



The 1977 Ogaden War: Conflicting Narratives over Karamardha

By Faisal A Roble

September 29, 2024

Introduction

About 47 years ago, the Somali National Army and the Western Somali Liberation Front (WSLF) jointly fought against Ethiopia's Derg forces over the Ogaden region.¹ As wars leave behind national conflicting myths and narratives they in turn strengthen identity politics and nationalism; so did the 1977-78 Ogaden war. Two issues about the war narrative that still divide Somalis and those who believe in a unitary state system for Ethiopia are the conflicting narratives surrounding the 1977-78 war and the fate of Karamardha - a revered site of the era that remains divisive in the political discourse of this region. These two phenomena carry different meanings for Somalis and for Addis Ababa. The details of the war, including the 78 clan elders, religious leaders, and business people the Derg butchered at Karamardha and the symbolism it stands for Somalis are at the center of the conflicting narratives—a Somali narrative versus a non-Somali one imposed from the center.²

In this essay, I will weave together the history of the origins of the controversy over Karamardha with the 1977-78 Ogaden War. I will highlight what actually happened in that war, the ensuing superpower interventions, and who lost or won the war. By doing so, I will debunk the recent claims made by Field

¹ Most Somalis both inside the region and outside the region use the “Ogaden region,” and “Western Somali region” interchangeably.

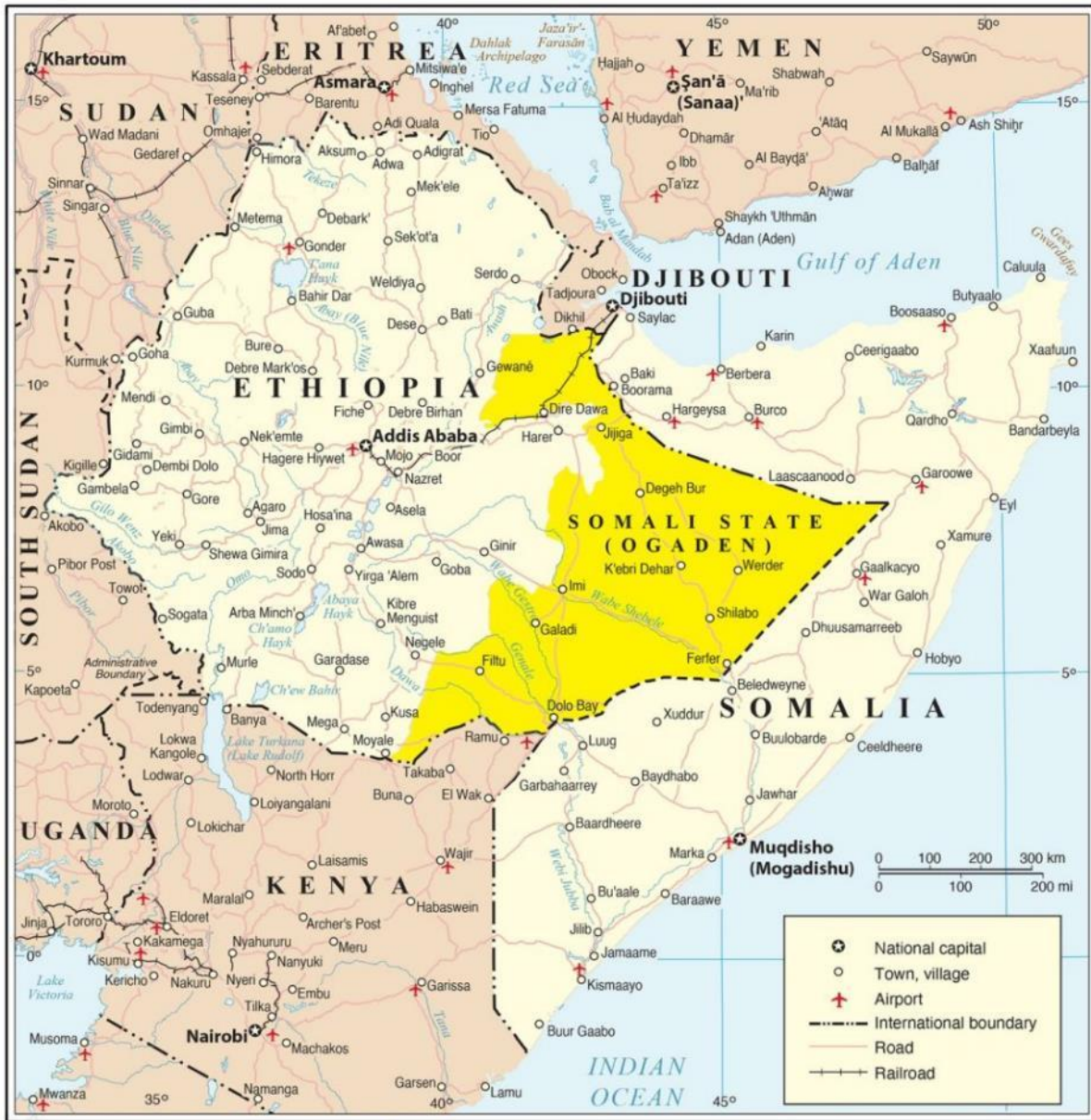
² To the Somalis, however, Karamardha is the sacred site of their victory, albeit temporary, and martyrdom since hundreds of Western Somali Liberation Front fighters and soldiers from the Somali National army who had participated in the war lost their lives to liberate the region. To the residents of Jigjiga, it is also the site where the retreating Derg soldiers slaughtered about 78 elders, religious leaders, and prominent businessmen. Included in the list of elders murdered are Suldan Deeg Heebaan (my maternal grand uncle), Suldan Ali Hussein (father of Ambassador Abdi Habashi and a close relative of my late mother), Ugas Rooble Doodi, father of the current Ugas of Awbare district, Suldan Odowa Liibaan, businessman Mohamed Yusuf (Mohamed Qiiq). My own father was saved only because days before this crime he traveled to his nearby farm and avoided Jigjiga for some time. The Derg soldiers initially took these traditional elders and businessmen, 78 of them, as hostages but on retreat slaughtered them at Karamara. The dead bodies of these community leaders were found after the Somali National Army, with the help of Western Somali Liberation Front, captured the Karamara fortress.

