

## Beyond Intercepting Wahhabism, Upgrading “Mainstream” Islam, and Transplanting al - Ahbash in Ethiopia: Rethinking the Role of the Ethiopian Government and the US

Mükerrem Miftah\*

### Abstract

The article presents three major arguments regarding the relationship between Ethiopian Muslims and the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front regime. The first argument addresses how, beyond Wahhabism and terrorism, the regime has securitized Islam and Muslims in Ethiopia. It contends that the regime sought to broadly redefine Muslims' relatively peaceful quest for recognition, participation, and ownership in Ethiopia's public sphere as an existential threat. Second, drawing on pertinent internet sources, the article argues that the US, particularly the U.S. Embassy in Addis Ababa, played a role that accentuated the regime's efforts. Third, by actively pursuing the “cultural reprogramming” of Islam and Muslims in Ethiopia, both parties aimed to impose a version of Islam that would fundamentally undermine Ethiopian Muslims' citizenship and religious identity. Drawing from both primary and secondary sources, this article concludes that, beyond Wahhabism, al-Ahbash, and “mainstream” or “Sufi” Islam, the regime and the United States were primarily interested in imposing any version of Islam or Muslim religious behavior that exhibits relatively identifiable features. This version requires maintaining a relatively low profile in Ethiopia's public sphere, acquiescing to the needs of the state, and posing no threat to the state and its interests, both locally and internationally.

**Keywords :** Islam, Muslims, Suffiyah, Wahhabism, al-Ahbash, EPRDF, Ethiopia

### Introduction

Ethiopia is one of the oldest nations in the world, even more so than others in the field of religion. Christianity came to Ethiopia in the fourth century (Lawler, 2019). Islam arrived in the seventh century (Britannica, 2024). While many advanced the untenable claim of mutual tolerance and peaceful coexistence for centuries between the two religious groups in Ethiopia, there is hardly any evidence to this end.<sup>1</sup> If anything, much like any other nation, inter- and intrareligious experience in Ethiopia must have its ups and downs, neither characterized by perennial fighting nor a thoroughly harmonious interaction. There have been points and times of peaceful coexistence as well as frictions. However, there is hardly any evidence suggesting ordinary Muslim Ethiopians conspiring to unleash “Islamic”

\* Ethiopian Civil Service University, Department of Policy Studies, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, mukeremmifta@gmail.com, Orcid: 0000-0003-4910-4284 .

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<sup>1</sup> One of the leading proponents of this rather ideologically-laden approach to interreligious relations in Ethiopia is Haggai Erlich. See, for instance, (Erlich, 1994). For a brief appraisal of Erlich's “lean-legged” approach to Christian-Muslim relations, see (pp.75-76) from Miftah (2015).

terrorism bent on destroying the Christian others, as some would have us believe (Dulin, 2017). This problem arises when a pseudo-historic-scientific endeavor advances a patched-up “hi/storying” to get across ideologically laden perspectives and/or policy statements (Yusuf, 2009). This is where and when sober academic exercise ends and ideologically twisted interest begins. This will be expanded further shortly. Nevertheless, the subtext and functionality of this doctored, reified, and/or heightened animosity between Ethiopian Christians and Muslims, or better yet, “Muslims’ bitterness”, can be explained and thus tackled. This article is one modest effort in that direction.

One of the principal arguments advanced in this article concerns the role of interests, local, regional, and/or global, and how these brought forth and instantiated, first, unnecessary and counterproductive complexities in making sense of Ethiopia’s inter- and intrareligious experience, and second, the need for, in the words of Bryan Turner, “upgrading” or, in the words of the US’ former ambassador to Ethiopia, Donald Yamamoto, “cultural reprogramming” of Islam in Ethiopia (Yamamoto, 2006, 2008, 2009a, 2009b). Put differently, had it not been for Islam’s inherent propensity for conflict and terrorism against Ethiopia’s Christians, at least since the advent of Wahhabism in post-nineteenth-century Ethiopia (some, like Erlich, would even go back to the sixteenth century), there would not have been much chaos and problems in contemporary Ethiopia and elsewhere in the region, so the argument goes. Consequently, actors with deeply entrenched interests in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa came up with what they considered the ultimate panacea in the form of the “cultural reprogramming” of Islam in Ethiopia. This was then followed by well-planned and funded interventions via different programs and projects in the different parts of Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa.

Now, to flesh out this and related other issues addressed in this article, the forthcoming discussion has been organized into three sections. First, the article begins with a reflection on the growing Muslims’ presence in Ethiopia’s public sphere, especially since the 1990s, and presents this, specifically in terms of the Muslims’ general quest for recognition, participation, and ownership, as a challenge against the longstanding “the Muslims in Ethiopia Complex” (MIC). Second, the article analyzes how the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) regime and the US responded to this challenge in their own ways, respectively. Finally, the article ends with general remarks. In terms of study material, the study benefited from interviews with purposively selected Muslim religious leaders and intellectuals in (fieldwork) Addis Ababa, direct observations, lived experiences, important documents, research articles, and other web sources.

