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A SPECIAL REPORT:

AT ISRAEL'S BACK DOOR: THE QUAGMIRE OF ETHIOPIA

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[Editor's Note: The renewed Israeli involvement in Ethiopia, which counters that of Libya, Saudi Arabia and Somalia, has been increasingly noted in the media. Israelis need to be concerned about their own back door, down the Red Sea to the Horn of Africa and out into the Indian Ocean and South Asia. Israel used to have a major presence in Ethiopia, as part of its policy of supporting non-Arab peoples on the periphery of the Arab world, and recently returned after a 15-year absence. Ethiopia is also of special interest because of its Jewish population and its problems in reconciling large dissident minorities.]

When you fly into Ethiopia from the Red Sea, you encounter a steep plateau which looks like Masada, rising from the coastal plain. Most of the Ethiopian mountains, with the exception of some ranges in the northern parts, are flat-topped and about two miles above sea level. It is a land with a varied climate but generally of continuous spring on the plateau. Since the oxygen is very thin so high up, not surpris-

ingly, Ethiopia has produced some outstanding marathon runners because their bodies are built for that lack of oxygen.

Water Rich, Food Poor

Ethiopia lies partly on the equator, which means that with the exception of its southern provinces, it enjoys abundant rainfall. In fact, Ethiopia is the source of nearly 80 percent of the water that runs into the Nile.

Recently it was reported that Egypt had denounced an alleged plan by the Ethiopians to build dams on the Blue Nile with the help of a group of Israeli engineers. Actually, Egypt is a parasite country because in fact it contributes no water of its own to the Nile. It has no rainfall other than along the coast and is totally dependent on the water of the Nile. Nearly 90 percent of its population lives in the Nile Valley, which is only 4 percent of its total territory.

It is utter nonsense to claim that Ethiopia is capable of carrying out a plan to dam the sources of the Nile

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and to threaten Egypt. The Nile is made up of hundreds of little streams that descend from the high plateau to the plains of the Sudan and join up gradually into the three or four main feeders of the Blue Nile. Then the Blue Nile joins with the White Nile (near Khartoum), which itself gets about one-third of its water from the Ethiopian plateau. Further north, the Atbara, also coming from Ethiopia, also joins the main course of the Nile. It is ironic that Ethiopia, plagued by drought and starvation since the 1970s, is not supposed to use its own water, which is used to feed tens of millions of Egyptians and Sudanese.

Ethnic and Religious Divisions

Ethiopia is perhaps one of the most heterogeneous countries in the world, comprised of scores of ethnic groups. Over the centuries Ethiopia has served as a haven for different populations who sought refuge on its plateau. Ethiopia has also seen many invaders, including two nearly simultaneous waves in the sixteenth century: by the Oromo (Galla) people, pastoralists who came in from the south, as well as by Muslims who entered from the coast.

There are no dependable statistics in Ethiopia, but the country is believed to contain a population of about 30 million. The Oromo are believed to make up about 40 percent of the total, settled in different parts of the plateau. They were a disunified, tribal society when they poured into Ethiopia. Not having a developed culture, they were ready to adopt the cultures of the people of the plateau among whom they settled. These included the pagan Cushitic culture of the settled people of the southern and western plateaus as well as the Christian semiticized culture of the Amhara and Tigrean people of central and northern Ethiopia. Only among the nascent Oromo intelligentsia, largely students at the Haile Selassie University (where I taught for four years and was the Dean of the Faculty of Arts for three), was there a beginning of a sense of a common origin, history, and purpose. But

a growing sense of unity among the Oromo is only one of the numerous ethnic problems that Ethiopia now faces.

Ethiopia of old was long considered a Christian empire (it has been a republic since 1974). The Christians in Ethiopia are believed to number about 35 percent of the population, 20-25 percent belonging to the ruling Amhara group, rather latecomers to Christianity in the Ethiopian culture. Yet they ruled and dominated the empire from the thirteenth century until 1974. (Haile Selassie was the last Amhara emperor.) The second major Christian group, the Tigreans, who make up 10-15 percent of Ethiopia's population, were the first to absorb Semitic influences in the northern plateau (in the last millennium BCE), to convert in the fourth century CE, and to found the Ethiopian empire. They speak a language called Tigrinya (not to be confused with the Cushitic Tigre language of the largely Muslim pastoralists who live next door to them in Eritrea). The Tigreans (Tigrinya speakers), who are cultivators, inhabit the province of Tigre and the cultivable southern plateau of Eritrea, and make up nearly 50 percent of the inhabitants of that province (some are Muslims).

