

Conflict and Conflict Resolution

By Dr Salah I. Jimi, 17 December 2008

This article will attempt to give an overview of the causes of conflict with a particular focus on the nature of current conflicts in developing countries. A significant part of the article deals with the causes of conflicts in Africa. Of the whole of the Continent, the Horn region including Eritrea is of special interest to my aim. I note there are prerequisites to conflict resolution; what are they? This article aims to find an answer to some of these questions.

Before entering into a discussion about dialogue and conflict resolution, and prior to proposing strategies for developing practical policies and assigning resources for good and just governance,¹ it is essential to look at the causes of conflicts in our world, in particular the conflict-prone Middle-East. Understanding and identifying the real causes of conflicts is prerequisite to any conflict resolution effort. This is important in order to pursue pragmatic approaches in resolving a given conflict and in developing a suitable system of governance.

It is common knowledge that conflicts are waged for various reasons; some conflicts are ideologically-driven and seek global domination (e.g. numerous proxy wars during the Cold War, a classical example is the Vietnam War in the 1970s). Wars are also waged for economical interest, oil being the top priority (e.g. US invasion of Iraq in 2003, which is described as *'strategic blunder'* by General Wesley Clark, former Supreme Allied Commander Europe of NATO and other military experts).² Sometimes it becomes difficult to distinguish between economical interest-driven wars and some types of proxy wars, as there exist commonality between the two, primarily reflected in the exploitative nature of these wars. Interestingly, global environmental degradation (e.g. deforestation, desertification, water scarcity, soil erosion, etc.) exacerbated by 'anthropogenically-induced' climate change is also becoming a likely source of instability, and possibly a trigger for regional and global conflicts.^[3,4]

Wars are also waged for religious reasons (e.g. the protracted Arab-Israeli conflict), although this conflict has had a proxy element in the 1960s-1970s when Jamal Abdel Nasser, of Egypt backed by the Soviet Union faced the British, French and the Israeli, famously known in the Arab World as the 'Tripartite Aggression'. The conflict between Hezbollah and Israel has a religious dimension as well as a proxy element (the latter is represented by Iran-USA rivalry in the Middle East). Hamas, considers itself, a nationalist Islamic Resistance Movement claims that its war with Israel is waged for political independence. Tony Blair, the Middle-East envoy for the Quartet (UN, EU, USA, and Russia) summarises the cause of conflict in the Middle East as follows:

"Palestine-Israeli conflict is about land, about culture, about competing narratives of history – but that it is also about faith", TIME Magazine, June 9, 2008.

†¹ A/R Rahman Sayed exhaustively explained the steps that need to be followed to establish just and good governance in Eritrea. The reader can see his latest well-written article entitled "The Arguments for Representative Governance in Eritrea".

This is an excellent summary of the causes of Arab/Palestine-Israeli conflict. However, the problem with Blair is, he was a noted war monger (creator of conflict), and so, to some, it may not be acceptable to refer to Blair as a credible source or even to accept him as a suitable peace mediator.

Nowadays, proxy wars under the pretext of self-defence are instigated by foreign governments, either through direct involvement or through mercenaries that serve the interests of the intruders (e.g. the current conflict in Somalia). By his own admission, during the interview with a member of *The Awate Team*, Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, of Ethiopia, justified the presence of Ethiopian soldiers in Somalia purely is for self-defence.^[1] I am highly sceptical about Zenawi's explanation, but the truth or falsehood of his justification for invading Somalia will not be discussed here. However, I have this message to PM Zenawi- you don't need to explain the reason for the presence of Ethiopian troops in Somalia, you only need to pull out your troops if you are a true believer in the stability of the Horn region. Interfering into sovereign country affairs has never helped bringing neither political stability nor sustainable peace.

Some writers attribute present conflicts in developing countries, especially in Africa, to the legacy of European colonisation,² while others look differently at European colonisation of Africa. Jeffrey Mcpeanne, makes this statement: - "*Africa cannot stand still and look at its post-colonial past for failure in the future*",^[7] emphasising the need to move forward. Whilst I subscribe to a forward looking belief, I accept linking present conflicts in Africa to historical mishaps as a valid argument. Both lines of reasoning (i.e. pros and cons of European colonisation to Africa) are sound, but are not of immediate relevance to the main theme of this article, and as such, will not be discussed further.

In most developing countries – including colonial and postcolonial Eritrea – the main cause of conflict is entrenched injustice arising from socio-economic grievances. The highly publicised conflict in the Darfur region of western Sudan is an example of a war fuelled by injustice. The history of Ethiopia is also replete with injustice perpetuated by successive brutal governments that have ruled Ethiopia, including the present regime. Unfortunately, conflicts in the Horn region have been worsened by on-going conspiracies on the part of governments of the region against each other. Rather than embracing the noble idea of good neighbourliness and cooperation, these governments have resorted to conspiracy as a means to prolonging their grip on power. Certainly, cooperation and all the benefits that come with it would have been a much more effective strategy and a better choice for resolving conflicts and attaining sustainable peace and prosperity for the whole Horn region.

