

Manufactured Identity, Territorial Claims, and the Displacement of Somalis: How the Oromo Regional State Obliterated the Somali Regional State

By Faisal Roble

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This Google image illustrates how the ORS encroaches on the SRS, rendering the latter unsustainable as a federal member state.

Although it appears a benign borderland friction at the outset, the Geri vs. Jarso conflict is a function of identity politics and territorial expansionism. The Oromo Regional State's political establishment, which

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adopted an ambitious territorial nationalism, is set to engender conflicts with its neighboring Somali communities. A local (Geri vs. Jarso) identity-based conflict has morphed into a wider Somali and Oromo mistrust eroding past positive relationship. The prevailing issues between Somalis and Oromo is a symptom of the dysfunctional ethnic federalism. Unless a new reevaluation as well as remapping of the current administrative system is addressed, the Somali vs. Oromo conflict could worsen. In this review, Somali clans names are mentioned only to align and put them in context with the Rift Valley Institute's report (<https://riftvalley.net/publication/minor-demarcations-micro-dams-major-drama-ethno-territorial-expansionism/>), which initially used some of the clans.

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Summary

- The Geri Kombe Somalis clan and Jarso who are Somalised Oromo have been in conflict over identity and territorial claims since the Derg revolution in Ethiopia in 1974. Following a land tenure proclamation which eventually lead to collectivization of the rural sector and the 1977-1978 Ogaden war resulted in the displacement of thousands of Geri Somalis whose farms were given to transplanted Oromo households. The fall of the Derg accorded them the opportunity to return to their original homes only to find that some of their farms being occupied by outsiders. The demand for their land and
- The ethnic-based administrative units, adopted as part of the Ethiopian Democratic Federal Government administrative structure in 1995, afforded both opportunities and challenges. One of the challenges is the propensity of powerful or more numerous groups to manufacture identities for territorial expansionism. In the case of the Somali vs. Oromo experience, the Oromo Regional State (ORS), a poster child for being a conflict driver in the borderlands, decidedly encroached on the outskirts of the administrative seat of the Somali Regional State (ORS), thus methodically making the later difficult to forge ahead with a sustainable and viable member state of the federation.
- Districts such as Jinacsani, Gursum, Baabili, and Tuliguuleed are hotspots for ORS expansionism. The Somali communities in these territories are neither recent arrivals nor aristocrats. They are farming communities who have lived in the region since at minimum the 16th century. Both chronicles and academic work strongly support that the Geri have lived on their territory that stretches between Jigjiga, Gursum, and Harar since the Abyssinian conquest by Imam Ahmed Al-Ghazi in the 16th century. On the contrary, the Jarso, a Somalised Oromo community, who have been settled there between 1920s and 1970s to farm for the feudal class and gentry of the era, lived peacefully with the Geri. In the case of Tuliguuleed, the ORS sees the Geri clan as an obstacle to its goal to open a corridor to have “access to the Red Sea” and operationalize the now-defunct Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Somaliland. The creation of a new district out of Makaniis village that was under the Somali region until recently is the main driving factor of the renewed devastating conflict that bitted the Geri against their historical co-habitus of the Jarso community.
- The difference in stature between the ORS and SRS leaders reflects the inequitable access they have to the power of the central government. No Ethiopian office holder is closer to Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed than Shimeles Abdisa is. Mr. Abdisa is to Abiy Ahmed what Ras Mekonnen was to Emperor Menelik between 1906 and 1913. Shimeles is an indispensable confidante and kingmaker behind the scenes. The challenge Somalis have faced since 2018 is that Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed is backing and committed to the grandiose ambitions of ORS pushed by Shimeles Abdisa to annexing productive territories in

the Faafan zone and the city of Moyale. The ORS leader interprets Mustafa's "ostensive restraint" as giving – the ORS seems to exploit the visible weakness of Mustafa Omer.

- In 2023, the ORS and the SRS met four times on the Marar Dam project. These meetings were held in Bishoftu, Addis Ababa, and Jigjiga, with technical teams from both sides discussing the political, social, and climate impacts of the Marar Dam and boundary demarcation. The Somali side told its people that it objected the project; however, in private it accepted the project as proposed and designed by the ORS with the condition that the Marar Dam is used by both Geri and Jarso communities. The other contentious project which the ORS implemented unilaterally is the "upscaling and demarcation" of the Makaniis village into a district. The report writes: "While it is possible that the 'ostensive restraint' shown by SRS leadership in relations to both the Mekanis village, which the ORS upscaled to a district, and Marar Dam contributed to de-escalate tensions, at the same time, his competitors accuse Mustafa of being subservient to Mr. Shimeles Abdisa.
- Chronicles and academic work show plenty of evidence that the Geri clan of the Somali nation has lived and largely administered the region stretching between the wheat fields on the outskirts of Jigjiga, Gursum, and Harar. From the 16th century on, the Geri had an undisputed presence in the triangular geography between Jigjiga, Gursum, and Harar. Their socioeconomic structure has been predominantly an agro-pastoral system. The Contested "Minor Marar Dam" is built on a village that has for centuries served as water wells for the Geri. Sir Richard Burton, the first European explorer to have visited Harar, has also visited Marar and recorded its people and culture; he wrote that Marar was a center of the Geri Kombe Somali clan. Burton stayed in the Marar valley for days and observed the strength of the Geri but never recorded any Oromo presence.
- The Geri and Jarso lived together and mutually benefited from the use of the land stretching between Jigjiga, Gursum and Harar through the observance of a Somali traditional constitution or "xeer," which the former originated and shared with their co-habitants. Complex penal and legal codes helped the Geri and Jarso resolve conflicts and live together for about 100 years until politics of identity and territorial expansionism designed by political elites, largely outsiders, were imposed. As a result, a peaceful way of life gave way to perpetual conflicts. The wars that started since the early parts of the 1990s continue, deeply affecting the lives of millions of both Geri and Jarso civilians. The ORS has insisted to displace Somalis in the face of a mostly silent SRS. There may never be a real solution to the conflict unless agency is given to the stakeholders. Whereas the ORS pursue policy of expansion, the SRS has no policy thus far but to survive and stay in power against pressures from Addis as well as from what the RVI's report calls "Mustafa's opponents." Meanwhile, the lives of hundreds of thousands of innocent civilians have been destroyed.

Introduction

This report is a cursory review of “**MINOR DEMARCATION, MICRO-DAMS - MAJOR DRAMA**” (**Micro-Dam**) prepared by the Rift Valley Institute (RVI) of the Ethiopian Peace Research Facility (EPF).¹ This review is not to extensively discuss the history of the region, nor is it to go into a detail discussion about the origins of the Somali and Oromo clans involved in the RVI’s report. Rather, it evaluates the Oromo Regional State (ORS)-led, multifaceted, and contentious Marar Dam and the boundary demarcation between the Somali and Oromo regions. The contested Marar Dam is located within 15 km of Jigjiga. Marar is a village that is administered under the center of Sheekh Madow in the District of Tuliguuleed. Legally speaking, it is within the SRS. However, the ORS is unilaterally developing the Dam. Many Somalis see this an expression of injustice. Also, the boundary demarcation is equally contentious in that the ORS “upscaling of administrative” capacity and status for the village of Makaniis to a full district level. Makaniis village is also located between Jigjiga and the border town of Togwajale, Somalia. Until recently, both Marar and Makaniis were part of the SRS. What had transpired until recently is the triumph of politics of Oromo identity in the depth of Somali region.

The alleged territorial expansion of the Oromia elite towards the Somali territories is an expression of power dynamics between the often “restrained” SRS leadership and the more aggressive ORS leaders. The latter flexes its political muscle over contested [Somali] territories due to its prominent role in the ruling Prosperity Party (PP) structure. The behavior of the ORS disproportionately affects the Geri Somali in the contested areas of the Faafan zone, as well as the Garre and Gura clans in Liban zone, a subject not covered by the RVI’s report, which is here under review. Somalis both in Faafan and Liiban zones feel they receive no protection from the SRS and its leaders. Many ask how the ORS elite got to decide the fate of villages on the outskirts of Jigjiga, while, according to the Rift Valley Report, Mustafa Omara remains “restrained.”