The 1977 Ogaden War: Conflicting Narratives over Karamardha

By Faisal A Roble

WardheerNews

Marshal Birhanu Jula that Somalia and the WSLF were defeated in 37 hours. I will also argue that Somalis would like to retain control over their historical narratives.



Source: accord.org

Whose Narrative shall Karamardha tell?

Karamardha, a slice of the Gureys mountain range, stands at 9000 feet above sea level. Throwing its imposing weight and humping over the flat terrain of Camadhle and Haroorays in the east and the prairie wheat farms of Tuliguuleed to the north, Kara-mardha is a landmark for the Somali region. The name Karamardha comes from “kara,” or narrow path, and Mardha is a native plant habitat unique to this mountain. Since Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed came to office in 2018, this modest mountain became famous not for its physical features or for what it represents to Somalia but for a centrist narrative descending from Addis Ababa. For Somalis, Karamardha speaks of their own martyrdom—the 78 sage Somalis the Derg slaughtered in that fortress. However, Addis Ababa wants an erasure narrative; it wants to erect monuments for fallen soldiers with or without giving due consideration to the local sentiment. And this disregard, plus a renewed militarization of the region, whose intent is to wipe out collective

Somali memory, prompted the ONLF chairman, Abdirahman Mahdi, to say this: 'We are Somalis today, we were Somalis yesterday, and we will remain Somalis tomorrow.' He continued to say, “We are not Ethiopians.” According to the chairman and many Somalis, the Prosperity Party has reduced Somalis to second-class citizenship. The chairman never sways from referring to Ethiopia as an [occupying colonial](#) force per the Front’s political program.

