked is enough to cause any named suspect to be shunned.

Although jihadism has been reduced to the political margins, its tiny number of adherents still pose a danger. An al-Qaida cell, operating from Mogadishu, bombed Mombasa's Paradise Hotel and shot at an Israeli airliner in November 2002. Several cell members – including a Tanzanian, a Sudanese and a Yemeni – are still at large. Aden Hashi Ayro, a former al-Itihaad fighter who trained in Afghanistan, runs a nameless network that has no political programme and makes no proselytisation efforts: he is interested only in killing. His thugs murdered four foreign aid workers, including an elderly British couple who ran a school. Raids and abductions sponsored by the Ethiopians and Americans continue, although they are clumsy, brutal, often net the wrong people and serve only to add to Mogadishu's lawlessness.

While recuperating from his bullet wounds, Hussein, together with his wife, Anab, was invited by the Egyptian president, Hosni Mubarak, for a Nile cruise. The two men had been the target of another assassination attempt a year earlier. In June 1995, Mubarak had taken the precaution of flying his armour-plated car to Addis Ababa for the twenty-minute drive from the airport to the conference hall where the summit of the Organisation of African Unity was to be held. Halfway along one of the city's boulevards, gunmen leapt from the crowds lining the streets and opened fire. A block downhill, a truck filled with explosives burst through. Mubarak had been accompanied from the airport by Hussein, who didn't know that the car was bullet-proof and threw himself to the floor. He and Mubarak clutched each other as the president's driver spun the car round and sped back to the airport.

News of the assassination attempt reached Ethiopia's chief of security, Kifle Gebre Medhin, within a minute. He was on the steps of Africa Hall, inside the United Nations compound, awaiting the procession of heads of state. Instantly he confronted his Sudanese counterpart, Nafie Ali Nafie. Gebre Medhin knew that Khartoum was supporting terrorist cells. In Sudan itself the al-Qaida network included al-Gamaa al-Islamiya ('The Society of Islam'), led by Sheikh Omar Abdel Rahman, later convicted of conspiracy for his part in the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, whose operatives were intent on murdering Mubarak. Other sponsored groups across the Horn included Eritrea Jihad, al-Itihaad and, bizarrely, the Lord's Resistance Army in northern Uganda, which takes inspiration from self-proclaimed Christian prophets. Nafie had assured the Ethiopian intelligence chief that the summit would pass without incident. It's still not clear whether he was lying, or had been kept in the dark. At any rate, Gebre Medhin had his revenge twice over. Acting against orders, he led the commando squad that cornered the terrorist cell in an Addis house. And he also commanded a tank unit that crossed the Sudanese border close to the Blue Nile river, defeated the army garrisons there, and then handed over the territory to the rebel Sudan People's Liberation Army.

The Eritreans thought Gebre Medhin had been naive to believe Sudanese assurances. As early as January 1994, Eritrea's president, Isseyas Afewerki, had declared that since Khartoum was backing jihadists from Eritrea's Muslim population who were planting landmines on Eritrean roads, he would respond by supporting the Sudanese opposition. 'President Omer al-Bashir will be overthrown within a year,' Afewerki announced. Bashir is still in power, but Eritrean-

backed guerrillas from the Beja tribe, who live on both sides of the Eritrea-Sudan frontier, soon sealed off the border and prevented further Sudanese infiltration. They are still insurgent in Sudan, threatening another war on its eastern flank.

While militant Islamism in Somalia was a local affair, buffeted by the currents of civil war, in Sudan it enjoyed the backing of the most powerful individuals in the state. Hassan al-Turabi, a lawyer and philosopher, was the visionary, with a grand plan for an Islamic state in Sudan and Islamist revolutions in neighbouring states. His student cadres spread across Sudan, setting up schools, clinics and micro-credit schemes, seeking practical solutions to the pressing problems faced by ordinary Sudanese. Most of these Islamist social projects didn't work, but at least they tried. Turabi's security cabal ran clandestine training camps, sometimes under the cover of Islamic philanthropic agencies, and smuggled al-Qaida operatives onto Sudan Airways flights destined for all over Africa and the Middle East. Khartoum airport even had a terrorist protocol unit responsible for meeting and greeting these men when they returned, ensuring that they bypassed customs and immigration and went straight to safe houses. A terrorist cell can survive without state sponsorship, but its capability is infinitely greater if it has a government to facilitate its every move.