The most plausible answer lies in the imbalance of political power between the two regional states. The Jarso, a Somalised clan, whose origins are traced back to Oromo blood, is used for justification in territorial claims against the SRS and to resurrect an Oromo identity inside the Somali region from a thin air. Suffice it to say, the Jarso have been Somalised, and the territory they live on cannot be a justification to obfuscate the SRS. The Jarso have in the past claimed, as

¹ The title of the [report](#) disrespects both communities by thinking what is happening between the Somali and Oromo in the borderlands could be construed as “Major Drama.” Many families have been displaced and many youngsters on both sides have died while defending what they perceive as their territories in the face of imposing government policies. There could have been a better choice of words. Geri, Garri, Gari are all variations of the Geri Kombe clan. Also, Somalis write Janacsani as opposed to the recently adopted non-Somalis way of writing it as Chinakson. You will also see differences in how to write Marar. I will be using the Somali way of writing it, which is Marar as opposed to Merer.

the RVI shows, multiple identities including but not limited to Somali; even within the Somali they have clan identities such as Dir, Daarood, Ajuraan of the Somali lineages, and, at extreme times, Oromo. Cathrine Besteman calls the adoption of a Somalised identity by non-Somali groups “sheegato,” or “adoption of local identity,” It is not impossible, therefore, to find a Jarso with a triple identity as Jarso, Dir, Haberawal, or Jarso, Darood, Ogaden. However, instead of using such fluidity of the Jarso identity to strengthen diversity, Shimeles Abdisa, Ethiopia’s most powerful regional president, in this case that of Oromia, used to foster a new political geography and weaken the Oromo-Somali kinship.

The Somali-Oromo conflict has roots in the collectivization program of the Derg. However, the current shape of armed conflict and displacement of thousands of innocent civilians trace their origins to the 1991 ethnic-based federal system, designed by the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). The EPRDF was dominated by the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF), with the Oromo People’s Democratic Organization (OPDO) as the main surrogate of TPLF. The current government of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed is also fully dominated by Oromo elite that morphed from OPDO to Oromo Prosperity Party with a Pentecostal twist.

Historically, the SRS has had a troubled relationship with the central government of Ethiopia. The region is a typical periphery zone within the Ethiopian body politic and can easily be explained by the theoretical construct of “core vs. periphery” as utilized by regional development planners, such as John Friedman² or David Harvey.³ The annexation of the SRS to Ethiopia began in the latter part of the 19th century but was completed following the Anglo-Ethiopian treaty in 1954.⁴ Somalis resisted for about 60 years, between 1890 and 1954, to avert the arbitrary incorporation of their land into Abyssinia, but to no avail. The Geri clan dearly paid heavy prices in their fight to thrust back the forces of feudalism and partition, but lost the battle after two wars with Abyssinians between 1942-1947 and 1948-1957.⁵ According to John Markakis, the marginalization of the Somali periphery region could be argued to be one of the

² John Friedman, Territory and Function sees the tension between the center and the periphery from the vantage point of access to development and growth.

³ David Harvey’s construction of the center-periphery concept rests on justice and equal access to power. tool that explains what separated centers from the periphery is more than distance. It is the political and economic distribution that separates them.

⁴ Drysdale, J, The Somali Dispute, Pall Mall Press, London and Dunmow, 1964, pp 75-80. Drysdale has a first-hand experience with the annexation of the Ogaden and the Haud and Reserved Area. In the 1950s, Drysdale was part of the Great Britain’s colonial office in the former British Protectorate of Somaliland.

⁵ Pankhurst, Sylvia, British Policy in Easter Ethiopia, 1944. Also, see Eshetu, Dibabu, Northeast African Studies, Volume 13, Number 1, 199, Pp10-12. Both Pankhurst and Eshetu emphasis the resistance that the Geri under the leadership of Garaad Ali put up to stop further obliteration of the Somali region. Bulhan, Hussein writes about the last days of the Geri resistance and the punitive measures the Haile Selassie regime exacted against the Somalis. See, Bulhan, Hussien, “The Partition of the Somalis and the Psychology of the Oppressed, Horn of Africa, Vol, 1980.

counterforces to delay Ethiopia's state formation.⁶ Ethiopian governance in the SRS has yet to have a tangible impact, for most of the region is outside the reach of the central state, with weak near absence of public services.⁷

SRS's history is replete with devastating pillages of resources by the center and exclusion of development benefits.⁸ The feudal order of Abyssinia and subsequent regimes have administered the SRS as a buffer and a militarized zone. No territory in Ethiopia suffered as much as SRS did through all the regimes that came and passed, including the current Prosperity Party (PP) regime. What makes this time unique is that the SRS is mired in a territorial dispute with the ORS, the latter being the political base of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed. This festering issue has yet to climax. If not arrested, it could explode and have far-reaching consequences.

The following cursory review of the RVI report, published in May 2025, is limited to areas of strength as well as points of bias or a lack of historical context regarding the Geri (Somali) and Jarso (Oromo) conflict and their respective historical relationship. The purpose of the review is to correct misconceptions that serve as conflict drivers in the current political atmosphere of Ethiopia. The review will demonstrate that the Rift Valley's reports used a weak methodology, lacked historical context or shown bias which in the end perpetuates the marginalization of Somalis in favor of the powerful ORS. In short, the review will unveil how the RVI's report could potentially accentuate the territorial claim of the ORS over that of Somalis, thus adding fuel to an already blazed identity politics.

The Rift Valley Institute's report is part of an ongoing "knowledge" production. A related report was completed by Juweria Ali on the same region in 2023.⁹ Juweria, a native of the SRS, significantly contributed to our understanding of the complexity, political geography, and potential environmental/health risks of oil politics surrounding the Ogaden Gas in the SRS. She highlighted how the EPRDF regime corrupted the SRS's leaders to exploit the Ogaden Gas without community buy-in. She writes: "Communities impacted by natural resource exploration around Calub Hilaala cite a lack of accountability for the crisis in the Ogaden Basin, and the need for reparations, environmental rehabilitation, and economic inclusion." She cautions that current policy-makers of the Prosperity Party (PP) should not ignore the community's concerns about environmentally induced health risks. She also raises the question of matching the "political visibility" Somalis claim to have attained in the PP administration and whether that will be translated into "tangible benefits for the region's population." That same question

⁶ Markakis, J. Ethiopia: The Last Two Frontiers, James Currey, 2011., Pp. 24-25

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ See the Visit to Abyssinia and Seventeen Trips to Somaliland, 1921. Major Swayne records a high level of cruelty the Abyssinians exact against Somalis by pillaging, burning villages, and confiscating thousands of livestock. Jigjiga area, Gailey, and Jarar regions suffered disproportionality during this pillage.

⁹ https://riftvalley.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Squeezing-the-Ogaden-Basin_Final.pdf, accessed June 19, 2025.

Juweriya raised haunts the SRS leadership as the ORS encroaches and, as critics say, puts a chokehold on Jigjiga.

Highlights of the RVI Report

Sponsored by the RVI EPF, Jonah Wedekind and Jamal Kadir, two consultants with a long-standing relationship with Haramaya University, in Oromia, try to map the territoriality of the Somali-Oromo conflict in the Faafan (Jinacsani and Tuliguuleed) and Liban (Moyale) zones. Consistent with the RVI's knowledge production commitment, Wedekind and Kadir make a good attempt to identify the most recent past, present, and future conflicts between Somalis and Oromo, with a focused analysis of the Geri (Somali) and Jarso (Oromo) wars on the outskirts of Jigjiga. They use the conflict in the Somali district of Tuliguuleed and its neighboring Janacsani as a case study. In this case study, the ORS unilaterally constructed a "Minor Dam" at Marar village which is only about 15 km to the north of Jigjiga, and the "demarcation and upscaling" of Makaniis village to a full district. Not only are both locations contested, but they are within a short distance to the administrative city of the SRS (Jigjiga). Also, they both were part of the Somali territory until recently.

The 68-page-long report (the report): (1) locates the Somali and Oromo conflict in Eastern Ethiopia in the "overlapping claims over territory and resources," (2) traces the origin of the conflict to the 1995 ethnic-based federalism, which designated territories based on population settlements, (3) shows the inequitable access by the ORS to the central government to push for unfair demarcation or "up-scaling administrative units or introducing development projects." The multi-faceted unilateral programs employed by the ORS is serving as a conflict driver for the Geri Somali and the Jarso. In this entanglement, the authors write, "While it is possible that the 'ostensive restraint' shown by SRS leadership in relations to both the Mekanis village, which the ORS upscaled to a district, and Merer Dam contributed to de-escalate tensions, at the same time, his competitors accuse him of being subservient to Mr. Shimeles Abdisa." On the other hand, the report says that Mustafa is accused of paying a fiddler to Shimeles and the ORS.

