

# State Terrorism in Ethiopia

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This article is about a government that supports and conducts terrorist acts against its own citizens, which I call *state terrorism*. There is some controversy in the general definition of terrorism in both the academic and geopolitical sense. Terrorism is an aspect of organized violence which threatens peace and security across the globe. Some politicians define it as a political instrument. Resistance to oppression and struggle for human rights and freedom are sometimes defined as terrorism in the legislations of some countries. But it is generally recognized as one of the most serious contemporary security challenges of Africa, tantamount to an undeclared war, which transcends political borders, destabilizes governments, preys on innocent people and causes an enormous amount of pain and suffering to the population and the economy of the affected countries. According to the Africa Center for the Study & Research on Terrorism (ACSRT), in May 2020, there were 153 terrorist attacks compared to 101 in the previous month, April. What is less spoken and written about is *state terrorism*, which relates to the actions of states that create the conditions for domestic terrorism and insurgencies and /or support terrorism to achieve a political agenda. In what follows, we argue that ***the current government of Ethiopia under Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed is a terrorist state, whose ultimate goal, as incontrovertibly affirmed by the recent statements of Shimeles Abdissa, is the establishment of an Oromo-dominated system of government through systematic elimination and subjugation of other ethnic and religious groups, especially Amharas and Orthodox Christians.***

Though there is no universal definition of terrorism, one that has been adopted by the UN in 1994 is:

“Acts intended or calculated to provoke a state of terror in the general public, a group of persons or particular persons for political purposes are in any circumstance unjustifiable, whatever the considerations of a political, philosophical, ideological, racial, ethnic, religious or any other nature that may be invoked to justify them.” (Para. 3).

The Africa Union (AU) definition is very detailed. It comes from the Convention of the Prevention and Combating of Terrorism, which has a long list of acts that constitute terrorism. Both the UN and AU definitions focus on non-state actors and exclude state sponsored terrorism or state terrorism:

[“Governments are often the targets of terrorism, but they can also sponsor terrorists or use the tactics of terrorism. There are two broad definitions of ‘state-sponsored terrorism.’ One refers to governments that support or conduct terrorism against other governments. The other refers to governments that conduct terrorist acts against their own citizens.”](#)

Terrorism is mostly transnational, as its threat is not directed against any particular country *per se*, but rather against a type of political system. In the case

of extremists like the Islamic State (IS), the concept of a modern state is anathema, with the stated goal being the creation of a regional or global Muslim sphere of influence or caliphate. The major terrorist groups in Africa (i.e., Boko Haram, Al Qaeda, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), Al Shabab, Lords Resistance Army in Uganda (LRA) and a few others, which I will be addressing in an upcoming article), have impacted regional peace and security and destabilized many governments, massacred hundreds of thousands of people and severely affected development in Africa. The impacted African countries include: Somalia, Sudan, Central African Republic, Chad, Kenya, Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Mali, Chad, Burkina Faso, Niger, Cameroon, Nigeria, Ghana, many of the states in the Gulf of Guinea, DRC, and most recently Mozambique; with small presence in many other countries.

These organizations have developed the capacity of financing and recruiting in many parts of Africa through an elaborate extortion scheme, kidnapping, killings, bombings and drug and arms trafficking, taking advantage of porous borders, poverty and weak governance. Addressing terrorism requires institutional capacity, skills, training, regional and global coordination, persistent dialogue amongst the stakeholders, and unwavering commitment and vigilance.

Ethiopia has become a fertile place to recruit extremists and criminal gangs, intentionally or unintentionally inviting terrorist organizations already operating in the region, through the failure of the central government to govern by protecting the integrity and the unity of the people. Though, not included in the official definition of terrorism, this complacency and or complicity could be termed as *state terrorism*. While there is sufficient evidence to build a case to bring to justice the perpetrators of the horrendous crimes and genocide that have been committed over the last three decades, and particularly in the last two years, [the state of Ethiopia can also be accused for aiding and abetting terrorists and their actions, thereby violating one of the key tenets of counter terrorism](#). Further investigation might eventually uncover the conspiracy between the state and non- state actors to fulfill the political agenda of external elements.