It is generally believed that Muslims make up nearly 40 percent of Ethiopia's population, while the balance are pagans. The tendency of the pagans to convert to Islam has been accelerated in the present century, despite the lukewarm efforts of the Christian government to win them to Christianity, in part as an expression of the frustration of large segments of the Oromo people who have become serfs of Amhara and Amharized Oromo warlords who had become governors of the provinces of southern and western Ethiopia.

In the sixteenth century, the Jihad (holy war) of the Muslim coastal element had managed to overrun the whole of the Christian Ethiopian empire on the plateau. A Muslim sultanate would have been established there if not for the last-minute intervention of a small Portuguese force which landed on the Ethiopian coast to support the remnants of the Christian

forces under Emperor Galawdewos (Claudius). Actually the Portuguese had previously thought that Ethiopia was a powerful Christian empire which could help them defeat the Muslims in the Iberian Peninsula and elsewhere in the world.

There are numerous ethnic groups in Ethiopia, yet the most important components are the (linguistically and culturally) semiticized group, living largely in northern and central Ethiopia. Their special culture, a synthesis of the local Cushitic culture and Semitic influences, originated in the centuries of the first millennium BCE. Such Cushitic tribes were probably influenced by the migration to the northern plateau of very small tribal groups or individuals from southern Arabia who arrived with a superior culture (in government, trade, construction, etc.) and intermingled with the local people and influenced them. (I have participated in several archeological expeditions in the north and was struck by the clear and substantial influence and impact of the south Arabian kingdoms, some of which were Jewish, on the customs, language, coinage, beliefs and style of buildings, temples, and many other things in northern Ethiopia -- an influence not at all common elsewhere in Africa.)

The Failures of the Ethiopian Church

Unlike the Christian missions and churches which were exported to Africa from Europe or America with the intention of converting the African heathens and "civilizing" them, the Ethiopian Church is a native church, established in the fourth century, with its roots deep in the soil of Africa. Some scholars confuse the Ethiopian Church as being the same as the Coptic Church of Egypt, which is totally wrong. This confusion probably arises from the fact that in the past the Ethiopians imported an Egyptian monk as the head of their church. The Abuna, as he was called, had the authority to anoint new clergy, a role which was essential to the survival of the Church. But the day-to-day running of the Ethiopian Church

was in the hands of the Itchege, the head of the Ethiopian monastic orders.

Being a truly African church, the Ethiopian Church had the opportunity over many centuries to convert millions of pagans, at least in the Horn of Africa, to imbue them with "Ethiopian culture" as well, and integrate them into the Ethiopian nation. However, being an elitist church, it generally looked down on the newly-conquered masses and rejected them, thus pushing them into the open arms of the Muslims who sought their conversion. Thus the Church failed miserably its historic challenge to act as an integrative force. On the whole, Ethiopian rulers abstained from using the Church as a unifying force. The two emperors who tried to do so in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries soon discovered the inability of the spiritually weak Church to rise to the challenge and they failed in their efforts to unite the empire.

In the nineteenth century, Emperor Theodorus also wished to use the Church to transform a disunited empire into a united one when he reunified the new Christian kingdom after three centuries of decline. Unfortunately, he did not have sufficient time for that, nor was the Church able and ready to cooperate with him. Actually Theodorus was a common highway robber, not an offspring of the Solomonic dynasty, who had grabbed the seat of the emperor and who was mentally disturbed as well.

The founder of modern Ethiopia within its present borders was Emperor Menelik II. (Menelik I is said to be the outcome of the union between the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon.) In the last decades of the nineteenth century his armies marched southward, westward and eastward to conquer (reconquer, according to the Ethiopians) an area nearly three times its previous size. In 1896 he managed to defeat and capture a superior Italian army with all its modern weapons, and have his nation's independence in its present borders accepted by Europe. Yet he allowed the Italians to continue to rule their Eritrean

colony including territories in the northern plateau which were originally the seat of the ancient Ethiopian empire (Axum).

