

IDRIS MEHAMED ADEM

Notes on a Talk With Idris Mehamed Adem

Date/Place: 15/3/1989/Khartoum

Language: Arabic/English (Translator: Abdurrahman Tahanna/Sudanese)

I left Eritrea in March 1959 together with Ibrahim Sultan.

In the Eritrean Parliament there were 68 members, 34 Christians and 34 Muslim but the majority of the Eritrean people were Muslim. It was the game of the British to make this balance.

Haile Selase tried to persuade me to be party to the dissolution of the federation but I refused. After I was deposed as President of the Eritrean Parliament I was invited to come to Addis to become an advisor to the Emperor at the Palace but again I refused. Then they took away the car, the house and the gold I had received before. I then retired to Aqerdat, my home town.

Then the people of Eritrea asked me to leave Eritrea when things became dangerous for me, in order that I will be safe. Ibrahim Sultan and I came secretly to Kassala.

We had many Eritreans in the Sudanese army then and we had relations with them even before we left Eritrea. Among them were Umar Ezaz, Taher Salem, Abu Tiyara, Mehamed Idris Haj. There was contact between them and us and they used to send messages inside to me. These soldiers then were not from Harakat.

From Kassala we went to Khartoum. We had no discussions in Kassala with those organized in Harakat. In Khartoum we asked the Egyptian embassy for permission to come to Egypt and we were given it. We came to Egypt on 23/3/1959.

As I was younger than Ibrahim Sultan I had a better relation to the students. These used to gather around me.

Harakat had as main aim to find a peaceful solution to the Eritrean question. When we got out from Eritrea we put it to our mind that it should be solved by armed struggle. We came to the point that this problem cannot be solved peacefully.

We met with the students in Cairo and tried to find out how to form an organization for this purpose. These discussions were not with all the students but only with the elite of them. We prepared the organization then without giving it already any name. In December 1959 we took the final decision to form the organization but we did not announce it.

The first Leadership was prepared in January or February 1961 but our diplomatic activity started before that. In December 1960 Ibrahim Sultan and myself, we went to Riad. There we had a meeting with King Saud but then we were referred to Crown prince Faysal. The conclusion of our meeting was we should go and explain our problem to the United Nations and that then they could stand on our side.

Actually, Ibrahim and I, we were holding different opinions. Ibrahim Sultan thought that we were here to solve our problem by peaceful ways but I supported the idea of armed struggle. Then Ibrahim and I went back to Cairo. I went a 2nd time to Saudia but without Ibrahim upon the invitation of the Eritrean community there. Then I found there Usman Saleh Sabbe.

Usman had had its own organization in Massawa connected with the Muslim in Ethiopia called **Al-Urwa al-Wutqa** (the firm bond). He took his education in Addis Abeba and when he was there he met many Ethiopian Muslims who were not happy with their situation. Then Usman started to build up an organization for the improvement of Muslims for the Muslims of Ethiopia and Eritrea together. About this organization we did not have information while still inside Eritrea. I met Usman for the first time in Saudia. When he went from Addis to Herqiqo he probably continued this organization as he came outside with the aim to look for support for his organization. Usman explained to me his organization when we met and the need for helping it. He tried to enlist our help for it. I refused to be part of it because the matter of the Ethiopian Muslims concerns only them. I knew that the Muslims inside Ethiopia suffered a bad treatment but we did not want to mix this issue with the Eritrean question. The Eritrean question we considered to be

an international question whereas the question of the Ethiopian Muslims was an matter internal to Ethiopia. To combine or mix these issues could only have been detrimental for our cause.

After discussions Usman agreed with my point and he decided to work with us. We agreed that if we find our independence we also can help the Ethiopian Muslims. So we prepared ourselves to work on the Eritrean matter together. We decided that from Saudia we have to go to Somalia. In Cairo we knew **Mahmud Harbi** who previously had been an MP in the French Parliament. At that time Somalia was not yet independent and Jibuti under the French. Because he opposed the French policy in Jibuti he became a political refugee in Cairo. As Ethiopia was then having designs on Jibuti as well we realized we had the same problem. He had the idea, after the independence of Somalia, to go there together and he would come with us and to help us along as he had many contacts there. But before we could go he died at the age of 34 in an aircrash.