This self-expression of the chairman was prompted by a serious accusation, or in Amharic parlance, wanjel,” that Field Marshal Birhanu Jula leveled against the ONLF. Jula, in an audio tape, said (september, 2024) that the ONLF, and other groups fighting the regime, are “proxy” agents for Egypt.” Add to this the vitriolic words of Ethiopia’s Foreign Minister, Taye Astke-Selaasie, who told reporters in Addis Ababa that his country still suffers from the “trauma” begotten from the 1977 war.” Such vitriolic language infuriated the ONLF, which signed with the Ethiopian government a peace treaty in 2018; that treaty is almost dead due to Ethiopia not sticking to the terms of agreement.³

Somalis see Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed’s intent to appropriate the Karamardha site for fallen Derg soldiers, who had hitherto massacred Somalis, as a political affront and part of a larger manipulation to reimpose a unitary form of rule. Controversy over Karamardha, therefore, is a larger fight over identity, self-determination, and what those rights mean to Somalis, who have waged [war](#) against the center since the 1950s.⁴

³ *The ONLF and the Ethiopian government signed a peace treaty in Asmara in 2018. Consisting of four points, the treaty recognized the ONLF as a pro-self-determination political party. It also stipulated rehabilitation of former liberation front fighters as well as free elections. None of these were delivered by the Ethiopian government.*

⁴ *The last swath of the Ogaden region was annexed to Ethiopia in 1954. The the last swath of the Ogaden region owing to unqualified support by the US and England position for the annexation despite that Somali resistance to abyssinian penetration to the region dates back to the 1940s, see Faisal Roble, *Conquest, Conflict, and Collective Punishment: Identifying Stakeholder in the Somali Ogaden Region, in Looking Back & Looking Forward: The Ogaden Region in the 21st Century, IHASA 2010 Conference Proceedings.**

The Ogaden War and Super-power Intervention

The contentious narratives over the 1977-78 war are another source for the simmering conflict in the Ogaden region. On a visit Field Marshal Birhanu Jula paid to Jigjiga in September 2024, he claimed that his country defeated Somalia in 1977 within 37 hours. He went on to say that “he has fought in many heroic battles in the [eastern region](#) where it has been forgotten and the next generation will continue it.” Mr. Jula is known for his loose tongue and extraordinarily outlandish claims.

The genesis of the 1977-78 war is found in the body politic of Ethiopia, a country some called a prison of [Nations](#). Changing that ancient body politic led to the 1974 Derg revolution. It was the Derg’s denial or failure, after the revolution, to address the rights of Somalis to self-determination that has triggered armed struggle by the WSLF and ultimately to the Ogaden War of 1977. Following a country-wide unrest, the Derg usurped power and deposed Emperor Haile Selassie in September, 2024. This calendar marks only 20 years earlier from the date in November 1954 when the swat of the Somali regions of the Ogaden and the Haud and Reserved Area were annexed by Emperor Haile Selassie.⁵ The Eisenhower administration of the 1940s pushed for annexing the Ogaden to Ethiopia due to a heavy oil interest, thus effective lobbying, by the US-based Sinclair Oil giant which at the time was active in controlling as many oil sites in the Ogaden and Eritrea.⁶ The history of the region, since annexation, has been one administered from garrison posts with no meaningful connection with Somalis. This system was challenged by Somalis as early as the 1940s.

However, the most feasible challenge to the annexation and colonization came Initially from the [left’s](#) idea and the wars for liberation carried out by Somalis and Eritreans in the early 1960s, the Derg was expected to critically address the Somalia issue for self-determination. The Derg, although tackled with the “land to the tillers”, thereby giving back about 10 million hectares of arable land back to the peasants, it failed to address the self-determination issue. Soon, the Western Somali Liberation Front (WSLF) was founded in 1975, which in 1984 birthed the ONLF. Eritrea ultimately became a free country in 1994, whereas Tigray Liberation Front took power in Addis Ababa in 1991. In the east, Somalis came close to being free in 1978 and possibly would have remained so had it not been the then Soviet bloc intervention.