Menelik established the traditional "feudal" system in all the conquered territories, and the conquered people, largely Oromo, became practically serfs of the warlords who had conquered them in his name. Many such warlords were of Oromo origin who had become Ethiopianized and converted to Christianity. Others were Amhara from Showa, the central province in Ethiopia, and still others were northern Christian Amhara or Tigrean military settlers who were given estates in the south or southwest.

The Threat of Greater Somalia

The new borders of Ethiopia in the twentieth century included tremendous tracts of land inhabited by numerous people of different origins. Among the more important were the Somalis, who are of the same stock as those living in today's Somali Republic. The Somali tribes in Ethiopia inhabit the southeastern part of the country, a savanna which consists of about 35 percent of Ethiopia and which borders the Somali Republic. Yet the total number of Somalis in Ethiopia today, who are all pastoralists, is estimated at about two million, roughly 7 percent of Ethiopia's total population. Their demands to unite one-third of Ethiopia's territory with their Somali brethren are naturally rejected by the Ethiopians.

The ideology of "Greater Somalia," launched by Ernst Bevin in the early 1940s, is a challenge not only for Ethiopia. Greater Somalia also includes not only the former Italian and British colonies of Somaliland, but all the territories where Somali tribes live, including nearly 40 percent of Kenya (its northern province), as well as former French Somaliland, now known as Djibouti, where the presence of Somali tribesmen is largely an outcome of French imperialism. The French had built a port there and a railway to Addis Ababa. The local pastoralist Afar people did not wish to do manual work so Somalis

immigrated to Djibouti to work in and around the port and the railroad. Eventually they came to number about 50 percent of the population. The Somali problem thus engulfs the whole area and is the cause of constant tension. The Somalis established the Front for the Liberation of Western Somalia and have been fighting the Ethiopians, with massive aid from the Somali Republic and some Arab countries, since the 1960s.

Breakaway Eritrea

The other major military threat to Ethiopia is that of the province of Eritrea in the north which wishes to secede from Ethiopia. Ironically, it is there that the Christian empire had its roots. Half the population of Eritrea are Tigrean people speaking Tigrinya (a Semitic language), who are largely Christians of the Ethiopian Church, but other Christian denominations are represented in Eritrea as well. The Tigreans and the Amhara were the traditional power base of the semiticized ruling elements of Ethiopia. Yet they always competed for hegemony in the empire. Since the rise of the new Amhara Solomonic dynasty in the thirteenth century, the Tigreans have felt cheated out of their heritage, believing that they were the rightful heirs to the ancient kingdom since they were the ones who originally established Ethiopia. They felt they had been pushed aside by the uncultured Amhara who were latecomers to Christianity, who borrowed and undermined Ethiopian culture, and have badly ruled the kingdom throughout the last 600 years.

Probably such elements of controversy would have remained of secondary importance if not for the fact that after the Ottomans conquered part of Eritrea in the sixteenth century and leased it to Muhammad Ali in the nineteenth century, the Egyptians expanded the territory under their rule on the coast and the periphery of the Ethiopian plateau. By 1885, as the Egyptian government in Sudan collapsed, the Eritrean colony was taken over by the Italians, who had established their colony

of Eritrea earlier along the southern part of the Ethiopian coast on the Red Sea. The Italian colony of Eritrea and their conquest of Ethiopia in 1935 survived until 1942. Then it was captured from the Italians by the British, who handed most of Ethiopia back to Emperor Haile Selassie, but not the Italian colony. The legacy of the Italians, of the Egyptians before them and the Turks before them, was responsible for gradually creating the Eritrean entity or identity.

Normally, a nation is defined as having people of a common origin, speaking the same language, having the same culture, having the same heritage, and living in the same territory, who believe themselves to be a separate and distinct entity. However, in Eritrea there are seven major ethnic groups. The most important is that of the Tigreans, largely Christians, who are an offshoot of the Tigrean cultivators in the province of Tigre to the south and who are today the spearhead of Eritrean nationalism. The second Eritrean ethnic group are the Beja, Tigre-speaking Muslim pastoralists of the northwestern plateau of Eritrea. The third are also Cushitic pastoralists on the coast (Habab). Another wild pastoralist group of the southern coast are the Dankalis (Afor). Another is the small "Arab" group around Massawa, and still another group are the Negroid elements, the ancient population of the plateau who now live on its peripheries, who are Christian and pagan, speak "Sudanic" languages, and are generally supportive of the government in Addis Ababa.