Theoretical Construct of the Report

The report's theoretical construct rests on "frontier energetics." Broken into layman's terms, "frontier energetics" is the socio-cultural, economic, and political frictions that result from a contestation on borderlands. Governments and ruling parties often manipulate such frictions to their benefit. Given the current imbalance of power dynamics between the Somalis and the ruling OPP, border "demarcation and upscaling administrative units," to which the SRS leadership did not agree, have become a tool for ORS for expansionist goals. This theory postulates that in a multi-ethnic federal system of government, like Ethiopia, opportunistic forces tend to expand their territories. "In Ethiopia's multinational (ethnic) federal order, various actors' ethnic alliances and relative position to administrative power holders (party members, government

officials, etc.)” is more applicable to the political culture of the ORS. In the face of what the authors call “ostensive restraint” behavior shown by the SRS, the ORS political elite flexes its muscle cognizant of the power dynamic in the country.

The ORS’ unilateral move to construct a controversial project near Jigjiga in a contested territory could in the future pit one group against another. The report raises a credible concern, often spoken in private Somali circles, that the ORS has encroached on their administrative city, Jigjiga. Some respondents to the interview conducted for this report felt that their city was besieged. The unending friction between Somalis and Oromo, who otherwise share a long history and culture, is a glaring sign of a failure of ethnic-based federalism both in the TPLF era and in Abiy’s Ethiopia. While it restored some basic rights to hitherto marginalized groups, such as Somalis, the ethnic-based federal arrangement comes at a high cost to borderland communities, mainly Somalis whose leaders are not accountable to their people but the center. Many Somalis in Tuliguuled, Moyale, or some parts of Shiniile feel that they have not received the protection and safety they deserved from the SRS. And that may not bode well for the sustainability of the SRS as it exists today. It could lead to disenchantment, where some clans may choose to opt out of the SRS. Despite such a concern, the SRS leadership remains oblivious to the needs of these communities but at the same time adopts “ostensive restraints” to the harassment by the ORS.

Strengths and Weaknesses of the Report

Strength: The authors are at their best when analyzing the sources of the conflict. They locate it in the 1995 ethnic-based federalism and the subsequent 2004 plebiscite that arbitrarily split many SRS districts and villages. In the 2004 plebiscite, 400 villages in 30 districts were affected. Following what Somalis largely consider a sham and vote-rigging plebiscite, about 80% of the contested districts and villages were awarded to ORS, although they were almost entirely in the SRS. To their dismay, Somalis blamed this injustice on the TPLF/OPDO alliance that collectively ruled the country for over 27 years. To date, we have a severely gerrymandered SRS, whose future as a sustainable member state of the federation is not feasible (see Map 3 below; Jigjiga is in a chokehold, silently argue most Somalis, even those in the Prosperity Party). The OPDO, which has morphed into the current, more powerful Oromo Prosperity Party (OPP), appears oblivious to the weight of the issue. The ORS behaves as if it is convinced that a deficit of mutual trust between the brothers and sisters of Somalis and the Oromo nation is a non-issue at this juncture. However, such a nonchalant attitude by ORS could backfire and potentially further destabilize the borderland communities.

The report recommends best practices in conflict resolution and calls on all concerned to resolve their territorial contestation. If their recommendations are implemented, there could be a viable path for peace and cohabitation between Geri as Somalis and Jarso as Somalised Oromo. To that

end, although the authors may not be familiar, the Geri and Jarso traditional constitution (*xeer* Geri iyo Jarso), formulated about 100 years ago, could help address inter-communal frictions, and that is exactly what one of the Jarso respondents proposed. The hurdle to a peaceful and practical settlement of the issues, mainly in the Moyale and Faafan zone, is always dismissed by the leadership of ORS. They seem not to want the peaceful co-existence between Somalis and the Oromo. Additionally, to the extent possible the report carefully touches the maneuvers of the ORS to see certain Somali clans as potential client towards its grandiose objective of creating a corridor to “access the Red Sea.”

Weakness: The glaring weakness of the report lies in its methodology and lack of accurate historical context in the conflict between the Geri Somali and the Somalised Jarso of Oromo origin. The biggest distortion is that the report comes out as if it advances the wrong narrative that tends to promote the ORS’s version of ownership of what are otherwise (historically, geographically, and culturally) Somali territories. As will be explained, the authors accepted a distorted narrative that “pastoral” Geri of the Darood extraction had migrated to the region, welcomed by the Jarso, shaped themselves into the “aristocracy class” of the area blessed by the dominant Amhara system, and took over the contested territory from the Jarso. One cannot help but state that the authors fall victim to a reconstructionist school of thought popularized by certain Oromo elite and, at the policy level, implemented by the ORS at the expense of the SRS.¹⁰

In an interview Dr. Dima recently gave to an Ethiopian media outlet, he referred to the Somalis in SRS as nomads who could not have numbered no more than 500K in the 1990s. His long time coclique, Lencho Letta, also keeps promoting animosity between Somalis and Oromo by always repeating an erroneous non-factual argument that Somalia killed more OLF insurgents than did the Derg. To prove this, he cites a dozen OLF leaders who were ambushed in the mid-1970s in Western Hararge (near Gara Mulata).

On the contrary, before displaced persons returned to their homes, the official Somali population in 1990 represented about 7% -8% of the entire population in Ethiopia¹¹. On issue of who killed OLF fighters in 1976 in Gara Mulata, the Somali version on this subject matter is starkly different from that of Lencho’s posthumous account. According to members of the Western Somali Liberation Front (WSLF), the OLF fighters, who were largely Christian and college-educated, were massacred by Sheik Jara, a Muslim Oromo nationalist, who sought to eject them

¹⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kl3YXrDldPE> accessed on July 8, 2025. In a multi-part live interview, Dr. Dima, who led the Oromo National Liberation Front (ONLF), argued that Somalis in Ethiopia in the 1990s did not amount to no more than 500,000 nomads. This point of view is pervasive among some Oromo elites. Dr. Dima lived in Mogadishu for over two decades as the chairman of the OLF.

¹¹ See Ethiopian Population tables for 1990

from his sphere of influence. The massacre of more than 20 OLF fighters were not in the hands of Somalis but a rival Oromo group, says WSLF leader interviewed for this report. The former version has been widely promoted by certain Oromo intellectuals, mainly those closer to the ruling OPP, to create an enemy out of their neighboring Somalis. This is a case of manipulation of history to serve current politics, which is to create a political wedge between Somalis and the Oromo, otherwise traditional allies. Both Dr. Dima and Lenjo are close to the OPP. Moreover, Lemma Megarsa, when he was running the ORS, always called the Somali combatants in the inter-communal conflict “Al-Shabab terrorists.” He never wavered from labeling poor peasants who were protecting their villages “Al-Shabab” terrorists. Such narratives of othering the Somalis became a heavy burden on the borderland Somali clans, undermining cohabitation between Somalis and Oromo.

Origins of Conflict

Notwithstanding the absence of any record of Geri and Jarso conflict in the era of emperor Haile Selassie, the current phase of the conflict started and continued in three consecutive regimes (the Derg, TPLF/EPRDF, and OPP). The seeds of the conflict were sown during the Derg’s collectivization program, where thousands of Oromo, read Jarso, peasants were brought to Jinacsani and Tuliguuleed. The next phase of the conflict started with the OPDO and EPRDF/TPLF, a regime known to have manufactured conflict for their political consumption. Since the 2017 Awayday massacre of Somalis, many Somali clans including the Geri, Gura, Garre, Issa, and Hawiya feel unprotected from the senseless and incessant attacks coming from the Oromo militia.¹²

The report correctly captures the recent origin of the Geri and Jarso conflict and the role the OPDO played. The OPDO has been a junior partner to the powerful TPLF under the TPLF/EPRDF rule. Both Prime Minister Abiy and his former ally, now in exile, Lema Megarsa, significantly contributed to the OPDO ideology of expansionism. As matter of fact, Prime Minister Abiy was responsible for urban development when Lemma Megarsa was the president of Oromia under OPDO. Also, Shimeles Abdisa worked for Abiy then. The trio developed an aggressive territorial ambition towards the SRS. The SRS leadership cannot oppose, what one Somali academic called, “Abiy’s ideology, which is Oromo first.” He added, “We all know that Prime Minister Abiy believes in the concept of “Oromo first, then Ethiopia second.” Although this opinion misses the political ploy of the use of “Oromo” by the very leaders who are massacring the masses of that nation, it underscores the politics of identity involved here to weaken the Oromo-Somali relationship.

¹² Ahmed Khalif, <https://wardheernews.com/keerroo-and-alshabaab-one-and-the-same/>, accessed June 29, 2025

It is such a political environment that makes the SRS leaders, if not fearful, “restrained,” a description the Rift Valley Institute’s authors repeatedly used. Accordingly, Mustafa Omar, on several occasions, offered an olive branch to ORS, including co-financing the Marar Dam construction, even though the site of the is on the outskirts of Jigjiga. Mr. Shimeles’ insistence on refusing collaboration or insisting on unilateralism is the result of a bigger objective the ORS leadership is nursing - creating an “Oromo corridor to access the Red Sea,” says the authors of the report under discussion. This charge is authenticated by Taye Danda, a prisoner of consciousness, who broke ranks with OPP but openly spoke to foreign-based media outlets. And this puts Mustafa and his administration between a rock and a hard place.