The Ogaden war started in April 1977 and ended around March or April, 1978. Somalis reached as far as Dhirdhabe within a short period of time and circled the city’s airport in November 1978. By then, Somalia had established a complete administration, with salaries being handled by the new administration connected to Mogadishu. However, in April 1978, a Soviet bloc-sponsored intervention was organized in Moscow and ultimately caused Somalis to retreat back to their borders. The WSLF also reverted back to a guerilla war until Mogadishu and Addis Ababa signed a fragile peace deal, which partly required Somalia to stop supporting the WSLF.

⁵ In an upcoming article, “Conquest and Collective Punishment: A Fifty-year view of the Legacies of the 1974 Derg Revolution,” I argue that Somalis have never accepted the 1954 annexation and legalization of the Haud and Reserved Area and the eastern Ogaden Region, respectively.

⁶ See also “A Century of War: Anglo-American Oil Politics and the New World Order,” Pluto Press, 2004 (pp 80-82).

By 1984, the WSLF reorganized itself into the ONLF, which exists today and observes a peace deal it signed with Addis Ababa in 2018. Since then, war stories have been narrated by different communities in the Horn of Africa differently.

Started at a unique epoch in the region's history, Somalis in Ethiopia were at an inflation point to seek freedom under the leadership of the WSLF with its headquarters in Mogadishu and auxiliary offices in Cairo, Baghdad, Damascus, and Kuwait. Additionally, the former French Somaliland was getting its freedom from France to become the Republic of Djibouti (June 27, 1977). Both the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) were fighting the Derg for their respective self-determination causes. In the center, the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), as the youngest movement and helped by Somalia, had offices in Mogadishu and assembled skeletal fighters in the Hirna and Fadis areas of Eastern Oromia.⁷



Cuban soldiers in Ogaden region

At the international level, both Somalia and Ethiopia were briefly client states for the now defunct Soviet Union. With all these forces impacting the geopolitics of the region, the Soviet Union attempted to create a federation between Ethiopia, Somalia, and [Yemen](#). By doing so, it aimed to solve the Ogaden question.

Failing in this mission spearheaded by Fidel Castro, the war of 1977 broke out between Somalia/WSLF against the Derg. With the recommendation of Castro, the Soviet Union, with all its Warsaw bloc, switched and backed Ethiopia. On its part, Somalia housed multiple liberation fronts, including the WSLF, EPLF, Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), TPLF, Oromo OLF, Sidama Liberation Front (SLF), Afar Liberation Front (ALF), etc. Somalia also hosted the Ethiopian People's Liberation Front (EPLF), which was more of a unionist front but anti-Derg and a precursor to the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP).

The Somali army was considered to be one of the strongest and most professional forces in sub-Saharan Africa. Although no definitive combat number is given in literature for both countries, the CIA [Ethiopia-Somalia](#) report of 1978 gives a huge edge to Ethiopia. Somalia comparison of strength favored Ethiopia. In comparison, Somalia had no more than 35,000 combat soldiers plus 15,000 WSLF as opposed to Ethiopia's over 180,000 combat soldiers, plus hundreds of thousands of militia. Likewise, Somalia had 11 divisions versus Ethiopia's 22. In every category of weapons, Ethiopia had twice, sometimes three times that of Somalis. Yet, Somalia overran Ethiopian defense forces.

⁷ See Habte-Selassie, *Bereket, Conflicts and Intervention in the Horn of Africa*, Red Sea Press: 1982. (60-65).

One explanation could be that the Somalis had a better artillery system, especially T-54/55, T-62, and Mig. 23s, Mengistu's army was no match to that of Somalia. However, Somalis had a rare commodity in warfare – a clear objective to die for, a value that was a short supply for Ethiopia's troops.