## **1. Challenging the Muslims in Ethiopia Complex: recognition, participation, and ownership**

In post-1990s Ethiopia, Muslims embarked on boldly asserting themselves in Ethiopia’s public sphere. All the available evidence pointed to the fact that there was a discernible and patterned movement of Muslims redefining what it means to be a Muslim and Ethiopian (Erlich, 1994).<sup>2</sup> Haustein and Østebø (2011, p. 761), for instance, observed that “The most significant change during EPRDF rule was that Muslims have become far more visible within Ethiopian public space”. For years, Muslims have been negatively defined, first, by writers and academics in Ethiopian studies; second, by state elites in their

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<sup>2</sup> Erlich recounts Muslims’ growing, but implicitly threatening, participation in Ethiopia’s government structure-federal and regional, academia, the expansion of religious centers, such as Mosques in Ethiopia to the extent of “defying the Old Christian atmosphere” (1994, p. 178).

social and public policies; and third, by Muslims themselves, as “Muslims in Ethiopia”, not as Ethiopian Muslims. Elsewhere, it was pointed out that the “Muslims in Ethiopia complex” (MIC) entails “a state of imagination, portrayal, and execution of the task of disentangling Islam and Muslims from Abyssinia and/or Ethiopia and the resulting intended sociocultural, economic, and political consequences” (Miftah, 2015, p. 72). He argued that the MIC stood for three but not mutually exclusive expressions of Muslims’ lived experiences in Ethiopia.

In the field of politics, the MIC “functioned as policy and praxis of many of the ruling elites throughout Abyssinian and/or Ethiopian history. It was deployed by many of the kings and state elites in their hand-to-hand and ideological combat against Islam and Muslims in Ethiopia” (Miftah, 2015, p. 79). In the field of Ethiopian Studies, the MIC represented a variant of knowledge production primarily spearheaded by non-Muslim Ethiopians and foreign academics and writers that claim to study Ethiopia’s history, culture, and society. Here, the MIC is a discourse by academics and other writers that have “created, in their discourses and narratives, an overessentialized, homogenous, and thousands-of-years-old intact culture and society” that has “disentangled, partly or completely, aspects of an equally important body of history, culture, and society” (p. 73). In the sphere of social psychology, MIC signified “the actual socioeconomic and political condition of Muslims and the associated low self-perception and alienation” facilitated and sustained by the politics and education of estrangement (Miftah, 2023, p. 221).

Post-1990s period, however, started to witness a progressively shifting development away from what has just been discussed under the MIC. Facilitated by at least four important factors, which will be discussed shortly, “Ethiopian Muslims” or “Muslim Ethiopians”, as opposed to Muslims “in” Ethiopia, or from the disentanglement to the reconstitution of Muslims, slowly but steadily came to the fore. One way of conceptualizing this could be a shift from the systematic and deliberate alienation encapsulated under the MIC to the recognition of Muslims as citizens; their participation in the areas that befit any citizen at all levels of society, and their ownership of their identity, religion, culture, and above all else, their agency and fate as human beings (Miftah, 2023, p. 222). These three core expressions of Muslim Ethiopians (Ethiopian-ness) are important analytical anchors underpinning Muslims’ historical questions and struggles in Ethiopia. In fact, these can be appraised as responsive strategies to the challenges of the MIC, which, for centuries, first, failed to recognize, second, dispossessed, and third, alienated Ethiopian Muslims. In spite of all these, given the desecularization propensity of the last regime and the state-led securitization of Islamic institutions and Muslims under the EPRDF regime, one of the key informants empathetically underscored that Muslims’ quest for recognition, participation, and ownership in and/or of Ethiopia is far from over. He observed that,

The state’s political calculations cannot be considered as the sole reliable rationale behind its actions. Rather, to meaningfully understand this, one has to properly diagnose the nature of Ethiopia’s historically evolving institutional politics and political culture and their relations with Islam and Muslims in Ethiopia. These conditions cannot be disentangled from the legacies, memories, biases, and discriminations deeply ingrained in Ethiopia’s body politic. There is, in plain words, a deep state of ideas, perhaps inadvertently endorsed, but which has always been against Islam and Muslims of Ethiopia. (Edris, July 1, 2022)<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The name is changed for anonymity.

This observation is very important, at least for two critical implications. For one thing, there is a faint but patently present sense of conspiracy that constantly hunts Ethiopian Muslims, and that has a history of accumulated grievance and trauma underpinning centuries of struggle and fighting with the establishment. Understandably, trauma breeds feelings of suspicion and watchful prudence. On the other hand, there is also a meaningfully understandable assessment of the past that conditions the nature and form of interactions between Muslims as a relatively coherent religious community and the Ethiopian state. Here, no doubt the interviewee is alluding to what sociologists call "path dependency" (Mahoney, 2000)<sup>4</sup>. The institutional and organizational, political, and policy-relevant domains of contemporary society and politics can never be disentangled from the norms, values, aspirations, constraints, expectations, and experiences of the cumulative past that, in one way or another, condition the state of affairs today.

Nevertheless, in this progressively growing assertive and vocal presence of Muslims' agency in Ethiopia's public sphere in the post-1990s period, there are at least four important contributing factors that played, and some of them still continue to play, crucial roles. One is obviously the advent of the EPRDF regime and its introduction of the 1995 constitution. Unlike any other point in the past, the constitution explicitly endorsed and the state appeared to dedicatedly uphold the freedom of religion, belief, and opinion (Article 27), and the separation of state and religion (Article 11), among other things. This has, therefore, expanded the opening of Ethiopia's religious and public sphere already set in motion under the Dergue regime. In other words, regardless of the challenges that followed the socialist regime's actual engagement with Ethiopia's major religious proclivities, albeit not necessarily unlike the EPRDF regime's approach to religion, the 1987 constitution declared that “Ethiopians are guaranteed freedom of conscience and religion” (Article 46.1) and “state and religion are separate” (Article 46.3).