Cost of the Conflict

Were it possible to equally “restrain” ORS, relations could have civil and improved between the ORS and SRS, and the Geri and Jarso could have lived peacefully and equitably as they did for over 100 years. However, the recalcitrant ORS leadership perpetuated conflict and could, in the coming years, lead to high casualties with no end in sight. To the demise of the impacted communities, the report only briefly touched on the Awaday massacre in 2017 and the 2018 fiasco following a riot in Jigjiga. The report would have been strengthened if numbers were given to gauge the level of the conflict in human deaths and property damage. Local leaders have reported that at least thousands of Somalis have been killed in Tuliguuleed, Baabile districts, as well as in Liban and Shinile zones. The same could be true on the ORS side. However, casualties are much higher on the Somali side due to the imbalance of power between the two regional states and the alleged sectarian role of the Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF), which often sides against Somalis.

The casualties of the two communities are not addressed with equal zeal. One recalls the Awaday massacre in 2017.¹³ The death of over 45 Somali civilians who lived among their Oromo neighbors as traders and the subsequent border conflicts between Somalis and Oromo along the borderlands upset inter-ethnic relationships. The SRS did not seek any compensation nor file legal action against the perpetrators. On the contrary, the 2018 fiasco in Jigjiga was said to have taken the lives of [unverified] estimated at 20 mainly young men, including Somalis. The swift move by the federal and regional governments to address this crisis and its impacts led to removing Abidi Mohumud Omer (Ilay), a man with a checkered record of human rights violations, including but not limited to torture of prisoners, murder of innocent citizens, for

¹³.<https://wardheernews.com/implications-of-the-killings-in-awaday-and-other-oromo-towns-for-future-leadership-of-ethiopia-by-the-current-political-elite-of-the-oromo/>

political vendetta. Although released from prison on Amnesty by the Prime Minister, many families and communities in the region are still reeling from heavy losses of loved ones, and crimes committed under Abdi which inexorably left behind a culture of terror, trauma, and tribulation for thousands of families, including Mustafa Omar's family. HRW extensively covered the crimes in the region during Abdi Muhumed Omer's reign¹⁴. However, such an argument is an overreach and a convenient narrative for Oromo-Amara and some Somali activists.

In assessing what had transpired in Jigjiga on that eventful day, the report assigned most of the responsibilities to Abdi Muhumed. The EPRD/TPLF and OPDO, in addition to the Somali leadership before Mustafa coming to office, must equally shoulder some of the responsibilities of what transpired between the Geri and Jarso between 1992 and 2018. Equally disheartening about the Somali-Oromo conflict is that hundreds of thousands of Somalis have been displaced from Tuliguuleed, Jinacsani, Baabili, and Oromo districts in the greater Harage valley. These Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), almost all of them Somalis, have settled at Qolaji camp, which lies only 50 KM to the west of Jigjiga. Lost their farms and livestock to vigilant groups blessed by the ORS, the SRS rarely talks about them. These Somali IDPs cannot go back to their homes because the ORS says so. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, who has visited Jigjiga several times, drove by the IDPs' camp but never turned his attention to them; instead, he talks about phantom wheat production in a land of starvation and displacement. The good Prime Minister's fantasy of "exporting wheat" produced in the prairie land of Tuliguuleed is akin to the French aristocracy's "let them eat cake."

Neither Mustafa is known to have ever made any meaningful effort to tackle the plight of the Qolaji IDPs. According to complaints from the IDPs, Mustafa minimizes the severity of the condition of live in Qolaji camp to avoid any wrath coming to him from ORS leadership. He avoids visiting and inquiring about how the multitude live in the camp or in other scattered settlements in the vicinity of Qolaji. In general, the ORS elite refuses to allow anyone to raise or dwell on the Qolaji camp issue, and the SRS acquiesces to that sentiment. For example, tens of thousands of IDPs cannot go back to their villages in Jinacsani or Baabili and reclaim their farmland, simply because their properties are in the hands of Oromo resettled from regions outside the contested territory. There are also instances where the ORS blocked programs of income generation that the SRS planned for the IDPs in Qolaji. It is an open secret that the last thing the SRS leaders would do is to arguably contradict or raise their voices against the ORS leaders.

¹⁴ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/07/10/interview-inside-what-was-ethiopias-jail-ogaden> accessed on June 20, 2025. Many crimes were attributed to Abdi Muhumed. Six years after imprisonment, he was released without any explanation.

All this took place while the ORS shows an extraordinary commitment to make its eastern borderland community a top policy priority. According to the report, the ORS heavily invests in these territories (borderlands adjoining the SRS) and has initiated several projects deep inside the Somali region to alter reality on the ground. A case in point is the Makaniis village. Makaniis is a village in the middle of the SRS and has no physical connection to any Oromo geography. Add to this the ORS propensity to encourage a culture of vigilantism and provoke Somali leaders. In this regard, the report cites one Miski Chaltu, who has been “outspoken about empowering her constituents has been “rewarded several times by the ORS leadership. She went on to assume influential positions as the vice president of Oromia in 2019 and as federal minister of urbanization and infrastructure in 2021.” It goes on to say that “Under Shimelis Abdisa's OPP, Hararge received markedly more attention than under OPDO. (See pp. On the contrary, the SRS deliberately neglected the borderlands for fear of offending the powerful OPP, the report implies.

In the last 30 years, following the establishment of the TPLF-led regime in Ethiopia, the prevailing feeling among Somalis has been one of mistrust of their neighboring Oromo. Somalis widely hold the belief that the ORS elite is exerting undue pressure and undermining the historical relationship and coexistence between the two communities. Such a sentiment is silently expressed among Somalis towards the OPP regime in private conversations. Due to territorial losses to the ORS, Somalis equate Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed with Mengistu Haile Mariam, and that is not a good place to be for the troubled Prime Minister, who is waging a civil war in two of the largest and most populous regions - The Amhara and Oromia regions with the fate of Tigray uncertain after a devastating civil war ended in 2022 causing the death of ENDF soldiers, and Tigray civilian estimated to reach anywhere between 600,000 and 1 million.

Contested Identities and Conflicts on Borderlands

The Tigray civil war left behind complex territorial problems in the north. There are also several festering conflicts over territories between the ORS and the Amhara, between the ORS and the Sidama, and between the Afar and the SRS. However, the Somali-Oromo regions have identity and territorial issues that, if left unresolved, could easily explode. As the report glosses over, given the loss of Dirdhabe, the ongoing controversy over Moyale, and the war with Afar on several Somali districts in Shinile zone, there is a sense that even Jigjiga, the administrative capital of the SRS, is under siege by the ORS. After all, says a widely held Somali skepticism about the OPP rule, Jigjiga is only within 15 KM from the location of the controversial “Minor Dam” in Marar village and lies at the mercy of ORS expansion.

According to the RVI's report, the upscaling of what was a Somali village (Makaniis) 30 km to the east of Jigjiga to a full district is part of the ORS grandiose strategy, which seeks to create a corridor through the SRS to access Berbera. The Marar village, which houses seasonal water holes for agro-pastoral Somalis and has been a traditional site for the coronation of the Geri

Garaad and its guurti for over 200 years, is the contested site for the proposed Marar Dam. Overnight, these territories have been placed under ORS jurisdiction, and Mustafa Omer, according to this port, chooses to show a “restrained” face. Incidentally, Marar was one of the Geri inhabited sites that Sir Richard Burton, on his accounts of “The First Footsteps in East Africa,” extensively wrote about (I will come back to this subject shortly).¹⁵

Since Emperor Haile Selassie, Ethiopia had changed its official map several times for administrative reorganization. The most famous is the Emperor Haile Selassie's era map, which served as the official map between 1946 and 1980 is the one that triggered less or no manufactured territorial claims with its accompanied politics of identity. Dividing the country into 14 administrative provinces with non-ethnic names, except Tigray and Eritrea, each province was administered by a governor or “*Indha Rase*, which, when loosely translated, is “my representative.” Most, if not all, were of Abyssinian origin (Showan and Amhara-Tigrarian governors) appointed by the emperor.¹⁶ The Derg which usurped power and murdered the emperor also instituted a different administrative map between 1980 and 1991, this time with targeted ethnically identified regions until the TPLF took power.¹⁷ The current administrative units follow ethnic patterns of population settlements. Adopted in the 1991 Transitional Charter, initially prepared by the then-victorious TPLF, the new map was translated into the official map of the Ethiopian Federal Democratic Republic in 1995. Articles 8, section (1), and Article 39 of the constitution ensure that the country remains an ethnic federation.¹⁸ However, as early as 1991 and 1992, the OPDO exerted a Faustian pressure on its allies in the EPRDF coalition to revise the 1991 map mandated by the Transitional Charter and start apportioning more territories to ORS at the expense of the Somali region.