Government or "state" terror, sometimes referred to as "*terror from above*," typically happens when a government terrorizes its own population to achieve a hidden political agenda. As revealed by the recent speech of the president of the Oromia region, Shimelis Abdissa, the regime in Ethiopia is aggressively following a policy of establishing an Oromo hegemony, making use of the official institutions, such as the judiciary, police, military, and other government agencies, spearheaded by a few in the top political leadership and non-state actors, particularly the 'the kerros' which Shimelis Abdisaa brazenly admitted in organizing. The "kerros " are Ormo youth radicalized to conduct the mission of destroying churches killing Christians and Amharas In fact, the government has not even distanced itself from Abdissa's statements pertaining to the overarching political agenda of Abiy's government to crush the Amharas ad non-Oromos, and to establish Oromo supremacy.

Abdissa's statement not only ignores to apologize the murder, massacre, torture and displacements that have taken place in the Oromia region, but it actually

brazenly justifies it. Ominously, the shout for the blood of Christians and Amharas still reverberates across much of the Oromia region today. Like in the case of moderate Hutus in Rwanda, Oromos who are either Christians, or have assimilated in the Amhara culture, or have been married to non-Oromos, or are simply opposed to the whole idea of ethnic federalism, have also been killed, their properties destroyed, and thrown out of the region. This policy of ethnic cleansing of non Oromos from Oromia region included the Gurages and Welayitas who are minorities but hard working people who have endured years of marginalization and oppression in the Oromia region.

After assuming power, the official Nazi policy was aimed at the deliberate destruction of "state enemies" and the resulting intimidation of the rest of the population. Stalin's "purges" of the 1930s, Pol Pot's massacre of the 1960s, and Mengistu's Red Terror of the 1970s, are examples of using the machinery of the state to terrorize a population. Such terrorist acts are considered crimes against humanity and fall under the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court (ICC).

Crimes against humanity are acts directed against the civilian population on a widespread or systematic basis, either in time of war or in peacetime. Crimes against humanity have been defined differently according to the jurisdiction and context concerned. The "Rome Statute establishing the International Criminal Court for Crimes against humanity describes these crimes as crimes against humanity;

1. For the purpose of this Statute, "crime against humanity" means any of the following acts when committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against any civilian population, with knowledge of the attack:
  - (a) Murder;
  - (b) Extermination;
  - (c) Enslavement;
  - (d) Deportation or forcible transfer of population;
  - (e) Imprisonment or other severe deprivation of physical liberty in violation of fundamental rules of international law;
  - (f) Torture;
  - (g) Rape, sexual slavery, enforced prostitution, forced pregnancy, enforced sterilization, or any other form of sexual violence of comparable gravity;
  - (h) Persecution against any identifiable group or collectivity on political, racial, national, ethnic, cultural, religious, gender as defined in paragraph 3, or other grounds that are universally recognized as impermissible under international law, in connection with any act referred to in this paragraph or any crime within the jurisdiction of the Court;
  - (i) Enforced disappearance of persons;
  - (j) The crime of apartheid;

(k) Other inhumane acts of a similar character intentionally causing great suffering, or serious injury to body or to mental or physical health.

2. For the purpose of paragraph 1:

(a) "Attack directed against any civilian population" means a course of conduct involving the multiple commission of acts referred to in paragraph 1 against any civilian population, pursuant to or in furtherance of a State or organizational policy to commit such attack"

The current PM was once a senior member of the EPRDF, and chief of the government security agency responsible for the detention of thousands of activists and opposition groups who faced years of detention and despicable torture. As one who believes in ethnic politics, he was actually put to power by the extremist Oromo nationalists to implement a policy that continues to promote, as revealed by Shimeles Abdissa, the partitioning of Ethiopia along ethnic lines, with the Oromo elites at the helm of power.