Despite facilitating the public sphere for entertaining diverse religious experiences and voices, the three regimes, from the Dergue through the Prosperity Party (PP), cannot claim to represent a fairly regulated interaction between the state and religion in Ethiopia. While, in crude terms, Islam and Protestantism, even with the enormous and multifaceted challenges they have been exposed to, relatively benefited from the policies of the three regimes, the same thing cannot be said for the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC) (Miftah, 2022). The socialist regime proclaimed socialism and nationalized all church lands. This had effectively dislodged the economic and political powers of the EOTC (Miftah, 2025, forthcoming). It then went on co-opting and “purging” the institution of the EOTC through what it called “The Provisional Council of the Orthodox Church in August 1975” and subsequently murdered the church's patriarch Abuna Tewoflos (Ancel, 2011, p. 9). Even more challenges followed under the EPRDF and the PP regimes (Miftah, 2025, forthcoming). In short, the post-1990s period, with the espousal of a constitution that endorsed Ethiopia's multicultural and religious diversity, can be said to herald and facilitate the ground for the Muslims' subsequent vocal presence in Ethiopia's public sphere.

The second important contributing factor to Muslims' proactive and vocal participation in Ethiopia's public sphere involves, first, the proliferation of Muslim institutions and, second, the production, distribution, and consumption of Islamic and Muslim ideas via various vernaculars in Ethiopia. Our

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<sup>4</sup> Mahoney conceptualizes path dependency as “those historical sequences in which contingent events set into motion institutional patterns or event chains that have deterministic properties” (2000, p. 507).

knowledge of this part of Islam and Muslims' history in Ethiopia comes from none other than the prolific and trendsetting Ethiopian historian, the late professor Hussein Ahmed. As an indisputably leading torchbearer of the paradigm shift in Ethiopian studies, which had for years downplayed, inadvertently or not, the role of Islam and Muslims in Abyssinia and/or Ethiopia, Hussein made unparalleled and immense contributions.<sup>5</sup> One was his critical appraisal of the conditions of Islam and Ethiopian Muslims in the 90s and onwards (Ahmed, 1995, 1998a, 1998b, 1998c). He observed that since the early 1990s, Ethiopian Muslims founded such organizations and associations as the Ethiopian Muslim Youth Association, the Ethiopian Muslim Unity Association, the Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council (EIASC) (rebranded in 2020 as the Ethiopian Islamic Affairs General Council (EIAGC)), and the Ethiopian Muslim Democratic Movement. The establishment of these institutions represents at least two important things. For one thing, it points to the fact that there was a relatively encouraging political field and public sphere that facilitated conditions and invited Muslims to assume roles in Ethiopia's slowly but steadily evolving public sphere. The other is Muslim Ethiopians' own readiness and proactiveness to seize any opportunity, no matter how minimal or discouraging, to empower themselves and advance their long-running causes in the context of Ethiopia.

The other was Hussein Ahmed's documentation and content analysis of the literature, including newspapers and magazines from 1975 to 1998. In a series of articles published between 1994 and 1998, he documented and substantively analyzed two sets of Ethiopian Muslims' publications: those directly addressing Islam as a religion and its practices and those addressing Muslims' past and current socioeconomic, cultural, political, and historical circumstances and issues, which he collectively merged under "Islamic literature". This Islamic literature and the resulting literary tradition, for him, represented "a manifestation of, and response to, the resurgence and revival of Islam in the Islamic world in general and in Ethiopia and the Horn in particular" (Ahmed, 1998, p. 32). Specifically addressing the latter types of Islamic literature, he observed,

In their many highly informative and enlightening articles and commentaries, they raised and thoroughly discussed a number of issues of historical significance and contemporary relevance—both religious and secular—thereby enhancing the general awareness of the Muslim community about developments taking place in the country and the wider Islamic world. The most recurrent issues included the need for reforming the administrative structure and working procedures of existing Islamic organizations and the defense of Islam against traditional non Islamic forms of belief and practices, and against prevailing misconceptions about, and the occasional assaults on, the doctrine of Islam and Muslims in general. (Ahmed, 1998, p. 31)

The last but not least contributing factor involves the role of interreligious polemics and its implication for strengthening Muslim identity and Muslims' travels and networks beyond Ethiopia. Christian-Muslim discursive dissensus and the occasional conflicts arguably facilitated conditions that helped solidify and define what it means to be a Muslim and Ethiopian. This is based on the classical sociological assumption spearheaded by sociologists Lewis Coser and George Simmel, underscoring that intergroup conflicts promote intragroup cohesion. Apart from the various wars and conflicts in the past, the sense of estrangement and alienation, complemented by offensive and delegitimizing discourses from non-Muslims, must have played some roles in cementing intra-Muslim solidarity.<sup>6</sup> It

<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, (Ahmed, 1992).

<sup>6</sup> One good instance in the later periods is (Eshete, 2007). More can be found here (Eshete, 2009).

also, at least indirectly, strengthened the identity of the Christian other, as identity formation is often contingent upon the reflexive and discursive encounters between different, often contending, groups (De Cillia, Reisigl & Wodak, 1999).

Finally, partly because of the opening of Ethiopia’s public sphere in the post-1990s period, many Muslim Ethiopians got the chance to explore and benefit from visits and travels to such countries as Sudan, Egypt, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia. Using this, while many of them advanced their knowledge of the Islamic religious sciences, others received formal institutional recognition in the form of certificates, diplomas, and degrees for their deep and advanced knowledge already acquired in Ethiopia. In the process, they were able to forge lasting relations between Ethiopia’s Muslim scholars and others. It also helped the subsequent proliferation of Arab-funded NGOs in Ethiopia (Ahmed, 2001).