The original Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) was Islamic and Arab-oriented, with a Christian minority, established about 1960. In the late 1960s the Christian intelligentsia established the Marxist-oriented Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front (EPLF), which in the 1970s became the largest, most powerful, best armed and successful mass movement of most of the people of Eritrea. The EPLF was progressive and "revolutionary," led by the Eritrean intelligentsia, whereas the rest of Ethiopia was very conservative and "reaction-

ary." Their war was against "reaction" and colonialism and was supported by the "progressive" countries. However, since the 1974 revolution, both sides have followed the same Marxist-oriented, "progressive" ideology and, therefore, the Eritrean rebellion was rejected by some of its previous foreign supporters. In addition, the whole seacoast of Ethiopia from Aseb in the south to Massawa in the north was in Haile Selassie's time part of the Eritrean territory. On the eve of the twenty-first century, a country like Ethiopia cannot survive if it is landlocked economically and strategically, and the Eritrean rebels continue to insist that they will not cede any part of their desert coast to Ethiopia, which makes matters even more complicated.

The Voiceless Oromo People

Probably the most complicated, confusing and challenging ethnic-"national" problem in Ethiopia is that of the Oromo. The latter do not inhabit one or two contiguous provinces in Ethiopia, but live in many of the country's 14 provinces either as a majority, a significant minority, or a smaller community. Moreover, while they are not concentrated in a single territory, are not a single entity, and have no common leadership, they make up nearly 40 percent of the total Ethiopian population. However, they were always treated as inferiors and hardly participated in the government of the country. Nor did the majority of the Oromo consider the Ethiopian culture and heritage to be their own, and most did not speak Amharic.

When the Ethiopian revolution erupted and the new regime came to power in 1974, it was believed that the military council (Derge) which began to run the country had numerous Oromo members in it. There were many Oromo soldiers and NCOs in the Imperial Army and names of members from other ethnic groups in the armed forces sounded like Oromo or Amharized names. One of the first and most successful reforms of the new regime was to nationalize the land held by landlords

and divide it among the peasants, and the peasants who largely benefited from this step were Oromo. Oromo language broadcasts were begun and their spoken language was taught. Yet it eventually became clear that relatively few Oromo were members of the Derge and most of them later perished in the bloody, internal struggles for power in that body.

The Impact of the Marxist Revolution

Today there are only a handful of about 110 non-commissioned and junior officers who comprised the original military council. The rest were killed during the bloody struggles for power in the Derge. The remaining members are largely Amhara or of Amharized origin, as were the ones who were killed -- Amhara or offspring of small ethnic groups who became partly Amharized during their military service.

One of the first major problems which the new regime faced was that of keeping the country together, yet at the same time they tried to undo some of the mistakes of Haile Selassie's government. Initially, the military regime announced their intention to permit a wide measure of autonomy for major ethnic groups, especially with regard to culture and self-government. Following the so-called Leninist approach to the nationalities problem, each major ethnic group had the right to self-determination but was not supposed to exercise it. On the other hand, the minority groups had a right to develop their culture and language, something which had been strictly forbidden in the days of the emperor. Yet once the regime realized that demands for autonomy and self-determination were about to tear the country apart, the Derge quickly coined the slogan "Ethiopia Tikdem," meaning "Ethiopia comes first," which holds to this day.

One of the important contributions of the revolution had been its enormous investment in literacy campaigns in a country where illiteracy was nearly 100 percent. But at the same time, this was linked to the struggle between the military

and ideologically-motivated civilian militants. The military rounded up all the intelligentsia, largely students and graduates, and banished them to all the remote provinces, among populations which were not akin to them, leaving them to themselves. Thousands perished due to the situation in such provinces or were killed outright by the military during 1975-1978, and often the locals simply annihilated them. Over a period of three years, several generations of Ethiopian intelligentsia were wiped out, a very thin layer of the nation but, still, the product of generations. Thus the pragmatic military led by Col. Mengistu Haile Mariam eliminated the most dangerous competition to the military government. Trade unionists and other potential dissidents were either imprisoned or executed by the thousands and many escaped the country, largely to the U.S.