In Ethiopia that ethnic line and boundary had been blurred by years of peaceful coexistence. What the country needed at this historic junction was to address the grievances of the Oromos and other ethnic groups through peaceful reforms that could bring about a non-ethnic federal system, effectively decentralizing power and enhancing peaceful coexistence. Through his silence and/or complicity, the Prime Minister of Ethiopia today is untying the very fabric that had strengthened the ties that bound the people together for centuries. Religious, ethnic and cultural tolerance, and systematic reforms that come from the people through direct consultation, were what were expected from a leader in these times of crisis, instead of fanning the flames. Abiy Ahmed refused to change the constitution, which created an ethno-centric government, and a system of ethnic federalism drafted by the TPLF-led EPRDF, which he voluntarily joined and enthusiastically supported. With the TPLF gone, he had the perfect opportunity and the overwhelming support of the people to change Ethiopia to a non-ethnic based federal arrangement. His failure to do so, and his tolerance of the proliferation of hate and divisive propaganda through the communication infrastructure controlled by the government, have led to a political crisis which has become complex with too many internal and external players.

The country is now on the verge of exploding. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed was not able or willing to deliver what he promised to the Ethiopian people through his eloquent speeches. All those colorful speeches of peace love and freedom have now been confirmed to be smokescreens for a hidden agenda of promoting Oromo supremacism, as suspected by Ethiopians more recently and boldly and arrogantly confirmed by Shimeles Abdissa. Abiy Ahmed's silence and complicity in the face of the premeditated killings of Christians, burning of churches, and

prevalence of lawlessness across Ethiopia has brought the country to the brink once again.

The very people who brought him to power and the party and 'the kerros' he leads have slaughtered Christians belonging to the Orthodox Church in the most gruesome way. Orthodox churches were burned down and desecrated. No African country has experienced such gruesome murders in recent years as has been witnessed in the Oromia region where innocent civilians were brutally massacred for either being Christians or Amharas or both, or for being either assimilated in the Amhara culture, or for opposing the actions of the Ormo extremists. Poor helpless people were massacred and their bodies dragged and body parts thrown all over, with family members not allowed to pick the pieces and give their brothers, sisters, mothers and fathers a decent burial ceremony. Properties belonging to many Amharas and Christians, Gurages and Welayitas were systematically destroyed without the intervention of the Prime Minister and the federal or local troops who were at the sites. Internet was shut down for a month in the entire country. Only now the world is getting glimpses of horrific images and stories of what really happened in Ethiopia in the month of July of 2020.

To the dismay of Ethiopians, the PM chose to keep quiet, not condemning those who committed these atrocious crimes, or assuming accountability for these vicious actions. He has yet to send condolences to the families who have been the victims of this genocide.

Ironically, these crimes are happening in Ethiopia in 2020 with no lessons learnt from the last genocide in Africa: The Rwandan genocide of 1994 after which the world premised ***Never Again!*** As the international community begins to understand the scope and gravity of these crimes, nothing is going to stop the campaigns to raise awareness until justice is served. Most importantly, the people of Ethiopia will continue to push for the world to recognize these actions as *state terrorism*, as Ethiopians prepare themselves present their cases to the ICC for what they are: *genocide and crimes against humanity*.

If people are effectively excluded from determining their future; and people are killed for who they are, for what they believe in, for their ideology or advocacy for equality and justice, then the state has become a terrorist organization. The Ethiopian state is conducting state terrorism, similar to the South African government during the era of apartheid. The policy of apartheid was state terrorism. And it was the resistance to this state terrorism that created the insurgency led by the African National Congress (ANC). The ANC was however declared a terrorist organization by the USA and continued to provide support in all spheres to the South African government which considered by law the blacks as inferior to whites. Indeed, the ethnic federalism of Ethiopia is very much alike to [the apartheid policy of bantustanization](#).