Unfortunately, academics and polemic writers, such as Haggai Erlich, David Shinn, Donald Yamamoto, Ephrem Eshete, and Medhane Tadesse, tend to view Muslims’ travels to Sudan, Egypt, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia in simplistic, reductionist, and above all else, erroneous manners. They accuse those who came back to Ethiopia from these countries with fundamentalist, radicalist, and Wahhabist understandings of Islam bent on shaking Ethiopia’s seemingly peaceful coexistence. Evidently, some Muslim Ethiopians came back trained in Saudi’s Wahhabism, and from this, a very insignificant minority turned violent and extremist. This is true, and there is ample evidence that supports this claim. However, the majority was not as fundamentalist, radical, and terrorist as some of the above authors would have us believe. For instance, Terje Ostebo’s extensive fieldwork in Ethiopia’s predominantly Wahhabi-dominated Oromia regional state showcased that many Wahhabis were unlike any other, largely peaceful, and focused on “the purity of Islamic practices and symbols” and religious proselytization (Ostebo et al., 2021).

Furthermore, this crippling perspective ignores the fact that many Muslim Ethiopian scholars have already acquired significant knowledge locally before they even moved out of Ethiopia for formal institutional recognition and advances in knowledge. Among those who went to Saudi Arabia and Egypt for advanced education in Islamic sciences, the experiences of famous Ethiopian Muslim religious scholars, such as Sheikh Abdallah Edris and Dr. Abdallah Khedir Ahmed, can present important cases. Both had relatively deep knowledge of Islam before they moved out of Ethiopia. While the former attended the renowned al-Azhar University in Cairo (Minber TV, 2022), the latter went to study in Saudi Arabia and remained there for eighteen years (Minber TV, 2023). Interestingly, however, after they came back, both have been significantly moderate in their views of inter- and intrareligious and cultural issues, history, politics, and “secular” education in Ethiopia, which is, in turn, hardly the characteristic feature of any terrorist or fundamentalist Muslim religious movement. Had it not been for the economy of words, many more cases could have been presented that demonstrate how shallow, unrepresentative, and, above all else, misleading the views of polemic writers and academics like Haggai Erlich.

## **2. The EPRDF regime and the US: reimagining the Muslims’ challenge**

While Ethiopian Muslims embarked on assertively advancing their causes and making significant

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<sup>7</sup> More discussion on the US follows next.

changes in Ethiopia's public sphere in the post-1990s, rising concerns against Islamic and/or Muslim social actions and movements started to be voiced worldwide. Partly informed by the growing terrorist attacks targeting the US and others, local, regional, and global actors set in motion military and programmatic interventions to curb, and ultimately, squash terrorism and political Islam in the Middle East and the Horn of Africa. Interestingly, this was the period when, among other things, Samuel Huntington's "The Clash of civilizations" was published in 1996; the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States took place, and the associated Global War on Terror (GWOT) was launched; the British orientalist, Bernard Lewis's "What Went Wrong: The Clash Between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East" was published in 2002; and many others. In the context of Ethiopia, for instance, this was when Haggai Erlich introduced his controversial conceptual schema wherein he proposed what he called the dual legacy of Islam (tolerant and radical) and how the latter was bent on destroying Christian Ethiopia in his "Ethiopia and the Middle East" book, which was published in 1994.<sup>8</sup> This was also reproduced in his other writings (Kabha, M., & Erlich, H, (2006). In short, one can sense the development of a relatively discernible attitude towards Islam and Muslims in the Western world in general and the US in particular (Cole, 2009).

This has, then, evidently facilitated the instrumentalization, securitization, and/or politicization of the old anthropological bifurcation of Islam into rural and urban, Sufi and Salafi or Wahhabi, and/or moderate or tolerant and radical or fundamentalist or literalist Islam/Muslims (Mamdani, 2005). The latter type of Islam and Muslims were, therefore, conceived among policy circles as an existential threat, and thus needed surgical interventions anywhere from the Middle East to the Horn of Africa. There is also how this was appraised and addressed by the Ethiopian government, which has played its roles in the active presence and influence of Islam and Muslims in 1990s Ethiopia, which will be expanded next. Nevertheless, it is in this subtle and complex context that one must try to make sense of the growing securitization of Islam and Muslims and what followed as the quest for exploring, either via inventing or discovering, the acceptable form of Islam in the post-1990s Ethiopia.

There are at least two major actors in securitizing Islam and Muslims and subsequently planning interventions in the post-1990s Ethiopia. One is the US, and the other is the Ethiopian government under the TPL-led EPRDF regime. Before proceeding further, however, it would be meaningful to unpack what, on the one hand, Muslims' active presence in Ethiopia's public sphere meant, and on the other, what Wahhabism entails as employed here. In the context of the former, it needs to be appraised as part of the Ethiopian Muslims' movement aiming to counter the three fundamental expressions of MIC discussed above. As social movements, and particularly as "they make demands upon the state", which constituted one of the three core expressions of the MIC, Muslim Ethiopians' movement and actions are necessarily political (Roots, 1997). However, although the movement has been generally hooked around the epistemic categories of recognition, participation and ownership, there is hardly any evidence that indicated it wanted to espouse a theocracy or the imposition of Sharia'h in Ethiopia. Rather, it has always been about being treated equally, not more and not less, assured of its share of the public sphere commensurate with its presence and role in the country. By definition, therefore, the actions and movement of Ethiopian Muslims dispossessed any fundamentalist or terrorist proclivities attributed to it. However, this is by no means an underestimation of Wahhabism and the various violent and terrorist