Additionally, the geography helped Somalia in that Ethiopian soldiers never adapted to the harsh Somali terrain and always lived off garrison establishments. By December 1977, Godey, Qabridahar, Dhagax Buur, Moyale, Gindir, Eimay, Jigjiga were captured by Somalis. Both Harar and Dhirdhabe were placed under a suffocating noose but never fully fell into the hands of Somalis.

Despite early success, Somalia's victory did not come to last. By October 1977, the Soviet stopped selling any new equipment or spare parts to Somalia. Unable to stop Somalia, the Soviet switched to Mengistu's. "On November 13, there were still 1,678 Soviet advisers in Somalia, implicitly representing the Kremlin's interest in the country. Somalia expelled the Soviets in the middle of the war. However, after the expulsion, Vasiley I. Petrov, Deputy Commander-in-Chief of the [Soviets](#) ground Forces, arrived to direct the war against the Somalis." In addition, the entire Warsaw bloc including the former East Germany, thousands of highly skilled trainers and advisors from East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Libya's financial support, and *boots on the ground* from Yemen (about 6,000), about 15,000 Cuban soldiers, and an unidentified number of North Korean foot soldiers descended into the Somali region, forcing Somalis to abandon the territories they had liberated.

The Soviets showcased their superpower intervention and the Ogaden sand defined the Warsaw bloc might. Broken by hearts, the famous Somali famous song of "Galbeed waa La Xo Gaagixisay," or, when translated, [Western Somalia](#) was liberated only to be aborted by Warsaw, grabbed each and every house and tea shop in all Somali regions in the Horn of Africa. The import of the Soviet Union's interventionist success in the Horn of Africa bolstered its leaders and moved on to the same in Afghanistan (1979) and in Angola in Southern Africa.

The West, the US in particular, did not come to Somalia's aid. Simply put, the West considered Ethiopia Africa's "anchor state" and did not want to alienate Mengistu's government. Cyrus Vance Sr., who in 1977 was the Secretary of State for the US administration, and Andrew Young, US ambassador to the UN, established a forceful bloc, "the Africanist bloc," within the US diplomatic community to rationalize the US policy, which was to not act in countering the Soviet bloc.⁸ The "Africanist bloc" argued that if the US sides with Somalia against Ethiopia, leaders of the African continent and the Organization for African Unity (OAU) will disapprove of such a move. These two cabinet members and others recommended to President Jimmy Carter that the US continue shipping weapons to Ethiopia, knowing that the Soviet Union was also supplying both weapons and training to Ethiopia. Even hard-core Republicans like Henry Kissinger, who otherwise would have taken a hawkish position on any country that befriended Communist Russia, gave Ethiopia a pass and let the Eastern bloc deploy massive weapons and manpower to help Ethiopia.

⁸ *Habte Selassie, Ibid; 65-67*

However, the lone voice in the Carter administration to challenge Soviet intervention in the Horn of Africa was Zbigniew Brzezinski, National Security Advisor, who could not match the voices of “the Africanist block” plus Henry Kissinger. In his last words of despair to gauge Jimmy Carter’s extraordinarily “dove” politics towards the Soviet’s naked intervention was that “détente was ‘buried’ in the Ogaden.” Whether the failure of the US to challenge the Soviets in the Ogaden theater—at the height of the Cold War—could be construed as the beginning of the decline of US supremacy has some validity, especially when you see the rise of China in contemporary world affairs.

Intervention in the Horn did not end with the Ogaden war. As much as Abiy ahmed in his war against Tigray was assisted by Russia, Turkey, China, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and even the US, so was the war of 1977 against Somalia invited countries across the ideological spectrum. The multipolar scenario of superpower interventions was born in the Ogaden sands. Somalia’s impressive victory was repulsed *not by Ethiopian troops* but by the mighty Warsaw Pact. Tigray Defense Forces (TDF), fighting for a Tigrayan cause, was pushed back by drones supplied by Turkey and bankrolled by the United Arab Emirates. Prior to such intervention the TDF was speedily marching within 150 KM of Addis Ababa. One can plausibly argue that superpower intervention in the Ogaden war was a precursor to the 2020-2022 short-lived Tigray victory against Addis Ababa. Simply put, Somalis, after reaching as far as Dire Dawa, had to accept defeat in April 1978 and carry out an orderly evacuation. Whereas Mengistu got the last victory because of a large-scale intervention by European superpowers, Abiy won the Tigray war on the back of upcoming Muslim and Middle Eastern states.