The state in Ethiopia has used violence and extra judicial killings and detentions to coerce compliance with the wishes of the state. In some cases, the state has enabled a few extremists to instill fear in the general population, destroying,

killing and looting Amharas and believers of the Orthodox church. A senior TPLF leader once publicly stated that the destruction of the Amharas and the Orthodox Church was a prime policy of the TPLF. Evidently, this ideology has been elevated to a different level under the premiership of Abiy Ahmed, as he strives to achieve his concealed objective of Oromo supremacy.

The crack in Ethiopian unity along religious and ethnic lines and the lawlessness across the country has also opened up the way to the Muslim extremists like al Al Shabab and IS to declare war on Ethiopia. [On two occasions IS has publicly stated](#) that it has started operating in Ethiopia with exclusive intention of establishing an Islamic Republic and exterminating Christians. This has added a new dimension to the ongoing state terrorism, as Ably Ahmed continues to downplay the role of Islamist extremists in the recent genocide. But almost all of Ethiopian Muslims would never allow such extremism to operate I the land where Prophet Mohamed declared as a peaceful land. According By Br. Najib Mohammed (written in EAL Selamta Magazine)

“In Islamic history and tradition, Ethiopia (Abyssinia or Al-Habasha) is known as the "Haven of the First Migration or Hijra." For Muslims, Ethiopia is synonymous with freedom from persecution and emancipation from fear .....Ethiopia was a land where its king, Negus or Al-Najashi, was a person renowned for justice and in whose land human rights were cherished.” That is what both Christians and Muslims have tried to achieve in the centuries of peaceful coexistence that has been referred as a model to the rest of the world. Ethiopians are determined to keep it that way.

In law there is no difference between international terrorism and domestic terrorism. Domestic terrorism can take place by either state actors or government sponsored operations. Both are happening in Ethiopia. The government has used incarcerations, torture, massacre and different subtle and not so subtle means to implement a policy of ethnic cleansing or weakening of the powers and influence of the more than 70 ethnic groups in Ethiopia.

It is true that governments have the responsibility to maintain law and order and in the process use certain tactics that are violent or acts that deny the rights of a citizen. Prohibition of demonstrations, suppression of freedom of expression, and detaining violent and dangerous individuals and groups of people are sometimes essential when the intent is to protect the interest of the larger community and bring about civil order. But what happens in Ethiopia is not being done in a manner that the domestic or international law prescribes. The state takes these brutal actions, genocide and crimes against humanity with the specific intent of achieving the above-stated political objectives. This is state terrorism, [as described elsewhere](#):

“ A defining feature of state terrorism, and that which distinguishes it from other forms of state violence, is that it involves the illegal targeting of individuals that the state has a duty to protect with the aim of instilling fear in a target audience beyond the direct victim. .... When non-state

actors use violence to intimidate an audience beyond the direct victim of that violence, we refer to it as terrorism. Yet there has been considerable resistance within International Relations scholarship to the notion that states can be perpetrators of terrorism, even though the vast majority of state violence, particularly against domestic populations, is intended to have a terrorizing effect, and results in far higher casualties than non-state terrorism does. It is frequently assumed that because the existence of the state is based on its monopoly of coercive power, there is a fundamental difference between terrorism perpetrated by non-state actors, and violence perpetrated by the state. In other words, states are permitted to use violence, so we should not refer to their use of violence as terrorism. Non-state actors, on the other hand, are afforded no such right in pursuit of their political objectives hence we refer to their actions as terrorism. There are two significant problems with these assumptions. Firstly, terrorism and state violence are being differentiated on the basis of who the perpetrator of the act is, rather than on the nature of the act itself. Secondly, it incorrectly assumes that because the state has a monopoly on violence, any use of violence by the state is permissible. I will show that definitions of terrorism should be based on the nature of the act, and not the actor, and that on these grounds, there is no reason why actions by the state cannot be labeled as terrorism, if those acts fit the definition. I will then demonstrate that just because the state claims a monopoly on the use of violence in the interests of its survival, this does not mean that all forms of state violence are legitimate.”