¹⁵ Richard Burton, *First Footsteps in East Africa or, An Exploration of Harar*, Dover Publication, Inc., New York

¹⁶ Between 1930 and 2025, Ethiopia had about three major administrative maps, all of which intended to accommodate identity politics. The last one is the most controversial one for its radical reorganization of administrative units on ethnic basis. The sub-ethnic level conflict proves to be equally problematic. In the case of the Geri and Jarso, the entire territory has been set back for at least a century due loss of life, multiple harvests, and thousands of youngsters. The SRS has not put in any meaningful effort to rehabilitate the war-affected multitudes. Many believe that lack of sympathy lies in clan politics, incompetence, and endemic corruption.

¹⁷ The map instituted in the era of Haile Selassie kept eastern Oromo and Somalis in Faaan zone together. The Derg regime made a minor change in that it created the Afar, Issa and Gurgura, Eritrea, and the Ogaden autonomous regions. Still eastern Oromo and Faaan zone were together. Conflict worsened with the TPLF changed.

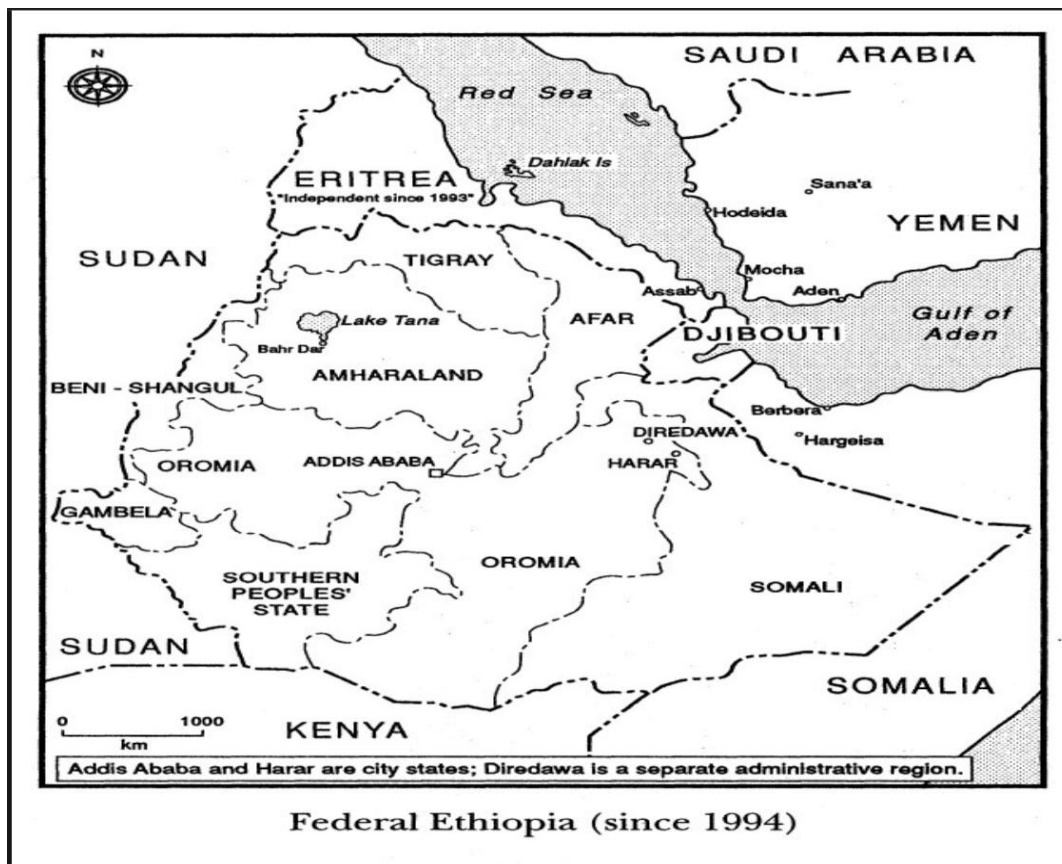
¹⁸ See Ethiopian constitution <https://www.ethiopianembassy.be/wp-content/uploads/Constitution-of-the-FDRE.pdf> accessed on June 18, 2025



Provinces, 1946-1980



Ras-Gaz or Self-autonomous regions 1980-1991



On page 14 of the report, the authors write that “the 1992 map that demarcated borders for these two regions under the Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE) remained subject to conflicts between various groups and disputes between the ORS and the SRS for more than a decade, resulting in calls for a border referendum.” To be correct, Somalis neither demanded nor exerted pressure for a new demarcation. The OPDO pressured the TPLF to change the map and sought more territories from the SRS. For example, in 1993 and 1994, the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), in collaboration with the Oromo Peoples Democratic Organization (OPDO), a member of the EPRDF coalition, militarily attacked the offices of the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) in Jigjiga and made a claim on multiple Somali territories, including Jinacsani and Baabili.

In 1992, several grassroots conflict resolution mediations were held in Jigjiga to address Derg era conflicts. Then was when the Geri and Jarso sides drafted an inclusive agreement on many issues within the context of the SRS. However, the OPDO leaders who showed disregard for a peace resuming between the two communities refused to honor the agreement. What followed was a total disregard for the new map by OPDO, which then embarked on a systemic and

programmatic campaign to annexing as much territories as possible from the SRS.¹⁹ With Oromo nationalism on the surge, EPRDF leaders made every possible effort to satisfy the Oromo Peoples Democratic Organization (OPDO), a junior member of the EPRDF coalition. EPRDF leaders also believe that significant concessions to OPDO are the only way to undermine the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) insurgency while strengthening the position of its junior partner, OPDO, thus having the effect of “robbing Paul to pay Peter.”²⁰ Unfortunately, feeble Somalis have become the Paul to be robbed by the ever-shifting OPDO’s deceitful ethnic politics first through its affiliation with TPLF and now with its dominance of the OPP.

At the wake of drafting of the ethnic based map in 1991, Somalis chose, out of pragmatic concerns, to make real concessions and laid to rest long-standing claims on swaths of districts in the Hawaas (Awash) valley. Soon after, Somalis were pushed out of and near Harar city, only to be followed by the designation of Diridhabe as a federal charter city. Today, Diridhabe is on the verge of being annexed to Oromia, owing to the control of the country’s power by zealot Oromo Prosperity Party. (OPP). The fate of Diridhabe, Moyale, Baabili, Makaniis, and Marar are all in the hands of the victorious Oromo elite who have shown utter disregard to Somalis’ viewpoint or at least exploited the “ostensive restraint” of the Somali leadership.

By 2004, OPDO had resurfaced its claim to conduct a plebiscite in several districts in the Somali region. However, an initial fact-finding mission by the federal government did not find any reason to conduct a new plebiscite to change the 1991 map for the SRS and ORS. The team concluded that the districts in Jinacsani, Baabili, and parts of Fiiq will remain in SRS. However, the OPDO rejected such a suggestion. To the contrary, the OPDO continued to twist arms within the EPRDF coalition to which it belonged. Finally, it succeeded in getting permission from the federal government, and a sham plebiscite was conducted in 2004, thus undermining the long-standing peace in the Faafan zone.²¹ The rest is history, and OPDO got what it wanted and would demand more to resize the SRS thereafter.²² The Somali representatives accepted the outcome with little or no resistance.

¹⁹ See Faisal Roble, “The Death of an Era and the Demise of the Community,” quoted in “Beyond Clannishness and Colonialism: Understanding Political Disorder in Ethiopia’s Somali Region, 1991-2004,” *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, pp 509-536, vol 43, No. 4(December 2006).

²⁰ Roble, F. <https://wardheernews.com/the-tears-of-justice-and-the-power-abuse-in-the-somali-region/ac>, June 18, 2025.

²¹ *Ibid*, June 18, 2025.

²² Roble, Faisal, https://www.hiiraan.ca/2004/dec/op/Faisal_Roble.htm accessed on June 15, 2025.