When we finally went to Somalia, Usman. and myself, the President then was **Adem Abdallah**. We were received in a good way and we were allowed to open an office there under the name of **Eritrean-Somali-Friendship Society**. They also gave us diplomatic passports of Somalia which we held since then up to today.

Our visit to Somalia was during the period of Haj 1961. We stayed in Somalia two months. Then we returned from Somalia to Cairo and announced the High Council.

When we were in Cairo we received an invitation by the Palestinians to attend the session of the Islamic Conference in Al Quds. That was the first time we explained in detail our case to different representatives of Islamic countries and in such a Conference.

We then met King Hussein and explained our problem. We wanted all the Arab countries around us to support us. King Hussein agreed with us and said you have to continue and we will help you. From there we went to Kuwait where we met with Amir Al-Sabbah and the Minister of Foreign Affairs. The main purpose of our visit was to explain our situation. From there we went to Bahrain. They promised to stand by our side. We wanted the Arab countries to have a good idea about our case so that they then could support our cause in the UN when it should be raised there.

From Bahrein we went to Lubnan (Libanon). We knew that Lubnan, being in her majority Christians, could not stand officially against Ethiopia. We explained our problem only to leaders of Muslim parties. Among others we met with **Adnan Hakin** of the Nedjadi Party. We hoped that our work in the other Arab states would force Libanon as an Arab state not to break out from the Arab group when our question would be discussed in the UN.

From Lubnan we went to Syria where we were allowed to President **Nazim Qudsi** to open an office. We were received in a warm way and they announced officially over the radio that they will support Eritrea. The other countries only had said that we have to continue to collect our people. The Syrians also agreed to gave to Eritreans military training.

When we met in Cairo before going to El Quds we announced the name of ELF and the **High Council** composed of: **Usman Saleh Sabbe, Idris Glawdyos, Ahmed Hashim, Mehamed Saleh Humed, Taha Mehamed Nur** and myself.

When we returned to Saudi after our long roundtour we started to organize branches there. We put it to the mind of the Eritreans there that the Eritrean problem cannot be solved without armed struggle. We demanded then from them to pay contributions. After that I returned to Cairo and Usman to Somalia. That was after **Awate** had already gone out into the mountains.

When I was still head of the Eritrean Parliament Awate came and discussed with me. He said: *things in Eritrea are not in a good way*. I told him: *do not be in a hurry, we have to find a good solution for these problems*. I left the Parliament in June 1956. He came to me while I was in Aqerdat and we discussed all these matters. I told him: *do not go to the mountain with a few people as it will be finished soon then*.

With us in these discussions sat **Sheikh Mehamed Al-Hussen Kelai** who is still living in Kassala and who knows the story of Awate more than I do. I said to Awate not to go to the mountain unless I tell you to do so as I have to go outside and try to find arms.

When we were outside we received a message that Awate had gone to the mountain. I send a

message to Kassala asking: *why did Awate go out although we had not yet sent weapons inside?* We learned that he had to go because the Ethiopians were coming after him. His family then was taken prisoner and brought to Teseney. We did not announce then that he had gone to the mountain. We only announced it after the Ethiopians ran after him and it was known inside that he had gone out.

Only these three people I mentioned (myself, Awate, Sheikh Mehamed Al-Hussen Kelai), we knew about these discussion. After I went out I learned that Awate also had entered into a relationship with **Sheikh Suleiman Mehamed El-Amin**. Sheikh Mehamed Al-Hussen Kelai actually was my relative and also living in Aqerdat and he was also a member of Parliament. I had full confidence in him and shared all the secrets with him.

The main role of **Shelkh Mehamed ibn Dawd** and Sheikh Suleiman occurred after I had left. Awate turned to them for support after I had left and these people also helped him.