The aftermath impacts of the war

Once the Ogaden war came to a close, over 1.5 million Somalis were displaced following the then Soviet massive deployment to eject Somalis out of the massive territory they liberated. The Warsaw bloc intervention on behalf of the Derg was and still is the largest intervention in the continent. According to a CIA report, the Somali government reported that by the mid-1980s about “750,000 Somali refugees from the Ogaden region were in camps, and at least half that number outside lived in urban areas of the host country. By early 1980, [1,500 refugees](#) were pouring into Somalia with an estimated total urban refugees tipping at 800,000 over 1.3 million in the camps. The process of depopulation was intensified during the [EPRDF](#) reign. Some of the depopulated Somali districts were resettled with non-Somali peasants which in the future could ignite another ethnic war in the region. As if that was not enough, the EPRDF regime carried out one of the worst massacres in the Somali region under the rubric of waging war against the ONLF. The most serious atrocities took place following the Obole ambush, where ONLF fighters hit hard against Ethiopian soldiers guarding one of the most important Ogaden oil sites.

Although underreported, there has been an ethnic cleansing in the region to which the world shut its eyes. Jeffery Gentlemen of the New York Times cataloged the sordid stories in the Ogaden. The controversy of whose history needs to be centered in the narratives surrounding Karamardha speaks to subjugation, people’s resistance in favor of self-determination, and Somalis reclaiming their history and identity. (Here is a clip showing Somali students at Jigjiga university defying Mustafa Omer’s attempt to indoctrinate Somali youth about their being Ethiopians: Contrary to his wishes, they chant [”we are not Ethiopians but Somalis](#)).

It is not clear at this point any toolbox Ethiopia has to assemble to convince Somalis as part of Ethiopia. Neither is it clear whether the Prosperity Party's coercion of Somalis or renegeing on its peace treaty with the ONLF would work. It is however certain that the new course of centralist politics of Abiy's prosperity party and its tendency to wipe out Somalis collective memory is a menace to peace and stability in the region.

Conclusion

Following the Somalis' loss of the war, the Derg tried to re-impose a centralized hegemonist culture, although it stayed away from the issue of Karamardha site. So did the EPRDF regime. However, the new assault by the Prosperity Party regime on Somali symbolism is the beginning of a new centrist era that is intended to erase the concept of self-determination guaranteed both under the current Ethiopian constitution and the United Nations General Assembly Resolution 1514(X). Mustafa Omer, the current Somali regional president, is being coerced by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed into designating Karamardha or tampering with the 1977-78 Ogaden war for the centralist's political consumption at the expense of the Somali narrative. Due to public outcry, so far neither is accomplished.

Most people attribute President Mustafa's departure from the Somali narrative mainly due to his assimilationist beliefs and partly an entrenched political opportunism—to stay in office as long as PM Abiy tolerates him. In 2023, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed publicly [ordered](#), some say coerced, Mustafa Omar to erect a commemorative statue for Ethiopian soldiers at the expense of Somali narrative. Such an order, plus Birhanu Jula's plan to militarize the Somali region, represent the center's deliberate but sustained move to impose its narrative and weaken the regional authority's decision-making as provided in the Ethiopian federal constitution of 1995.

Faisal A. Roble

Email: faisalroble19@gmail.com

Faisal Roble, the former editor of WardheerNews portal is Principal City Planner and CEO for Racial Justice & Equity for the Planning Department, Los Angeles City.