



Yacob Saleh A Vivid Contrast of Two States

By Awate Team
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On Friday, August 25, 2006, Yacob Saleh, an Eritrean participating in the March for Freedom, was briefly detained and then released by American authorities. Awate.com interviewed him the same day and his story follows. But Yacob's story goes back, way back when the supporters of the Eritrean tyrant really believed that all they had to do was say "Bin Laden", "Al Qaida", "terrorist", "jihad" often, and the US authorities would round up every opposition member and surrender them to Isaias Afwerki... Back when they were burning up their phones reporting on every opposition member as a "sleeper terrorist." Back when Isaias Afwerki and his supporters were trying to exploit the "war against terror" for their own dictatorial interests.

Back when they were begging the US to establish a base in Eritrea because Eritrea's landscape looks so much like Afghanistan's. Back when they were licensing themselves to hold Eritreans prisoners as long as they felt like it, just like Guantanamo. It goes back to the summer of 2002.

The First Clues (2002)

My roundtrip flight Seattle to Dallas, at every airport I stopped, the searches were more and more extensive. Atlanta was more intensive than Seattle; Dallas more intensive than Atlanta. By the time I was flying back on the last leg of the flight, I began to believe that I must be on some terrorist list.

The Earliest Contact

An FBI agent paid a visit to my home. I didn't happen to be there...he interviewed my neighbor, who told him whatever he knew about me...he left his business card at my home. I called him back the next day and we scheduled an appointment.

Later on, after I got to know the FBI agent really well, I would come to learn from him that it had gotten to a point where the agency was receiving 10-15 calls per day from "your own countrymen" reporting me as a terrorist, a Jihadist, a supporter of Bin Laden...

The Interrogation: Seattle

He wanted to know about me and the organization that I belong to [the Eritrean Islamic movement.] He wanted to know why we call ourselves Jihad and what exactly our objective is. I told him that to us Jihad means fighting for your right not to be a second class citizen. We are not about domination, and the evidence is that we belong to Eritrean Alliance [EDA, then ENA]—along with the other organizations who are struggling for restoring rights to Eritreans. We are not against Christians. We just do not want the Muslim Eritrean to be a second class citizen.

He kept asking me about Jihad, I told him not to be obsessed with language issue—which is how I, we, see "Jihad." I told him that I can only answer about Jihad in the context of Eritrea—I cannot be accountable about how Jihad is practiced and interpreted by others.... I explained to him that Jihad means to strive, and a mujahed is a person who strives. Just like Reagan supported the mujahedeen of Afghanistan in their fight against the oppression of the Soviets, I am supporting the mujahedeen of Eritreans for their rights.

Jihad, ijthihad, mujahed...its meaning varies with the context. For example: a student who struggles and strives to get his Ph.D is said to have practiced ijthihad. This is a language, not religious issue. An Arab woman, including a Christian Arab woman, who has a particularly severe labor [while delivering a baby] is said to have had ijthihad.



I can only speak about Jihad in its Eritrean context. I cannot be responsible for what non-Eritrean mujahedeen do. To make this point, I told him that if I go to Saudi Arabia, they are not going to give me citizenship because I am a Muslim. I am an Eritrean and a Muslim.

He wanted to know, if that is the case, if our struggle is limited to Eritrea, why does my organization's website display a link to Hamas?

I told him that we Eritreans show a great deal of sympathy to Palestinians, just like they showed sympathy to our cause, in our separation from Ethiopia. In the 1960s, 1970s, this was manifested through socialist ideology; now it is being expressed in Islamism. It is not like we have the resources to do anything for them. Nor can they do anything for us. The most we can do for each other is to pray for one another, which we do.

He said that his office had been following my activities, my job, my Eritrean activism, my Islamic activism and he wanted to know who is funding all my activities. I told him that regarding my funding, they can see it in my tax returns, which I file regularly. As for my energy, I told him there is nothing extraordinary about it: anybody can do what I am doing, if they stop watching TV. I don't like laying back and watching television; I would rather be active.

I got to know the FBI agent really well. He, too, is a devoutly religious person and I think he respected my seriousness about my religion.