In the three years following the assassination attempt on Mubarak, a military coalition of Eritrea, Ethiopia and Uganda, with the discreet endorsement of the US government, brought Sudanese jihadism to a halt. They launched an undeclared regional war in which all three states sent troops across Sudan's border. They also co-ordinated action with the new Rwandan government, which was facing a similar problem from Congo. The Sudanese president repeatedly protested that his country had been invaded. The invaders denied it, crediting their victories to Sudanese rebels. With this knife at its throat, Sudan rapidly closed down militant bases, expelled bin Laden, and reined in its jihadist security agencies. The world saw a raft of UN and American sanctions – a Clintonite version of regime change – and, a few days after the East African embassy bombings, Clinton anticipated the Bush doctrine of pre-emptive war by precisely but mistakenly destroying Khartoum's al-Shifa pharmaceutical factory with cruise missiles. A soil sample containing traces of a precursor to the deadly chemical agent VX was evidence that something illegal had been going on there, but most analysts agree that Sudan's chemical weapons were stored elsewhere. Sudanese diplomats now turned the tables on the US, threatening to demand a UN investigation if the US raised Sudan at the Security Council. The firestorm in the night sky had been frightening, but what really worried Sudan's security chiefs was the foreign battalions that secretly threatened to capture major towns. As the Islamist project began to fall apart, President Bashir turned on his mentor, al-Turabi, and eventually jailed him. Bashir and his powerful deputy, Ali Osman Taha, gambled that if they made peace with the Sudan People's Liberation Army in the south, then at least they would stay in power. That improbable scenario came to pass earlier this year and on 9 July, the SPLA commander in chief, John Garang, flew to Khartoum to be sworn in as vice president. Garang died in a helicopter crash only 22 days later but his successor, Salva Kiir, is likely to consummate the peace deal. But even if Sudan returns to war, it will not be a renewed jihad aimed at founding an Islamic state but a nasty struggle for power.

Throughout East Africa, the fortunes of political Islamism rose and fell in the 1990s. By the time of 9/11, it was already into its endgame. The attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon occurred just two days before the UN Security Council was due to debate lifting the sanctions on Khartoum which had been imposed in the wake of the Mubarak assassination attempt. The US had decided to abstain, having concluded that Sudan was no longer

sponsoring terrorism. But the Global War on Terror made Bashir understandably nervous: his regime's history made it a soft target. He offered more counter-terrorist co-operation. His security chief, Salah Gosh, widely suspected of command responsibility for the extreme violence in Darfur and elsewhere, has visited both London and Washington DC to discuss Khartoum's extensive files on the terrorists it once hosted. Bashir, Gosh, Nafie and others live on their nerves: they know they are implicated, and will sacrifice anything except themselves to stay in power. Last month, al-Qaida added the Sudan government to its list of targets, accusing it of selling out.

Khartoum had been saved from certain military defeat when its adversaries fell out among themselves. In May 1998, Eritrea and Ethiopia went to war over their disputed border, and a couple of months later Ugandan and Rwandan troops fought each other in the occupied Congolese city of Kisangani. As the attempt to found an Islamic state was running into the sand, so was the rival left-wing project of revolutionary militarism. The guerrillas-turned-governments in the four 'frontline states' were, like the Sudanese leaders, concerned only with staying in power.

This parallel is more than a neat coincidence. The radical Islamists and their regional enemies shared ideological fervour and organisational discipline. Both believed that enduring problems of state and society could be overcome by revolutionary change; and, as this failed, both reverted to simple power politics. Like other political creeds, jihadist Islamism is shaped by the contours of local politics – and sometimes it vanishes into the landscape.

The demise of grand ideology in the Horn did not mean the end of violence or militancy. Various ideologies have emerged from the ruins of the Islamic state project. Most are regional or tribal. In Darfur and Chad, Arab supremacism took over. Leaders of the infamous Janjawiid militia adhere to the philosophy of Qoreish, according to which the lineal descendants of the Prophet Muhammad and his Qoreish tribe are entitled to rule Muslim lands. This supposedly gives the Arabic-speaking Saharan Bedouin of the Juhayna confederation the right to dominate all the land between the Nile and Lake Chad. While US Special Forces chase a handful of jihadists in the mountains of the central Sahara, they have overlooked this vicious and archaic ideology, which has spread far more havoc just a few miles to the south.

A century ago, the first fundamentalists saw their task as challenging the imperial powers and their modern rationalism. Hassan al-Banna, the Egyptian schoolteacher who invented Islamism as a socio-political movement in the 1920s, saw his Muslim Brothers as a party comparable to the Fascists and Communists he contended with. For the next generation, the struggle was with secular pan-Arabism, Communism and, in Africa, leftist liberation movements. For Muslims in the Horn, 9/11 came at a moment when the Islamist project had been overtaken by the politics of exhaustion. By declaring his War on Terror, President Bush provided a convenient new enemy, but resisting America is so remote from the real problems faced by ordinary Muslims as to be meaningful only to a handful of misfits and criminals. Luuq was a real and courageous attempt to build an Islamic community in Somalia's ruins, though it was fatally hijacked by al-Qaida. Ayro's murders, by contrast, are utterly meaningless.

Today, East African Muslims are more likely to be radicalised in Finsbury Park or Brixton than in Khartoum or Luuq. Personal bitterness, a search to find affirmation in membership of small exclusive groups, and the endless news stories about Muslims being victimised in

Palestine, Iraq and Europe are all more significant influences on young Muslims in England than al-Itihaad or Eritrea Jihad. What we have learned so far about Yasin Hassan Omar, Hussein Osman and Muktar Said Ibrahim suggests that this is their story.