While I was in Cairo messages were sent to me by the Emperor through the Mirghani family of Keren to desist from my activities and to return. The Emperor said in these messages that I should not wear myself out standing up against the might of Ethiopia. But I replied that I am only doing what Haile Selase did after the Italians drove him into exile. That happened in 1960 or 1961.

We had an agreement with the Eritrean soldiers in the Sudanese army that we will bring the weapons from outside and that they then would peacefully terminate their service with the army and then join the struggle. We did not want to create a problem with Sudan by asking them to desert with their arms. After they got out our revolution started to grow.

Before we went to China we already collected people and arms and brought them through Aden to Eritrea. I bought these weapons personally and brought them.

We made contact with China through the Embassy in Syria. We gave them a memorandum and asked them for a visit in China. We were then invited to participate in one of their internationalist celebrations. Usman and I went there and we stayed one month. They asked us if we were socialists. We said no, we are not socialists. But although we said we were no socialists they agreed to help us in the name of anti-imperialism. They agreed to train our volunteers and to give weapons. We met then with Mao-Tse Dung and Tchou En Lai.

After we returned we send our volunteers to China. After the training they send weapons for us. We then bought a big new ship. We then received many weapons from all sides and transferred these by ship from Aden to Eritrea through Aqiq. We also brought weapons from Syria by plane to Khartoum but they were intercepted due to problems within the parties of the then Sudanese government.

IDRIS MEHAMED ADEM

Notes on a Talk With Idris Mehamed Adem

Date/Place: 17/3/1989/Khartoum

Language: Arabic/English (Translator: Abdurrahman Tahanna/Sudanese)

(Continuation of Talk of 15/3/1989)

(relating to some members of the first leadership of the ELF - GS):

Usman Idris Beschir	responsible for the Somali office later on
Mehamed Saleh Humed	responsible for finance
Seid Hussein	responsible for organization inside and outside Eritrea

When we got to Cairo we met the students there. Among others we met:

Seid Hussein
Idris Glawdiyos
Mehamed Saleh Humed
Taha Mehamed Nur
Adem Akte
Idris Ibrahim Ahmed
Mehamed Ismael Abdu

I received an invitation to go to Somalia. When we established the office there, Sabbe was left in charge and I returned to Cairo. Usman stayed there about one year. After we had stayed about two months in Somalia we prepared our branches there and I got a passport for Usman.

When we went to Jeddah the first time, Sabbe was still inside. In Jeddah during the 2nd visit I received a message of Sabbe to come and see him.

In Al Quds Usman was with me. He came to this conference from Somalia. From Al Quds we went to Bagdad and met with Abdel Kassim Karem. After our roundtrip we went to Saudia and Usman did not go back to Somalia again.

Usman had entered Saudi-Arabia illegally from Assab through North Yemen. He had asked the Saudi government to be allowed to stay as a political refugee. But they refused him permission. At that time he was planning to go to Pakistan, as the Saudis refused to accept him as a political refugee. He went to the Pakistan embassy and met with the ambassador after I had met him. The ambassador was willing to give him a visa but I persuaded Usman to go to Somalia with me.

He had asked the Saudis to give him refugee status but when he entered nobody knew that he had this organization. At that time the Saudis had a good relation with Haile Selase and they did not want to appear to support Eritreans, at least that is my analysis why they did not allow him to stay.

When I was in Jeddah the Harakat sent an invitation to come to Port Sudan. I went there and I met there with the committee of Harakat. They asked me to be their head and to join our organization with them. I refused as they did not go for armed struggle. That was during my 2nd or 3rd visit in Jeddah. On my return we all met and discussed the Port Sudan meeting. I had gone there alone.

In Saudia the main branches of ELF were in Jeddah and Riyad. In Jeddah Taha Nur was responsible and in Riyad Suleiman Mehamed Nur. Suleiman had gone to Saudia before I had left Eritrea. He worked there as a tailor. He is a brother of Taha Mehamed Nur. Their duty was

to collect the contributions and to organize information meetings for the members.