The long stalemate in the Eritrean case can be primarily attributed to the self-styled uncompromising character of Isaias Afwerki and weak opposition.³ In interviews, with local and foreign media, Isaias continually argues that dreams of developing countries, including Eritrea, have been dashed because of foreign interference,

² The literature is rich in this subject, but for the scope of this article, it suffices to read selected articles in this link,^[5] or here.^[6]

³ Weak opposition here refers to the ineffectual political opposition organisations and parties, the missing role of the 'educated' class, and more importantly, the great silence by the great majority in the face of oppression.

specifically the USA interest-driven intervention. Although there is some truth in that assertion, it is hard to accept the argument that foreign intervention is the only or main cause of the current grievances in developing countries. Governments should stop blaming others when they themselves do little or nothing to address mistake.

In his speech to Eritreans in Toronto,^[8] Saleh Johr, emphasised that unconditional dialogue is the most powerful tool to resolve conflicts. I support Johr's idea, and I add this: what we want to achieve is, long-term solutions based on genuine and honest dialogue, and not short-term approaches with limited outcomes. I would urge Eritrean government officials and opposition leaders to understand the real cause of their disagreements and enter into a genuine dialogue.

Some of the important questions in relation to the problems Eritreans are facing today include: do Eritreans properly understand the real cause(s) of their grievances? And do Eritreans discuss contentious issues in an open honest and transparent manner? According to Saleh Younis,⁴ of Awate.com, the answer to the latter question is NO! Saleh Younis, in interview conducted with **VOANews.com**, following his presentation, "*Constitutions As a Door Stop*",^[9] which he delivered in honour of Professor Bereket Habte Selassie,^[10] said, the Somalis and the Sudanese were able to discuss contentious issues in an open honest manner. On the contrary, the Eritreans and Ethiopians didn't. This practice is indicative of the disingenuous culture of hiding the truth, and it is unfortunately on-going phenomenon in Eritrean politics.

It is important to recognise that spearheading a national leadership in a country like Eritrea, with diverse entities and a brutal legacy of armed struggle, poses a formidable challenge. Leading a nation like ours requires deep understanding of the needs of each section of the society, and more importantly perhaps, a constitution ratified through proper democratic process.¹¹ The problem is worsened by the lack of role models and charismatic leaders or a team leadership of prominent national figures capable of creating harmony among the diverse entities. In present Eritrea, injustice against all Eritreans is perpetrated by the oppressive PFDJ regime, and inequality is consolidated by its institutionalised discriminatory and favouritism policies. I reiterate, the main cause of any potential conflict in Eritrea is the long-standing injustice, and the minds of decent Eritreans need to be focused on this single issue. How to reverse injustice? How to replace injustice with justice? How to create a just society? These questions, along with how to achieve a durable democratic system of governance in Eritrea will be discussed in a future article.

To conclude, whilst the problems of some developing countries might seem similar, still a unique solution needs to be searched for each conflict in each country. Put simply, it can be compared to an exam situation. Students who clearly grasp the concepts of the exam questions are likely to arrive to more accurate solutions, and as a result, would better impress their examiner(s). Those who attempt answering the questions prior to properly understanding the requirements are likely to obtain less satisfying results. Similarly, identifying the main cause of a given conflict leads to a

⁴ Although Saleh Younis is one of our best elites and attempted his best to narrate the history of 'political Islam' in the Eritrean context, I believe this subject is a complex one that needs specialist approach. Islamic scholars such as **Dr Yusuf al-Qaradawi** and the likes can put this complex topic into its right perspective.

more realistic solution, and hence, more satisfactory outcomes to the warring groups. Therefore, to effectively resolve any conflict and to achieve a long-lasting peace, political dogma and perceived mindset need to be replaced with pragmatism. That is the key message of this article, and it is an important one.

[1] <http://www.awate.com/portal/content/view/4857/11/>

[2] http://news.sbs.com.au/dateline/interview_with_wesley_clark_550682

[3]. <http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/RWB.NSF/db900SID/KARI-79RTDQ?OpenDocument>

[4] <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/earth/main.jhtml?xml=/earth/2007/12/10/eaclimate110.xml>

[5] <http://www.helium.com/knowledge/90838-the-long-term-consequences-of-the-colonization-of-africa>

[6] <http://www.africanfront.com/conflict.php>

[7] <http://www.helium.com/items/543329-africa-cannot-stand-still>

[8] <http://www.awate.com/portal/content/view/4889/4/>

[9] <http://www.awate.com/portal/content/view/4515/9/>

[10] <http://www.meskerem.net/LawPoliticsandIslaminAfrica.htm>

[11] http://vbn.aau.dk/fbspretrieve/16138517/DIIPER_wp_9.pdf