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<sup>8</sup> For more detailed engagement, see (Miftah, 2015).

actions that caused the crisis, and as a result, sends out wrong messages about Islam and Muslims in general.<sup>9</sup> In other words, a real conundrum arises when each and every single act of Ethiopian Muslims is, often deliberately, watered down and interpreted as intolerant and *terrorizing*, largely bent on disrupting Ethiopia’s delicate religious balance and coexistence; and thus, endangering the lives of the religious other, the Ethiopian state, and those beyond. This becomes more apparent when we next delve deep into the ways in which the US and the Ethiopian government interpreted Muslims’ pursuit of recognition, participation, and ownership in Ethiopia’s public sphere in the post-1990s.

### **3. The EPRDF regime challenging the Muslims’ challenge**

No other convincing evidence can be brought forth that can lay bare the EPRDF regime’s approaches to Islam and Muslims that parallels what we have gathered and learned so far from the Let Our Voice be Heard movement (LOVBH) of Ethiopian Muslims (Miftah, 2014). In the years 2010–15, the LOVBH movement rose to challenge and rebel against what it considered the state’s securitization of Islam and Muslims and its decision to impose al-Ahbash in Ethiopia. Although the movement articulated three operational questions, the gist of these questions revolved around two major issues (Miftah, 2024). The first is that the state should not interfere in religious matters, and thus respect the constitution’s cardinal principle of the separation of state and religion. The other is that the state must not tell Muslims what to follow and which to follow from Islam. Unfortunately, the state squarely failed to observe either. In hindsight; however, we can extrapolate that there were at least two rational political calculations that might have underpinned the EPRDF regime’s securitization of Islam and the decision to transplant a “moderate” form of Islam, that is, al-Ahbash, in Ethiopia.

One is the intermittent terrorist attacks in and around Ethiopia (Belay, 2024). The other aspect of this was the sporadic interreligious conflicts in some parts of Ethiopia (Ostebo et al., 2021). The second is the regime’s wholesale endorsement of the US’ GWOT and the subsequent “interventions” in the Horn of Africa (Malito, 2015). This, among other things, provided steadily flowing cash for the EPRDF regime. Making the same point, Alex Thurston said early on that the most accurate way to read the dynamic between the government and the protesters [Muslims protesting under the LOVBH movement] is that [the late Prime Minister] Meles and his successors have proven particularly skillful at positioning themselves as a “U.S. ally in combating terrorism” and positioning domestic dissidents as extremists (Thurston, 2013). Apparently, this might have partly motivated the regime’s securitization, beyond terrorist attacks and militant groups, of any Muslim and Islamic movements in Ethiopia. Interestingly, the post-1990s period was, as noted above, when Muslims have been making their role and presence felt in Ethiopia’s public sphere—religion, politics, education, media, entertainment, etc. Consequently, the vocal and proactive presence of Islam and Muslims, perhaps unexpected, unfamiliar, and/or even unwanted for centuries, in the public sphere in the post-1990s might have signaled and subsequently posed a threat to the status quo, especially to Ethiopia’s political culture and elites. This might have inadvertently resurrected Erlich’s “Grangn Syndrome”, which purportedly symbolized Muslims’ cataclysmic terror bent on destroying Ethiopia. In this regard, it might be worthwhile to repeat the account of one of the interviewees, who pointed that,

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<sup>9</sup> There needs to be a caveat here as Ostebo argues, except for a minority, Wahhabism in Ethiopia is largely focused on “the purity of Islamic practices and symbols” and religious proselytization. See, (Østebo et al, 2021).

. . . to meaningfully understand this, one has to properly diagnose the nature of Ethiopia's historically evolving institutional politics and political culture and their relations with Islam and Muslims in Ethiopia. These things cannot be disentangled from the legacies, memories, biases, and discriminations deeply ingrained in Ethiopia's body politic. There is, in plain words, a deep state of ideas-perhaps inadvertently endorsed, but which has always been against Islam and Muslims of Ethiopia. (Emphasis added, Edris, July 1, 2022)

Interestingly, while the regime securitized the Muslims' progressively active and bold presence in Ethiopia's public sphere and the intermittent terrorist attacks, it proposed to impose what it considered to be a tolerant Islam firmly grounded in Ethiopia and Suffiyah in its religious outlook, which the late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi identified as "home-grown" or "indigenous" Islam.<sup>10</sup> However, the red flag and eyebrow-raising phenomenon is how the government decided to go about it. One is the government's deliberate misreading of what and who Suffiyah represented in Ethiopia and elsewhere. The EPRDF regime and many others, including the US, which will be addressed next, viewed Suffiyah as essentially apolitical, and thus non-threatening to their interests and actions in Ethiopia and beyond. This view is not only un-social scientific (philosophically) but also ahistorical (empirically unsustainable). Human beings, individually or collectively, are part and parcel of politics, institutional or not. Aristotle's dictum is worth recycling here: that man was a "political animal" because he is a social creature with the power of speech and moral reasoning (Cherry & Goerner, 2006).