When Eritreans came illegally to Saudia and claimed to be ELF they were not touched. This came after we met with King Faysal after he became King and he gave us facilities. Eritreans in Saudia had come as skilled workers as at that time Saudia was open for workers from all sides. There was no real Eritrean association among the workers as they were lacking the leaders for it. When we visited Saudia for the first time we met with all the young Eritreans in Jeddah after speaking with King Saud. At that time Usman came to Jeddah. He then send me a message to Cairo and then I came back and met him. At this time we did not have an organization or a name for it. The absence of clubs or associations among Eritreans in Saudia was due to the policy of the regime.

Usman Idris Khier was working long time in Saudia. He is from Massawa and he and Usman Saleh Sabbe took their secondary education in Addis Abeba together. Whereas Usman continued his education Khier left after middle school and went to Saudia. There he worked as interpreter in a Public Utilities company. Usman Saleh Sabbe brought the people from the Herqiqo area into the organization and Khier was more or less recruited by him.

In Kassala we decided to form the Revolutionary Command and the four zones. At the meeting in Kassala were present myself, Taha Mehamed Nur, Idris Glawdiyos, Sabbe and a certain Usman Ali Ahmed. Some members of the council did not attend this meeting.

Usman Ali Ahmed was in the High Council since its formation in Cairo. He had studied at the Faculty of Law. When he was sent later on to Algeria to head our office there, he completed there his PhD. He came from Ali Giddir but by origin he is from the Ad Sheikh Mahmud. He came to Cairo in the early 50's together with Idris Glawdiyos and Seid Hussein. Said Hashim studied at the College of Commerce.

There was a demand that the organization should make a congress to elect a leadership in a legal way. In the first quarter of 1967 the High Council met in Dimashq (Damascus) to discuss the demand of the people for a congress. At this time we decided to have this congress within one year in liberated Eritrea. After the year had passed we had not held this congress for various reasons and the army decided to go ahead and finally made this conference of Adobha.

Usman refused the invitation of the new leadership of the army to come inside. The High Council then divided into two. One side thought that the army is in a good way under the condition that a congress is held within one year's time and the army agreed on this demand. The army said that I should become the responsible head of the army but I refused as the leaders of the army then had been elected by it and spoke for it.

With Usman went Khier and Taha Mehamed Nur, the others stayed with me. The rest of the council stayed in Cairo. They send for us an invitation to come to Khartoum. So we went and met in Khartoum with Mehamed Ahmed Abdu and Usman Ajib. Glawdiyos and Mehamed Saleh Humed were with me.

When we established officially an office in Khartoum it was headed by Said Ahmed Hashim. That was after the resignation of Abboud. In Kassala until then we had a secret committee.

Tedla Bairu was not a member of the High Council because we thought that the new leadership should be elected by the conference of the army. But when he joined us we considered this to be a good accomplishment as he was well known among the highlanders.

When Usman prepared a conference in Amman he choose the name Harakat Tahrir ltra. At this conference Tedla Bairu was there and he became a member of their leadership. They also wanted me as a leader but I refused as I insisted that the leadership should be elected. Usman

send many messages to me in Cairo to join but I refused. Usman and I, we had a good relation still at this time but we disagreed upon this point-

Weldeab had activities with the students in Cairo but he did not have an organization. We cooperated among us but he had no good desire to have an organization. From my point of view he did not want the leaders should be from the Muslim. He and Usman were not in a good way with each other. Later he worked for a period in the Kiada al-Amman but not for a long time. He stayed with Isayas when Usman left.

My son Ibrahim completed his studies in commerce in Dimashq and he headed the office there later. He is born in 1944. Abdalla Idris and Ahmed Nasser were against him. They wanted to transfer him from Dimashq to Abu Dhabi but he refused. He then went inside and was later arrested and sentenced to 12 years imprisonment. After 3 years he was released when the ELF had this conflict with the EPLF. He is now in Abu Dhabi. When he was elected into the Revolutionary Council of the ELF in 1975 he was heading the office in Damascus. His conflict with Abdallah and Ahmed Nasser started because he did not want to join the Labour Party.