

II. The Eritrean Islamic Jihad Movement (EJIM)

Eritrean separatism began in earnest during World War II, as Eritrea passed from Italian to British rule in 1941 and remained under British administration until 1950. Arab states pushed for independence given the large Muslim population and ties to the Arab world from that community. The initial constitution in 1952 was ratified by Emperor of Ethiopia, Haile Selassie, but Eritrea and Ethiopia were linked through a federal system, under the sovereignty of the emperor. Eritreans resisted Ethiopian rule and began armed struggle for their independence in 1958.

The Eritrean Islamic Jihad Movement (EIJM) began activity in 1975 when a group of Islamist-minded guerillas split off from the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) that had been fighting since the beginning of the Eritrean independence movement. The EIJM was formally established in 1980. Since independence in 1993, the EIJM (and its factions) have been the principal Muslim opposition group in Eritrea, seeking the violent overthrow of the ELF government led by President Isaias Afewerki. EIJM claims to only target the Eritrean government and its apparatus in the country, not Western targets, and seeks the establishment of an Islamic caliphate in Eritrea.

The group is based in Sudan and is made up primarily of dissidents from the ELF, conservative Eritrean (and some other Muslims from Horn of Africa countries), and a Muslim youth network. The group is also known by a variety of other names—the Eritrean Islamic Reform Movement, the Abu Suhail organization, the Eritrean Islamic Salvation Movement, and the Eritrean Islamic Party for Justice and Development—but many of these appear to be break-away groups that operate with some degree of autonomy.

This is reflective of the climate for political and militant Islamic organizations in the Horn of Africa. Like other neighboring countries during the last three decades, Eritrea saw a number of Salafi organization rise to popularity, where before the mid-1950s the ideology had been largely alien to this region. In the 1980s, the Jabhat Tahrir al-Iritriyya al-Islamiyya al-Wataniyya (The National Eritrean Islamic Liberation Front), the Munzamat al-Ruwwad al-Muslimin al-Iritria (The Organization of Eritrean Pioneer Muslims), al-Intifada al-Islamiyya (Islamic Awakening) and others were founded, some in Sudan. By 1988, these organizations merged to form the EIJM.

This union of militant Islamists, however, continued to fragment. Within five years, a militant Salafi faction emerged under Shaykh Abu Suhail (also known as Muhammad Ahmad), who participated in the Afghan jihad against the Soviets. He is mentioned as the leader of the Eritrean Jihad movement in documents captured from al-Qaeda in Afghanistan¹. It is from this connection that some allege EIJM ties to al-Qa'ida;

¹ See "Harmony and Disharmony: Exploiting Al-Qa'ida's Organizational Vulnerabilities", Harmony AFGP-2002-801138.

its operations in Khartoum may also have put members in contact with al-Qa'ida, while it was also based in Sudan during the early- to mid-1990s. A more moderate faction calling for dialogue and reconciliation also emerged within the EIJM opposed to Abu Suhail.

Currently led by Khalil Mohammed Amer, the EIJM today falls under the umbrella of opposition group known as the Eritrean National Alliance. This can be a near dizzying array of organizations and factions in the Eritrean Islamic scene, but over the past decade, they have carried out relatively few successful operations. In 2003 EIJM claimed responsibility for a hotel bombing and an ambush killing 46 Eritrean military. The group was initially blamed for the 2003 killing of British geologist Timothy Nutt, but EIJM denied the claims and reaffirmed its goals only to target the Eritrean government. In March 2006, a reincarnation of the EIJM, renamed the Harakat al-Islah al-Islamiyya al-Iritri, issued a statement claiming responsibility for five attacks over a one month period on Eritrean forces. They resulted in the death of five soldiers.

With its base in Khartoum, the EIJM runs most of its operations in western Eritrea near the Sudanese border. Ethiopia temporarily allied with Sudan in the 1988 war between Ethiopia and Eritrea, and Kalashnikovs and RPGs originating in Sudan have been found on EIJM rebels. Sudanese support has not been unconditional or long-term, however. While Hasan al-Turabi ruled most of Sudan in the early 1990s, he cracked down on some of the EIJM members and closed some of the offices and operations. Sudan hosts tens of thousands of Eritrean refugees, and as with other refugee diasporas, there was likely fear that they could influence Sudanese politics.

The main EIJM body led by Khalil Muhammad Amer, as described by its deputy Abu al-Bara' Hasan Salman in a 1998 interview with the now-defunct Islamist magazine al-Nida', aims to carry out: "Armed struggle and training youth; da`wa [outreach] and education... we accompany the Qur'an and Sunnah and aim to fulfill as a group all the aims therein and to realize our position as servants of Allah, and to establish the Islamic State [sic]." He states, "[t]he Islamic Jihad Movement is striving against two groups, the Christian regime and the hypocrites. The movement also represents the only military option which had proved its fortitude in confronting the Christian regime in Eritrea."

Salman went on to say, regarding the "external front", which is "very sensitive ... from the aspect of our strategic security", that they aim to "exchange our experience and expertise with other Muslim organizations which also work to challenge the various corrupt regimes in the region... Strive to generate the suitable opportunities to support our Jihad through Islamic means; and [m]ove around neighbouring countries and expose the corruption of the Eritrean regime and its danger over the entire region on the religious, security, and political fronts."

Clearly from this description, the group has aspirations for uniting with like-minded Islamist groups (the majority of them militant Salafi) and moving toward the establishment of an Islamic state. In this sense, there is a legitimate concern for cooperation with al-Qa'ida, although the group remains dedicating to only attacking

Eritrean targets and Eritrea is far less appealing as a safe haven than neighboring Somalia.

The Eritrean jihad movements are highly active online, promoting their message, providing extensive news coverage of developments and information condemning the Eritrean regime in three languages. Websites connected to or maintained by Eritrean Islamic Jihad include: (the now defunct) www.eijm.org, <http://www.alkhalas.org> (the Eritrean Islamic Salvation Movement, renamed the Eritrean Islamic Party for Justice and Development), <http://www.islaher.org> (the Eritrean Islamic Reform Movement), and the more moderate news portal awate.com.

Given the high degree of fragmentation, illustrated by the proliferation of factions and continual renaming of the organization, the movement remains ineffective, but not inactive. There is a shared set of ideology and goals between al-Qa'ida and the Eritrean Jihad movement, but given the absence of high-impact Western targets and the disharmony among Eritrean Islamists, it is unlikely al-Qa'ida or the wider global jihad movement would become seriously involved in Eritrea.

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