Evidently, global diplomacy these days has shrunk to regional diplomacy; and the watchdog of global peace and security has relegated its powers to the key regional players. The Gulf countries led by Saudi Arabia and UAE, in partnership with Egypt, have taken the lead role in shaping the destiny of the countries in the Horn of Africa, as they are trying to do in North Africa, Libya, Yemen, Lebanon Iraq and Syria.

Abiy Ahmed's willingness to sideline the AU and sign a peace agreement with Eritrea in the palace of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, is ground for suspicion. The reasons as to why Abiy became a frequent flyer to Saudi Arabia and UAE is not much known. However, it is further evidence, coupled with his inactions in the face of genocide, about his long-term vision of strengthening Oromo supremacy, while annihilating Orthodox Christianity, as was well articulated by Shimeles Abdissa.

To date, the ICC has opened investigations into **11 situations**: (1) the **Democratic Republic of the Congo**; (2) **Uganda**; (3) the Central African Republic I; (4) **Darfur, Sudan**; (5) **Kenya**; (6) **Libya**; (7) Côte d'Ivoire; (8) Mali; (9) the Central African Republic II; (10) Georgia; and (11) Burundi. The ICC has publicly indicted 44 people. The ICC has issued arrest warrants for 36 individuals and summonses to eight others. Six persons are in detention. Proceedings against 22 are ongoing: 15 are at large as fugitives, one is under arrest but not in the Court's custody, two are in the pre-trial phase, and four are at trial. Proceedings against 22 have been completed: two are serving sentences, four have finished their sentences, two

have been acquitted, six have had the charges against them dismissed, two have had the charges against them withdrawn, one has had his case declared inadmissible, and four have died before trial.

In the face state terrorism, which has recently manifested itself in the July genocide, the only salvation for Ethiopians is fighting for justice at the ICC, *indicting and convicting the perpetrators of these crimes*. This will deter further bloodshed and dampen the continued turmoil in Ethiopia. It will also teach future leaders that they too will be held accountable unless they are led by the will of the people. Abiy's persistent lies to himself and to Ethiopians; his penchant to collect people who are 'yes' people around him; his demand for constant adulation; his inability to be challenged or questioned; his lack of compassion to those dying and suffering; his grandiose behavior, which makes himself, not the country, the center of his life; are all reminiscent of characteristics of dictators before him, who committed egregious crimes against humanity to advance evil agendas and eventually ousted ignominiously. Whether it is Nazism, communism or Oromo supremacism, the crimes committed against humanity to achieve their objectives can only be redressed at the ICC. Since the dead, the displaced and the imprisoned cannot find justice at home; the international institutions established for this purpose should pick up the *Case of Ethiopians Against State Terrorism*.

Prime Minister Abiy should take notice of the advice of Matshona Dhliwayo, author of *Lalibela's Wiseman*, who counseled: **"If you wear a mask for too long, there will come a time when you cannot remove it without removing your face."** At no time was this duplicity of the prime minister clearer than when he recently launched his diversionary tactic, showcasing the grand projects in the capital city, only weeks after the ghastly genocide took place in the Oromia region, and days after the illuminating statements of Shimeles Abdissa were leaked through the popular media. Such diversionary tactics are, of course subtle tools of dictators who are known to use grand projects and made-up stories as smokescreens for their evil agendas. The inaugural documentary on parks and the antique car shows hosted by Abiy Ahmed remind one of Mussolini's impressive square, named Forum Imperii. Stalin used the Great Purge to eliminate his enemies. Eskinder Nega and other innocent Ethiopians became sacrificial lambs to advance Oromo extremist agendas. And so history will keep repeating itself.

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