Furthermore, in many parts of Africa, including Ethiopia, we have plenty of evidence that contradicts the claim that Suffiyah or Sufis are not politically and/or militarily active and, by implication, withdrawn and only secluded in religious monasteries. Apart from Hussein Ahmed's seminal work on Islam in Wallo (one major center of Suffiyah orders in Ethiopia), which included the role of Sufi Sheikhs and their struggle, a very recent compendium of similar experiences from West Africa can present many and unequivocal evidence (Ahmed, 2001; el-Amir, 2022). On top of that, initially, among those who spearheaded the LOVBH movement in Ethiopia, some were Suffis, whom the present author is familiar with, but later withdrew for different reasons. Furthermore, nearly half of those who actively pursued the movement and now assume roles and those who withdrew or resisted the LOVBH movement but later joined, the currently Wahhabi/Salafi-dominated Ethiopian Islamic Affairs General Council (EIAGC) are either Sufi, pro-Sufi, or tolerant of Sufi ideas and practices.<sup>11</sup>

From the above observation, one thing is relatively clear. The regime was not necessarily planning, in the words of Bryan Turner, to "upgrade" any other form of Islam or Suffiyah, not even transplanting al-Ahbash, but something else. Based on what we have gathered so far and the analysis that follows, the regime, in essence, only wanted to install a form of Islam and Suffiyah which, first, refrains from any forms of terrorist acts, second, accepts and lives under a multicultural polity (which may involve forbearance), third, avoids or attenuates, as much as possible, any vocal presence in Ethiopia's public sphere, and fourth, serves the state or at least poses no threat to the state and its interests locally as well as beyond. Undoubtedly, these rubrics may appear to be posterior to the fact, but only so if one looks at

<sup>10</sup> The late prime minister Meles Zenawi characterizes "nebarueslemena" (indigenous Islam) and "Sufi" as tolerant vis-à-vis the "new" 20-to-30 years old "Salafi", of which some are extremists like Al-Qaeda. See (Bilal Nation, 2012).

<sup>11</sup> Examples of personalities that I can name include Sheikh Haj Taha Harun (leads the Islamic prayer in the grand Anwar mosque in Addis Ababa), Dr Endris Mohammed (Addis Ababa University, actively works with EIAGC), Dr Mohammed Habib (Addis Ababa University, actively works with EIAGC), and others.

them from the perspective of the government’s plan to impose al-Ahbash in Ethiopia. However, no other religious proclivity shows significant correspondence to these features more than Lebanon’s al-Ahbash. In other words, while, speaking from personal observation, from Ethiopian Muslims, al-Ahbash probably constitutes less than a few thousand scattered around Harar, Dire Dawa, parts of Wallo, and Addis Ababa, it is in Lebanon where al-Ahbash was transfigured, essentially born, raised, and integrated, as a religious society, movement, organization, and/or political actor.<sup>12</sup> There is no evidence whatsoever that this happened in Ethiopia. There (in Lebanon), it functioned on most, if not all, of the above prerequisites of Ethiopia’s EPRDF regime in Lebanon (Hamzeh & Dekmejian, 1996). Among other things, regardless of its passive participation in Lebanon’s parliament, we know that its founder, Sheikh Abdullah al-Harari, “emphasized the necessity for Muslims to obey political rulers” and “kept a low-profile in Lebanon’s internal politics” (The Jerusalem Post, 2008; Thurston, 2013). Its contenders also labeled the criticism “of serving Zionism and protecting its interests in the Middle East” (Hamzeh & Dekmejian, 1996, p. 218). The plan was, therefore, under the disguise of the founder’s Ethiopian origin and the Suffiyah character al-Ahbash tends to project,<sup>13</sup> the regime, hiding behind its true intentions, thought it could simply and successfully impose al-Ahbash on Ethiopian Muslims. That is, apart from the intermittent terrorism linked to Wahhabism, it wanted to undermine the Muslims’ vocal presence in Ethiopia’s public sphere, reproducing, this time in a more complex and subtle manner, what I have just discussed above under the Muslims in Ethiopia Complex (MIC).

#### **4. The USA connection: Concrete and anecdotal evidence**

The EPRDF regime was not necessarily alone in spearheading the plan to transplant al-Ahbash or upgrade “mainstream” Islam and Muslims in Ethiopia. There is some concrete and circumstantial evidence that points to the active involvement of the US government. Before reflecting on this; however, it would be more meaningful to analyze the factors that might have necessitated this in the first place and then move on to discuss the empirical instantiations. Accordingly, I argue that two broad issues must be taken into consideration in making sense of the Muslims’ bold presence and influence in the Horn of Africa in general and Ethiopia in particular; and what this represented for the US. First, the EPRDF regime and the US had been close partners in their fight against terrorism beyond their borders, especially in the Horn of Africa. Second, apart from terrorism, the increasingly snowballing Muslims’ role and influence in the Northeast and the Horn of Africa’s public sphere might have signaled a change in power politics in the Horn of Africa. David Shinn, a former ambassador to Ethiopia (1996–1999), for instance, viewed the demographic shift marked by the increase in the number of Muslims in Ethiopia as, “should Muslims become in the not distant future a majority, which is a real possibility, it will eventually change the political dynamic of Ethiopia. But we do need to be alert to the changing dynamic here” (Shinn, 1997). He further said that it was not only Muslims, who were increasing in numbers, but also their mosques,

While the Ethiopian Orthodox Church may well be facing very slow growth, we see no evidence that is the case for the Muslim population. Although statistics are lacking, the number of new mosques under

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<sup>12</sup> In the words of Kabha and Erlich (2006, p. 524), “The number of Ethiopian members in al-Ahbash is not known, but there are not many”.