To combat the unique injustice between the Geri and the Jarso, the former's Garaad appealed to Addis Ababa for justice. In a legalese language supported by historical facts, the Garaad sent a letter entitled, "Tears of Justice." With no help from the SRS, the Garaad wrote that "the Gurti of Geri Kombo are submitting this appeal to the central government of Meles Zenawi, refuting the "transfer of Somali districts to the Oromo state." The Garaad and his Gurti don't sanction what looks like a jungle rule in which injustice is the king."²³ The appeal wrote that the responsible parties who helped to rob Somalis are "gangs comprising Abbay Tsahaye, Federal Minister for Federal Affairs, Abadula Gameda, Federal Minister for Defense, Dr. Mulatu Teshome, Speaker of the House of the Federation, Mahmoud Dirir, Federal Minister for Mines, and the two presidents of the two states, Junedin Sado and Abdi Jibril." Abdi Jibril was the interim president of the Somali region. Now, he lives in Jigjiga in a house provided by the SRS, while Ambassador Mahmoud Dirir represents SRS in the Dialogue Commission appointed by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali.²⁴

The OPDO's demand at the time affirmed a long-standing vision held by the then-opposition group of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), which fought in the past to annex Moyale, and territories inhabited by the Geri, Issa, Gura, Garre, Hawiye, and other Somali border communities. Paying deaf ears to the Somali case, on November 18, 2004, the Federal Government of Ethiopia announced its decision on what it claimed to be a plebiscite. Somalis lost almost all the contested districts. With speed, the EPRDF/OPDO-controlled House of Representatives rubberstamped the results of the sham votes. Somalis were informed to cede the regions of Maeso, Bardoda, Baabili, Gursum, and Jinacsani to the Oromos. As much as Aksum is a Tigre city or Dambidolo is an Oromo, Jinacsani, only 25 km to the north of Jigjiga, is an essential Somali city. Now the territorial contestation is over sites on the outskirts of Jigjiga and villages in the vicinity of Somalia's border. It is in this context that Somalis feel Jigjiga is under siege by a power that they cannot stop. The SRS chose to adopt an "ostensive restrained" attitude towards an aggressive ORS appetite for expanding its territory and manufacturing identity.

²³ Ibid, 2004

²⁴ <https://wardheernews.com/the-tears-of-justice-and-the-power-abuse-in-the-somali-region/> accessed on July 9, 2025.

Real vs. Manufactured Territorial Claims

who wrote in 1994

In “History and the Making of “Clanship, Conflict, and Refugees, An Introduction to Somalis in the Horn of Africa, a “didactical and information-oriented report,” prepared for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), in 1994, Gudio Amboros, explains what territory and Identity were in the Faafan zone:

“The Geri, on the other hand, are a relatively large clan inhabiting the region between Jijiga and Harar in eastern Ethiopia. Thanks to the relative fertility of their region, the Geri are mainly farmers. They engaged in traditional feuds with the “Somalised” Oromo Jarso clan, with whom they often cohabited in the same villages. These feuds acquired a new political relevance within the context of the Transitional Government of Ethiopia’s policy of ethnic regionalisation, for their district (Gursum) was contested by the Oromos of Region 4 and the Somalis of Region 5.”²⁵

As shown on the map below, the Somali and Oromo boundaries were at about Gursum and the westerly wing of Baabili in the 1990s. Today, the ORS is contesting territories that are located on the outskirts of Jigjiga or east of Jigjiga, such as Marar and Makaniis, respectively.

Despite this the claim of the above UN-sponsored research, the Rift Valley Institute’s report makes inordinate departure from scholarship and inexcusable weaknesses lie in its lack of historical context of the Geri and Jarso claims over the territories surrounding Jigjiga, identities, and their relationship with each other. On pages 19-20, the report discusses the territoriality and identity of the Jarso in a way that reconstructs them as the descendants of the ancestral owners of the Faafan region, particularly Baabili, Janacsani, and parts of Tuliguuleed, from thin air. The report reaches this conclusion by using the information collected from one or two unweighted interview responses conducted in Jigjig. Both informants, who were asked to self-identify and self-claim the land stretching between the foothills of Karamara and the Prairie wheat fields, were biased Jarso members, Similar questions were not asked the Geri interviewees.

The authors report that “Jarso elder respondents, who identify themselves as Oromo, say that Geri agropastoral were adopted by the Jarso, who originally settled between Jinacsani and Tuliguuleed in the foothills of Mount Karamara, where the Jarso have since maintained a majority and shared the territories with the Gerri.” The authors accepted this simple albeit non-

²⁵https://arcadia.sba.uniroma3.it/bitstream/2307/4150/1/Clanship_%20conflict%20and%20refugees_An%20introduction%20to%20Somalis%20in%20the%20Horn%20of%20Africa.pdf accessed on July 2, 2025.

According to Sylvia Pankhurst, Emperor Haile Selassie sent a letter to Greater Britain accusing the Garad of the Geri “massacring 700 women and children in Fanyanbiro.” The Garad denied these accusations.

scientific response and memorialized it. The authors did so without historical records or scholarly references. The report quickly adds that the “Jarso identity is rooted in their sedentary claims to ancestral land.” These comments promote a pro-OPOD and faulty historical reconstructionism narrative in that (1) the Oromo were natives to the plain fields facing the Karamara mountains, and (2) the Jarso welcomed the Geri to their ancestral land.

Let us evaluate these positions by using historical records about the Geri-Jarso settlements in the contested territory and minimize the politically skewed reconstructionist narrative. According to Fatah-Al-Habasa, one of the oldest chronicles about this region has been home to the Geri, Harla, Bartire, Issaq, Hawiye, Harti of Miad, Marehaan, Gurgure, Usbiyan, and others. The same groups occupy today as they did in the 16th Century the stretch of land between Harar and Jigjiga.²⁶ Equally, the Nola, Afran Qulla, and Jarso lived in parts of the region, mainly to the west and south of Harar. Moreover, Ahmed Al-Ghazi first used Zayla as his seat to continue the tradition of Sa’ad-ad-Din, who a century ago was defeated by Abyssinian kings. However, when he needed to raise troops, he moved his seat of operation to Harar and right away sought the support of the Geri Garaad, Garaad Mataan, followed by the Harla Kombe chief, Garaad Hassan. The rest followed suit. Ahmed Al-Ghazi was set to avenge for Sa’ad-ad-Din of the 16th century. Equally key to his conquest of Abyssinia was the riverbank village of Dir, which, in modern time, became Diridhabe. The Dir riverbank emerged as the Imam’s launching station westward. Incidentally, the Somali clans who occupy the rural districts of Diridhabe hail from the Somali Dir lineage (the Issa and Gurgure).²⁷

Despite the RVI’s report not citing any authoritative source to lend credence to its claim that the Geri was welcomed to the Oromo territory by the Jarso, the former were living in the vicinity of Harar, let alone Janacsani and Baabili, before the famous “Oromo migration” to southwest Ethiopia was completed. In the “Futuh Al-Habasha,” or “The Conquest of Abyssinia,” as told by Sihab ad-Din Ahmed bin ‘Abd al-Qader, who was an Arab Faqi and the storyteller of the experience of the “Conquest of Abyssinia,” shares with us that one of the most influential clans in the Somali conglomerate of Imam Ahmed Al-Ghazi’s force was the Geri clan. Garaad Matan, who was the chief of the Geri clan, was also the overall general of the army organized and led by Imam Ahmed Al-Ghazi. To emphasize the degree to which the Geri was central (and present in the region) to the “conquest of Abyssinia,” the Imam forged a political marriage with Garaad Matan by marrying his sister.

²⁶ Abd al-Qader, Shihab as-Din Ahmed bin Abd al-Qader, *Futuh Al-Habas’a: The Conquest of Abyssinia*, Pp. 8,11, 22, 28, 42, 43, 44, 77, 78.

²⁷ Dir River, at the time located in the valley to the west of where present day Diridhabe is located, gets its name from the two Somali clans that lay claim on the city – Issa and Gurgure both of whom belong to the Somali lineage of the Dir family.