In the mid and late 1970s, the rise in power of the Eritrean rebels, supported financially and militarily by some Arab countries and permitted to use bases in the Sudan, greatly endangered Ethiopia. Their efforts were coupled with an eruption by Somali rebels who were openly supported by the regular Somali army. Only Soviet and Cuban help saved the Ethiopians, as the Soviets turned their back on their former Somali ally and enabled the Ethiopians to overcome the Somali army and rebels. In addition, the Eritrean rebels were pushed back to the peripheries of the province or into the desert. For a time it looked as if the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front was about to collapse, but this was to prove only a temporary setback. In addition to the Sudan, the Eritreans were able to enlist the support of both reactionary, conservative Saudi Arabia and supposedly "progressive" Libya, both of whom united to undermine the Christian Ethiopian Marxist state. The Eritreans enjoyed a gifted and highly-motivated leadership and the loyalty of devoted fighters, and by the end of the 1970s were again able to take the offensive, defeating the poorly-motivated Ethiopian army repeatedly in the 1980s. The

Sudanese and the EPLF also encouraged and helped to arm the sister leftist Tigre Peoples Liberation Front, which in recent years totally "liberated" the province of Tigre and penetrated the peripheries of the Amhara heartland.

The traditional Ethiopian empire had rested on a three-legged tripod consisting of the emperor, the church, and Ethiopia's semiticized culture and language. In 1974, the Ethiopian revolutionary regime dismantled this tripod. The emperor was arrested, thrown into jail where he died soon afterward, and the institution of the "Lion of Judea, King of Kings of Ethiopia" was abolished. Christianity was renounced as the state religion and the Ethiopian Church deprived of its position as the state church. It suffered as well the confiscation of all its land and other sources of income which had served to feed thousands of Ethiopians who served in the Church hierarchy or the monastic orders. Islam and all other religions in Ethiopia were made equal to Christianity.

Finally, at least in the first years after the revolution, the Derge helped undermine the Amhara Ethiopian culture and its primacy in the Ethiopian state. Yet as far as Ethiopia's Arab and non-Arab neighbors were concerned, Ethiopia remained by definition a Christian empire, regarded with distaste if not hate. Somalia, although not an Arab (but Muslim) country, was even made a member of the Arab League for political-religious reasons. Despite its new Marxist, largely Christian, leadership, Eritrea is also considered somehow part Arab, part Muslim, and worthy of Arab support.

Will the Current Regime Survive?

Unfortunately, Ethiopia's revolutionary regime has gravely harmed itself and undermined its power. The Amharized leadership of the Derge is hated by all. If not for the centralized authority, the mass organizations of the urban and rural people and the secret police, the regime would have collapsed long ago. The "pluralistic" leadership turned into an authoritarian,

bloodthirsty dictatorship of one man, Mengistu Haile Mariam. The support base of the regime including the Ethiopian Communist party is far too narrow to maintain the government in power for a long period. The authority of the regime in provinces far from the center is nearly nonexistent today. The unsuccessful war against the country's enemies, led by officers who have no idea how to run an army, has undermined the army's motivation. In addition, the forced recruitment of untrained peasants to fight against a determined rebel army has proven to be disastrous and has made the regime even more repugnant to the population. The population is starving by the millions but the war goes on without end. In addition, the Soviets and their allies are no longer willing or able to support the Ethiopian regime and its unsuccessful armed forces. The Soviets, who supported the Ethiopians to the tune of about \$1 billion a year in the early and mid-1980s, have cut this support to a fraction in recent years and are ready to abandon Ethiopia altogether if Mengistu does not find a solution to the endemic rebellions which are bleeding the country and to the growing unrest in all segments of the population.

Lately, the Tigrean rebels have penetrated the central province, Showa. It is claimed that they are only about 120 miles north of Addis Ababa. Within the ruling clique there is total disagreement, which recently led to an abortive coup against Mengistu Haile Mariam by all the heads of the armed forces. Now he alone controls the country, the army and the whole government machinery, without showing the aptitude for it.

After years of starvation, somewhat mitigated by the international community, Ethiopia is facing a new period of drought which may bring the death of additional millions. The chronic famine in the country is also a result of the fact that the poor peasants, who were exploited for many generations, never really attempted to grow more than they needed because it was always taken from them. As a result,

the townspeople and the drought-stricken provinces lack the very minimal amount of food needed to survive. Whether the newly-returned Israelis will have time to help Ethiopia before it collapses is impossible to predict.

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