<sup>13</sup> One exceptional character, unlike many subscribers of Suffiyah orders, al-Ahbash has, much like its detractors among the Wahhabis, is the tendency to call those who do not subscribe or agree with its ideas and practices “kaffir” (unbeliever). Here is a link to one instance where an Ethiopian Ahbash member doing exactly the same. See (Abate, 2022).

construction and information based on our travel around the country suggest that Islam is adding to its numbers with ease. (Emphasis added, Shinn, 1997)

Haggai Erlich accentuates Shinn's implicit fear for Ethiopia's domed future as Ethiopia's torchbearers, Orthodox Christians, are overtaken by their Muslim counterparts. Erlich, betrayed by the emotional undertone of his statement, said,

Hundreds, if not thousands, of mosques were constructed throughout the country . . . (in 2000 in Addis Ababa, there were some thirty mosques, while in 2004, their number was estimated at well over a hundred). They have already changed the very landscape of Ethiopia. (Emphasis added, Erlich, 1994, p. 178)

By the same token, Donald Yamamoto, also the US' former ambassador to Ethiopia (2006-2009), complained that the expansion of Wahhabism in Ethiopia posed a serious challenge to the US interest in Ethiopia.<sup>14</sup> He said, "Ethiopia's delicate Muslim/Christian balance and historic attitudes between the faith communities regarding tolerance and mutual respect are being challenged [by Wahhabism], thereby undermining U.S. interests in the region" (Yamamoto, 2009a). Therefore, these intermittent terrorist attacks in and around Ethiopia and Muslims' growing presence in Ethiopia might have been seen as constituting a major security concern for the two major actors in the region.

When it comes to how the US sponsored what it called the "mainstream" Islam, or Suffiyah, in Ethiopia, there were at least two major sets of activities that caught our attention. The first was its close partnership with and support for the EPRDF regime and the Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council (EIASC), which is now renamed as the Ethiopian Islamic Affairs General Council (EIAGC). The second was its own context-specific programs and interventions aimed at neutralizing terrorism, Wahhabism, or what it called "Arab Cultural Imperialism" in Ethiopia. Collectively, these interventions and programs, serving the US' foreign policy, were pursued to bring about what it called "The Cultural Reprogramming" of Islam in Ethiopia (Yamamoto, 2009a).

In the context of the first, we know that the US, particularly the embassy in Addis Ababa and its ambassadors and diplomats, such as David Shinn, Donald Yamamoto, Vicki Huddleston, and others, forged strong relationships with the EPRDF regime and EIASC in the post-1990s Ethiopia. We know that, according to Vicki Huddleston, the US government "supported training of the Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF) and implemented civil affairs projects through the Combined Joint Task Force for the Horn of Africa in predominately Muslim regions" (Huddleston, 2006). Yamamoto revealed that his office maintained strong working relations with EIASC. He conducted "conversations with Muslim Authorities, such as Sheik Elias Redman, the head of Ethiopia's Islamic Supreme Council", about the "Salafists working to cause strife among Muslims and non-Muslims" in Ethiopia (Yamamoto, 2006). Shinn also reported that his office maintained strong working relations with Ethiopia's EIASC and the EPRDF regime in the fight against Wahhabism and extremism in Ethiopia. He specifically observed that both were working hard to protect what he called the locally grounded "mainstream" Islam, which is Suffiyah, and were "determined to undermine the threat of Islamic extremism by working closely with mainstream Muslims" and the need for standing behind them (Shinn, 1997). However, it should be noted

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<sup>14</sup> Although this is a hasty generalization given what we know from Terje Ostebo's field work in the Wahhabi-dominated Oromia regional state, there is indeed evidence for the occurrence of intolerance and intra-and interreligious conflicts in some parts of Ethiopia.

that this synergy between the EPRDF regime and EIASC was forged because, in the words of Donald Yamamoto, “the Ethiopian government appoints the members of the Islamic Council” (Emphasis added, Yamamoto, 2009a). This statement carries significant weight as the EPRDF regime has always utterly denied any involvement in the constitution and operation of EIASC (SABC TV, 2013).

When we examine the US embassy’s context-specific programs and interventions, which aimed at, first, neutralizing Wahhabism and attenuating Muslims’ bold visibility in Ethiopia’s public sphere, and second, sponsoring what it called “mainstream” Islam and Muslims, we find consolidated and well-funded programs and interventions in three major spheres. In the field of research and ideas, the embassy tried hard to “introduce” Ethiopian Muslims to the US-based Mu’tazili (a rationalist extremist in Islamic thought), an advocate of liberal Islam, professor of law and Islam, and preacher, Khaled Abou El-Fadl’s works (Yamamoto, 2009b). As a self-proclaimed Mu’tazili, about which he said, “I follow a school within Islam called the Mutazila”,<sup>15</sup> he wrote many, but the embassy chose “two books written by a Muslim-American scholar—‘The Place of Tolerance in Islam’ and ‘The Great Theft’, both by Khaled Abou el-Fadl—in the local languages of Amharic, Oromifa, and Somali” (Yamamoto, 2008). However, the embassy reported that it could not succeed because, Yamamoto (Emphasis added, 2008) explained,

The Public Affairs Section has been planning to translate ‘The Great Theft’ and ‘The Place of Tolerance in Islam’ for local consumption. However, after approaching several prominent academics and translators who are known to post, the job was turned down by everyone.

Even more intriguing (and I daresay, suspicious) is the fact that the embassy asked one of these authors to do the translation anonymously. The answer was, again, negative. Yamamoto (Emphasis added, 2008) reported this as,

Another one reported in a phone conversation that he would not even translate the book anonymously, because they will find out who did it and the Wahhabis will exert a lot of pressure (unspecified) on him and his family. Post is still pursuing a means of translating this book, but it now appears it may have to be done outside the country.