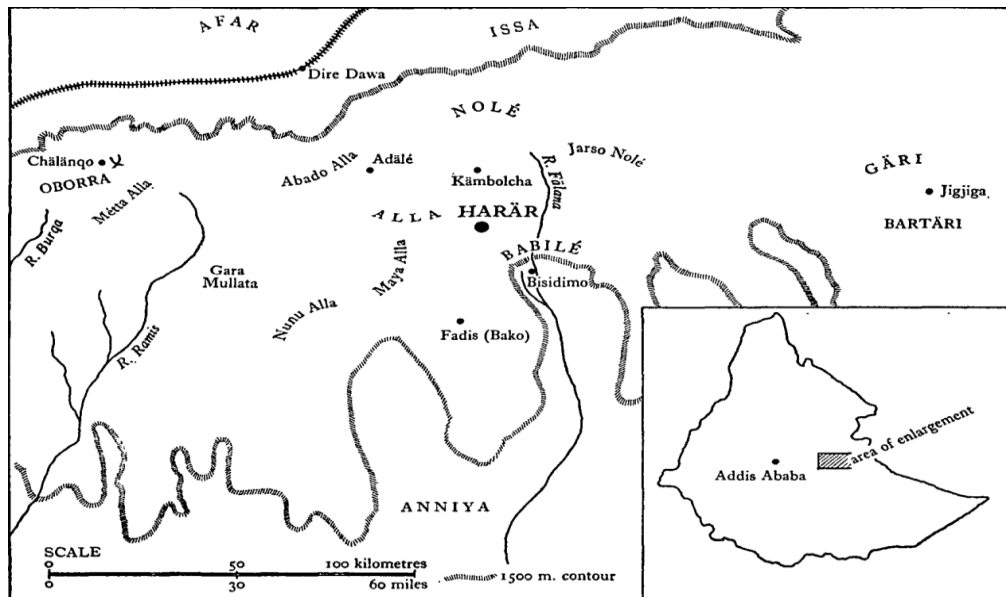
In terms of whether the Geri moved to its present territories from somewhere else, as claimed by the authors of the Rift Valley Institute's report, the UN-sponsored article of 1994 states the following: "Somalis, like the Issa clan, were pastoralists in the vicinity of Harar, while the Geri and Bertire were agropastoral to the east of Harar." This is to suggest that Somalis in general occupied the territories stretching from Harar to Jigjiga. The Geri occupied the stretch of territory to the northeast of Harar, and the Bertire to the southwest of the same city. The map (below) that Caulk used shows that the Geri settlement is as far as where the Nole Oromo start. Also, the article states that Geri and Bertire shared an interest in long-distance trade and were fellow Muslims, as were the Ogaden Somalis.²⁸ Both Caulk and Gudio Amboros dispute, with record and scholarly research, the Rift Valley Institute's faulty claim about who is or is not indigenous to outskirts of Jigjiga.

The report referenced an article written by R. A. Caulk, written in 1977.²⁹ It dates some of the identity of the Nola and Jarso Oromo clans as well as the Geri, Issa, and Bertire all within the vicinity of Harar. Focusing on the historical presence of the Afran Qulla Oromo clans in the vicinity of Harar during that period, the article says nothing about Oromo presence in Jinacsani or Tuliguuleed territories. It, however, discusses the Nole clans, who historically occupied territories mainly to the west and south of Harar, Gara Mulata and Bisidima), and were friends with the Geri and the Harari establishment. In one situation, the Geri and Nola clans collaborated to stop Egyptian passages to the Somali hinterland.

Historical Map provided by Caulk showing the Geri settlement between the 1850s and 1930s (Reference: Caulk).

²⁸ Cited in Caulk's article, this Interviews was conducted with the "late Uthman Garad, ughaz of the Gari, and the late Fitawrari Dul Hersi, ughaz of the Bertari, Jigjiga, May 1969. Cf. Bruno Francolini, 'I Somali del Harar', Gli Annali dell'Africa Italiana, 1, 3-4 (Dec. 1938), 1126—7. See also I.M.Lewis, Pastoral Democracy

²⁹ <https://everythingharar.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Hararitsneighbourseh.pdf>



Another important source to refute the report's claim that the Geri was welcomed into the Faaan zone by the Oromo is the accounts of Sir Richard Burton. As a member of the British Geographical Society, which served as a cutting-edge research institution for colonization and a precursor to the East Indian Company. Sir Burton arrived at Zaila in 1853.³⁰ He asked the king of the city, Sharmarke of the Issaq clan, to help him reach Harar. According to Sir Burton, the two most powerful kings on the road to Harar were Garaad Adan of the Geri and Garaad Hersi (wiil-waal) of the Bertire. A similar observation was equally made by Cualk who conducted research in this geography and published an article in 1977. Other sources also record that "a significant trace of Oromos in the Somali inhabited areas (between Shinilee and Zaila and between Zaila and Harar) were first seen in the 1930s, only after Haile Selassie was crowned as the viceroy of Ethiopia. As quoted by Cualk, this is consistent with an interview conducted with the late Garaad Usman of the Geri and Garaad Dool of the Bertire in 1969, who both said that Jarso came south of Baabili in the 1930s. In 1918, Fitawararu Tekle Hawariat, a Russian educated agricultural economist, was appointed as the governor of Jigjiga and set in motion a plan to finance Abyssinian soldiers in a creative way – settling Oromo in the fertile Geri land and collect taxes to feed his soldiers. It was rather the "abled but assertive Ras Imiru, a relative of Emperor Haile Selasie, who implemented the Oromo Settlement on the skirts of Jigjiga. By 1925, a government sponsored "a system of serfdom in support of the State:"

³⁰ In his impressive book, Sir Richard F Burton gives an explant detailed information of the people who lived in the stretch of land between Grusum, Jugjiga, and Harar. Despite the Rift Valley Institute's erroneous conclusion that Geri Somali clan came there as a guest, Burton intimates us with the oversized Geri presence in the region. The book, *First Footsteps in East Africa or, An Exploration of Harar*, Dover Publications, is the most alterative account of that era.

“Peasants tilled the land and offered Grain in return supported the soldiers, the soldiers supported the tax collectors, who, in turn, kept the wheels of the ‘administration’ running. Thwarted by Somali aversion to serfdom, Takel brought Gallas to cultivate the rich pasture lands to the north of Jigjiga. Each family received one hundred and twenty acres and paid a tithe of one-tenth of their produce to the Governor.”³¹

Sir Burton, on his part, noted that the Geri possessed the largest and most powerful army at the time, totaling about 5000 shields.³² In addition, the Bursuug, Hawiye, and Mareehan clans in the vicinity of Baabili all enjoy the protection of the Garad of the Geri. Burton also states that Adan, with whom he met in the environs of Harar, controlled the vast territory to the east of Harar all the way to the Gudabuursi land. Sir Burton writes that he travelled among the “Girhi Somali, who extended within sight of Harar.” Of the twelve branches and sub-branches of the Geri, Burton does not mention any pastoral practice. Rather, when he finally visited the powerful Garaad Aden in a village not far from Harar, he wrote extensively about the lifestyle of the Geri as sedentary group with a significant ownership of livestock. Sir Burton also states that the Amir of Harar at the time was married from the household of the Gard to enhance his military power against the Nole clans, who occasionally invaded Harar.

In his epic expedition stretching from Zaila to Harar, Sir Burton gave a perceptive observation of the same Somali habitat almost three centuries following the accounts by Sihab ad-Din Ahmad bin Abd al-Qadir bin Salem bin Utman. In 1858, Sir Burton, who acquainted himself with the Somali Garaad of the Geri, also writes sparingly that saw *some [indentured]* Oromo farm workers in the court of the Garaad, most of them belonging to the Nola clans. However, he never saw a significant population of Oromo to bear out what the RVI report claimed. On the contrary, Sir Burt extensively wrote about the power and the expansive territory between Jigjiga and Harar, which the Geri occupied. He also narrated the many Somali clans the Geri Garaad provided protection and security.³³ There was no Abyssinian presence in the Somali territory at the time of Burton’s trip, but only Turkish, to which Burton notes that in the household of Garaad Adan, members of the household spoke Somali, Arabic, Turkish, and Harari languages. Most of the Somalis Oromo or Jarso were brought into the, Gursum, Janacsani, and Tulguuleed area to farm for the Amhara feudal lords in the 1930s.³⁴ The Geri settlement has

³¹ Drysdal, John, *The Somali Dispute*, Pall Mall Press, London and Dunmow, 1964, Pp 44-45.

³² *ibid*

³³ *Ibid*, *First Footsteps*, Pp 190-191.

³⁴ Yusuf Haji, a Jarso activist who resides in Sweden, captures the essence of the Jarso identity. On a Facebook post, he said, “Jarso is Oromo by origin but has been Somalised through time.” He continued to say that “we are culturally Somalis.”

always been in the triangle stretching between Harar, Gursum, and the prairie fields of Jigjiga as confirmed by both chronicles and scholarly works as far back as the 16th century.³⁵

Such a mistake by the authors of the RVI's report leads to a bigger problem; calling the Geri an aristocratic class ruling class over a multitude of Jarso is a disservice to both communities. It is also a letdown, let a mere eyesore to the commitment of the RVI to knowledge production and help policymakers use credible data. The Geri and Jarso communities lived together at least since the 1930s in the valley between Jigjiga, Jinacsani, and Tuliguuleed, and collectively observed the Geri and Jarso *xeer*. Both communities were impacted by the *rist* land tenure system that was institutionalized by the feudal order. On the contrary, neither of them attained any aristocratic status as the report alleges. This claim is entirely a distortion of Ethiopian feudal history. Except for the schism that prevails in the wider Somali society, where one clan takes pride in its heritage, in the context of “laandheer vs. laangaab,” or “nasab vs. sheegato,” indeed an archaic reactionary Somali social norm, no discernible class or caste system existed that separated the Geri from the Jarso. Most Jarso urbanites easily and voluntarily assume a Geri identity when they mingle with or navigate through other Somali clans.