The Interrogations: Indiana

When I moved to Indiana, two agents were assigned to me. I am sure my phone is tapped and I am followed. I attend mosque services and the agents will ask me what I thought about that day's sermon. And I give them my honest views. Once they asked me if politics can be separated from religion. I told them that, in my view, it cannot. I gave them several verses from the Quran to show them that. That is what my religion teaches me, to struggle against injustice, which means to practice politics.

Involvement In The March For Freedom (2006)

When I heard of the March for Freedom [organized by Asper-Italy and sponsored by the Eritrean anti Tyranny Global Solidarity, a group of websites, advocacy groups and civil societies from around the world], I decided to join. The March for Freedom is a project intended to create awareness of the plight of prisoners of conscience in Eritrean prisons.¹

The goal of the March for Freedom is to create awareness and to appeal to the UN, the Congress, and the State Department to help form an international investigative commission to find out the whereabouts of the hundreds of prisoners who have disappeared in Eritrea.

Arrest In Baltimore

March for Freedom arrived at Baltimore early and I left the group driving a van. Apparently, I did not properly stop at a red light and was stopped by a policewoman. I was politely asked for a license, which I provided. After a while, the policewoman and another person told me I was under arrest. Guns were pointed at me, and they handcuffed me. I was told that I would be detained until the police conducted their investigation. I was taken out from the car and taken to a corner of the street and sat there while the police then cordoned off the area and rounded it with police ribbons [the Do Not Cross police line tape]. Five or six cars with different authorities arrived at the scene, the FBI among them.



I was then taken to a police van where I stayed for a while. Later, the police told me that I was to be taken to the police station for my own protection and for questioning. I was taken to the police station where I was thoroughly searched. Then I was asked many questions by many authorities. They contacted different states apparently to gather information about my background. Police dogs sniffed the car thoroughly.

After three or four hours of detention, one of the policemen came and told me that I was free to leave and offered to drop me at the place when they had picked me up. The police officer further apologized for the inconvenience and gave me his name and telephone number and told me that if I felt I had been mistreated in any way, I had the right to sue the police. I told the officer: “If this had happened to me in my country, I would have been either dead or in hospital. We are marching to get such rights for the Eritrean prisoners of conscience, for their human rights. Such rights to be questioned with respect and if proven innocent, to be let free- that is what the whole March is for.” I thanked the police for doing their job, and left.

A reporter who was covering the incident asked me if I wanted to press charges against the police. I told the reporter that instead of covering my pressing charges or not pressing charges, the biggest favor he could do for me is to cover the activity of the March for Freedom. The reporter replied that he can’t promote the March because his task is to report and not to promote.

Relationship with Law enforcement

Often, when they talk to me, they will ask if I need an attorney. What for? There is nothing that an attorney can do that I cannot do—since I am convinced of my innocence. I don’t clamp up, and I don’t say I need my lawyer, which law enforcement agents always view with suspicion. I tell them the truth, as I see it. I am not going to give them answers that I think they will like, I tell them the truth. I think they respect that. What I can tell you is that I upset all their expectations about a devout Muslim. Look, if I tell them things they would like to hear, maybe I will have a life that does not include interrogations and questions. But for how long? A life time? But I have to face God for eternity.

¹ The prisoners include Evangelical Christians and so-called minority religions whose faith the Eritrean Government doesn’t approve of; Muslims (mainly teachers and community leaders) whose devoutness places them in the category of terrorist suspects; Orthodox Christians who opposed the meddling of the government in their religious affairs; ministers and political leaders who demanded the president be accountable to the assembly and that the “ratified constitution” be implemented; American Embassy workers who were accused of being CIA spies; reporters of the free press; citizens deported from Malta and Italy; parents who cannot account for the whereabouts of their conscription age children, and ordinary citizens who ran afoul of the government’s arbitrary rules.

Many have been and still are tortured in metal containers housed in deserts, suspended from tree branches, or held in underground prisons. Many of the prisoners have been in jail for more than a decade- they were not charged, they do not have visitation rights and nobody knows their whereabouts.

In short, they disappeared. The list of prisoners is long, the most comprehensive list prepared to date is by Farajat.com