Yamamoto’s words tell us many things. First, it tells us about the US’s deeply entrenched dedication to countering the political visibility of Islam and Muslims in Ethiopia in general and Wahhabism in particular and its plan to impose a form of Islam that it believes befits Ethiopian Muslims. It will even do so at the expense of consulting “mainstream” Islam representatives in the country, with whom it has been able to forge dependable and working relations for years. Second, the “unspecified” remark also, among other things, signals the implied willingness of the US embassy to go as far as protecting, had the author accepted the offer, against any threat that might target him/her. In short, this goes to indicate that the US, apart from its efforts to tackle Wahhabism, was bent on containing Muslims’ growing presence and influence in Ethiopia’s public sphere at any cost and anywhere.

In addition, the embassy also sponsored research about the religious status of Muslim youth in Ethiopia (Huddleston, 2006). It wanted to map out the nature of religious outlook among the youth in Addis

<sup>15</sup> He mentions this in (Whitney and Rosenbaum, 2002). It must be stated that Mu’tazilism commands close to none, let alone almost the unanimous opposition to it among Wahhabi and “mainstream” Muslims alike, in Ethiopia.

Ababa, Dire Dawa, and Harar. It concluded that most were “tolerant”, except for a few who were living in Addis Ababa and believed, implicitly characterized as intolerant, that “Islam [was] under threat from Westerners and Christians” (Emphasis added, Huddleston, 2006). These are statements and observations significantly lacking details and contexts but latently accentuate the need for the securitization of Islam and Muslims in Ethiopia.

In the field of interventions and programs aimed at supporting “mainstream” Islam and Muslims’ places and objects in Ethiopia, it planned and/or carried out projects in Addis, Ababa, Wallo, Harar, and Oromia (Yamamoto, 2009a). These projects included the preservation of Islamic manuscripts associated with the “mainstream” Islam and Muslims, the conservation and structural consolidation of a 13th-century Muslim shrine of the Sufi Sheikh Nur Hussein Shrine, restoring the Muhammad Ali House in Addis Ababa, and others. Finally, in the field of events and ceremonies, the embassy was able to host luncheons, consultative meetings, special events, and Iftar events in its compounds, primarily inviting “mainstream” Islam representatives and members of the EPRDF regime.

In short, it can be seen that in its relations with the EPRDF regime and the representatives and institution of the “mainstream” Islam and Muslims in Ethiopia, the US aimed at, and partly succeeded in accomplishing two things. For one thing, under the guise of countering terrorism, it has breached Ethiopia’s constitution by deeply involving itself in Ethiopia’s internal concerns and issues. The US does not have any legitimate authority to punish “bad” Muslims and reward “good” Muslims in Ethiopia. The pretext of GWOT and Wahhabism, as discussed above, only served as the smokescreen for the larger scheme of stifling the presence and influence of Islam and Muslims in Ethiopia’s public sphere.

Second, to serve “the US interest in the region”, “it is in the U.S. national interest to support”, and “cultural programming can contribute significantly to the achievement of foreign policy objectives”, it tried and partly succeeded in sponsoring, via different grant platforms, what it called “mainstream” Islam and Muslims (Yamamoto, 2009a). It went even beyond that when it tried to transplant a version of Islam acceptable to neither Wahhabi nor “mainstream” Muslims in Ethiopia. Indeed, what the US and the EPRDF regime wanted was not necessarily sponsoring or upgrading Suffiyyah or “mainstream” Islam, or in essence, not even al-Ahbash, but a version of Islam and Muslim behavior, apart from refraining from any forms of terrorist acts, that accepts and lives under a multicultural polity that may involve forbearance; that avoids or attenuates as much as possible vocal presence in Ethiopia’s public sphere; and finally, that serves the state or at least poses no threat to the state and its interests locally and beyond.

## Conclusion

The article closely examined the nature of Ethiopian Muslims’ complex relations with the EPRDF regime. By broadly contextualizing the Ethiopian Muslims’ quest for recognition, participation, and ownership through the conceptual schema of the “Muslims in Ethiopia Complex”, it assessed how the EPRDF regime and its partner, the US, redefined and securitized Muslims’ active presence in Ethiopia’s public sphere. While terrorism and Wahhabi extremism served as a springboard for their subsequent interference and intervention, the present study found that their actual policies and programmatic pursuits and efforts betrayed their manifest goals.

Both actors were neither necessarily interested in transplanting al-Ahbash nor protecting and upgrading the “mainstream” Islam or Suffiyah in Ethiopia. Instead, fearful of the growing presence and influence of Islam and Muslims in Ethiopia and beyond, they were laser-focused on managing and/or conditioning Muslims’ religious attitude in general and, specifically, what it means to be human, how to think, how to act, and above all else, how to behave as Muslims in Ethiopia’s public sphere.

Finally, two implications of the study are worth noting. First, the growing presence of Ethiopian Muslims in Ethiopia’s public sphere—whether demographically, politically, or both—is likely to elicit negative reactions from other actors, including the U.S. Secondly, irrespective of the roles of inter- and intrareligious dynamics that shape the conditions of Ethiopian Muslims, the impact of, first, institutional memory and culture (“path dependency”), and second, the views of political and academic elites is likely to influence the nature, trajectory, and future of Muslims’ quest for recognition, participation, and ownership in Ethiopia’s multicultural and multireligious public sphere.

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