While the report consistently and rightly classifies the Geri Kombe as Somalis of the Darood family, it loses consistency when classifying the Jarso identity. For example, it refers to the Jarso as Somali and Oromo. It even goes further to assign them Somali clan identities by classifying them as members of the “Dir” as well as the “Darood” clans. The Jarso themselves at times assume different identities for different needs. And here is where Catherine Besteman develops the concept of “sheegato.”

The Rift Valley Institute weakness results from not historicizing the Jarso identity as well as an ostensible laziness embedded in the methodology of the report. The report builds its knowledge about the identity of the Jarso and their relationship to the contested territory on informal information collected from subjects not screened for bias. In the end, what comes out is a Jarso caricature that is Oromo, Somali, Darood, and Dir. All these classifications contradict one another. At its in most extreme cases, it makes the case for the Jarso and the Geri to both equally belong to the Darood family. Making the Jarso identity as fluid as one wants in the era of territorial contests could be dangerous, especially when the ORS is aggressive and abusive to its neighbors. Nonetheless, this confusion could have been eliminated or minimized by centering the historical context of the coexistence of the Geri-Jarso, or even the Gare-Oromo, in the Moyale

³⁵ All these facts said, plus the land-holding titles in the region from the era of Ras Mekonen to the day the Derg nationalized farming lands in 1974, are part of the record that the RVI report elected to ignore. The Geri's claim to Jinacsani, Tuliguuleed, and parts of the Babile territories is difficult to dismiss by the response of one or two interviewees.

area, a region with similar frictions. Instead, the report put a premium value to identity for territorial expansionism as opposed to historicizing diversity to enhancing coexistence.

Peaceful Past Gave Way to A Problematic

The silver lining in the Geri and Jarso relationship lies in history as capsulated by what one respondent of the Jarso extraction mentioned. When asked about the conflict between them and the Geri Somali, the Jarso respondents defaulted to the transitional customary law called “xeerkii Geri iyo Jarso, or the “customary law of the Geri and Jarso (*Xeer*), which binds the two and helped resolve inter-conflicts for generations. The respondent viewed this customary law as a method to resolve conflicts and enhance cohabitation. Approximately established 100 years ago, the Geri and Jarso *Xeer* is a traditional instrument (constitution) that had kept peace and cohabitation between the two communities. The constitution served in the past as a guiding instrument for the 12 branches of the Hassan Issaq of the Geri in Faafan zone and the 6 Jarso clans in Faafan.³⁶

Flanked on the right and left corners by two respective chiefs, the Geri and Jarso constituent assembly was always chaired by the Garaad. As the supreme authority, the *xeer* was applied equitably to maintain peace and cohabitation. Arif Mohamed provides a fascinating discussion on how this legal instrument helped the Geri and Jarso cohabitation, that is before OPDO’s expansionist policy created a disequilibrium in the region³⁷ However, an expansionist attitude by OPDO, and now OPP, which has adopted a policy of territorial expansion, will not let peace thrive. The OPDO took advantage of an inter-communal conflict between the Somalis and the Jarso that flared up due to security vacuum following the fall of the Derg. With many Somalis returning to their homes from refugee camps and cities where they were housed following the 1977-78 Ogaden war, clashes were unavoidable. By 1992, OPDO elected to arm the Jarso. In addition to flexing its muscle as a member of the ruling EPRDF, OPDO laid claim to the city of Jigjiga, thus causing an open (armed) conflict with the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) as far back as 1992.

³⁶ There are several Geri clans who live in Puntland, Somaliland, Southwest Regional state of Somalia, Jubaland, the Garissa region of Kenya, and Libaan zones The Geri and Jarso *Xeer* only applies to those who co-habit in the Faafan zone of the SRS.

³⁷ , Arif Ahmed’s thesis for the fulfillment of his Law Degree submitted to Addis Ababa University, 1992 .” The Geri and Jarso *xeer*.” Arif argues, that, if implemented in the current crisis, it could help maximize the chances of establishing and enhancing peace between the two communities.

Suffice it to say that the Oromo Regional State (ORS), both during the OPDO reign and under the Oromo Prosperity Party (OPP), is a major driver of the conflict between the Geri and the Jarso. As the report mentioned, the ORS circles the territory contested with heavily armed troops as opposed to the SRS, which does not station enough forces to protect the vulnerable civilians in Tuliguuleed. The ORS draws power from the Oromo dominance of the Prosperity Party, headed by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, to whom the Somali leadership plays a fiddler role. Most Somalis believe that the annexation and demarcation movement by Shimeles Abdisa is encouraged by the OPP leadership, whose goal is to reach the Somali coast. However, multiple invasions by Abyssinians and more recent draconian measures by successive feudal regimes in Ethiopia against Somalis did not successfully remove the Geri from their natural ecology. Perhaps that is why the Somali saying, “dhulku waa ma guuraan” or “ecological belongingness is a permanent phenomenon,” is one of the most endearing ancestral concepts for Somalis to defend their territories against powerful odds. Somalis know their habitat.

Concluding Remarks

- The report correctly captures the power dynamics between the leadership of the ORS and that of the SRS. Whereas the SRS disarmed its militia in Tuliguuleed and elsewhere, the ORS continues to arm them and push for unilateral Dam construction and upscaling administrative capacity in contested territories. Mustafa’s critics argue that he doesn’t challenge the unfounded expansionist attitude of the ORS because he fears for his seat. Right or wrong, there is a Somali adage that says “Fule xantiisa ma mooga,” or “a coward is not unaware of what others say about him.”
- In the last 7 years, Somalis say that the leadership of the SRS neither helped nor protected the Geri clan in the face of an aggressive leadership in ORS. The blame is not only on the shoulders of Mustafa Omer, on those representatives of the SRS at the federal level as well as the selfish clan culture exhibited by other adjacent communities to the sites subject to ORS land grab. There is unsubstantiated allegation where certain Somali clans side with the ORS, thus undermining any effort the SRS leadership could have done to fend off for itself.
- The Rift Valley Institute’s Report, although highlighted important aspects of the Geri and Jarso conflicts, erred by not historicizing the relationship between the two communities, and, therefore ending up in adopting a biased narrative as to who is/was indigenous to the contested territory. In this review, we hope to have shed light on relevant chronicles and academic work on the history of the region. We have stretched our use of data available to the 16th century accounts as mentioned in the Abyssinian Conquest. We have also highlighted relevant works in the 19th and 20th century. We have argued that the Jarso community, although settled in the prairie fields on the outskirts of Jigjiga by Fitawarari Talke Hawariat and his successor, Ras Imiru after 1925, to raise crops for the Abyssinian

soldiers tasked to subjugate the Somalis in the region, they have been Somalised and lived peacefully with Somalis. With the right political conditions, the two could easily resume their peaceful and productive lives. However, the current political dispensation – identity politics vs ORS unmatched power in the country – is not conducive to a peaceful coexistence between Somalis and Oromo.

- The Geri and Jarso, two communities with a shared history and culture, are saddled with an imported and manufactured conflict for an unrelated grandiose goal pushed by the OPP politicians. The Somali leadership, for whatever reason, is willing to collaborate to foster and promote a partnership on the Marar Dam and the consensus-based demarcation of their respective boundaries. However, a similar gesture is not reciprocated by the other side represented by Simales Abdisa. Simply put, the report, provides timely information about the conflict and layered claims over territories. However, the integrity of the report is compromised by the authors conclusion that the Geri came to the region as guests and turned into aristocrats. This conclusion is untenable. The Rift Valley Institute is partially responsible for the lapse or error in the report; the institute should have conducted a careful peer review of such a controversial assignment for the report has serious policy implications for the Somali region.
- The Report in the end advances a set of best practices to bring about reconciliation and conflict transformation. One of the recommendations is to put in the center of future talks and mediations the very stakeholders – the Geri and Jarso – and accord them a prime role in resolving their problem. The two communities need their own space and assume agency over solving their conflict. The ORS needs to respect international law in that forced displacement of indigenous people is tantamount to ethnic cleansing, a major crime in international tribunal whereby perpetrators of such crimes can be held responsible.

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