

The Interview

The 'Nabad Project': In pursuit of healing bitter divisions





'The Peace Engineers'

Filsan Abdi, 27, is a UK based Speech and Language Therapy consultant and the founder of the 'Nabad Project' - 'Nabad' in Somali means 'Peace'. It is a recently established campaign for peace and reconciliation between various ethnic groups in Ethiopia.

Born in the city of Dire Dawa, in Eastern Ethiopia, Filsan spent most of her teen and adulthood in Addis Abeba, where she had her first academic degree in Leadership and Management from the privately owned Unity University. Later on she went to Leister City in England to do her second degree in 'Communications Science and Disorder', in university of Hertfordshire, but it is her studies in the field of communication which would become one of her bedrocks that helped her make her first move in organizing the 'Nabad Project.'

Filsan was raised among her Somali parents who are from Jigjiga, the capital of Somali regional state. As much as she was an individual who is optimistic of her country's journey to a better future, the decade old devastating human rights record in the region, where she always had a bond as an Ethiopian Somali, had impacted her deeply.

The recent headlines of mass killings and displacement in Ethiopia in general and the Somali regional state in particular kept making her and the people around her wary of the future. Above all, as she says, it was the deadly conflict between armed members of Somali and Oromo communities which made her decide to "break the silence and throw a stone for change than being a part of the spectator by the side lanes."

Hundreds were killed and more than a million civilians were displaced in the last two years only from areas bordering the Somali and Oromia regional states, and Filsan watched it unfold with horror – from afar and on the ground. What she experienced during her visits to the region was only a trauma, discontent and a broken spirit. It eventually led her to establish the "Nabad Project", a peace initiative that involved a group of young volunteers who defied the ethnic divide and came together with a promise of leaving their differences aside for a future of peaceful coexistence.

What began from the Somali region, the 'Nabad Project' has now come too far in turning differences into opportunities to sustain a county with people of shared destiny; "together for good." Today Filsan is proud to call the 'Nabad Project' volunteers the 'Peace Engineers' in the making.

A few weeks ago, Yared Tsegaye, Deputy Editor-In-Chief of Addis Standard, sat down with Filsan Abdi in Addis Abeba to discuss the 'Nabad Project' and a range of other topics affecting the youth in her community and beyond.

Excerpts:

Addis Standard: How do you explain the Nabad Project? An organization in political activism? A group of young volunteers doing the impossible? A team of communication therapy professionals? Let's start with you. Who is Filsan? And what's the 'Nabad Project' for her?

Filsan Abdi: Filsan is a regular person in her own. I have a son. He is a four-year-old boy; I can say I am blessed! He is, actually one of the things that make me grow as a person. When you become a parent, you understand the true reason you live and why it is important to have a country. Now, this project is another thing that I believe would define me. I have always had the mission and vision of bringing the love and unity that has been lost amongst Ethiopians. The project was initially launched in Addis Abeba, together with a group of fantastic young individuals, who have been doing voluntary work with me, as the 'Nabad', meaning 'Peace' in Somali. 'Nabad' is the reflection of our collective mission for our nation. We aimed at consolidating various groups into a public dialogue and create a platform, first within the Somali group. If we have to be defined in nature, we are part of a CSO wing, working on advocacy and ready for serving the community.

You held the first of the community level dialogue under the project in Addis Abeba and later in Jigjiga among the Ethiopian Somali Community while the region, under its former president Abdi Mohammed Omer, a.k.a Abdi Illey was experiencing chaos. Why this particular region?

I came back here while the country was collapsing, especially the Somali region. After the former President Abdi was ousted out of the region following the violence in the weekend of the 4th of August 2018, there happened much confusion and chaos. There were different groups and movements within the region. We witnessed that innocent civilians were traumatized and they needed guidance. By the 10th of August, I spearheaded the campaign together with my group amongst the Somali Community in Addis Abeba; one of which was in Bole Michael area. We tried to consolidate them to have a conversation despite what was happening in the region. We made them understand how important it is to have a country and guard it through.

But not everyone was evidently against the former President. Did that pose any challenge for you and your team? And what was your view of the region's political administration?

I do not believe anybody has supported Abdi from the heart. He has been there at the power of chair for eight years as a dictator forcing people do his wish. He had a false vision of destroying the region after he left power. People had no one to talk to.

Take the Heego for example. My view is that these were young and idealistic people, whom he created as the brand of his power. But when he became too powerful, he lost his way. The Heegos were not enemies for the Somali people as were perceived; they were created, yet forced. They will be arrested and sent to prisons or lose their lives and the lives of members of their families will be hurt if they do not obey to be members of that group. They were not only from one clan. Abdi used them to terrorize the people, they were oppressed. I tend to say everybody was against him, nobody really wanted him. But when Abdi was out of the picture, when he was no more there, these young individuals amongst all the tribes and clans were pictured wrong as the enemies. The Nabad, through the communications between the Somalis, tried to calm down all the flaming confusion and misconception in them.

We visited this woman, who has been arrested for 14 years and gave birth to a daughter while in jail; raped multiple times. Now she cannot walk and on a wheelchair. This woman only saw her kid after all these years

What did the Nabad project tailor in bringing consensus within a region at the precipice of a civil war? Have you heard from the victims and their families and checked on them to see their lives on the ground?

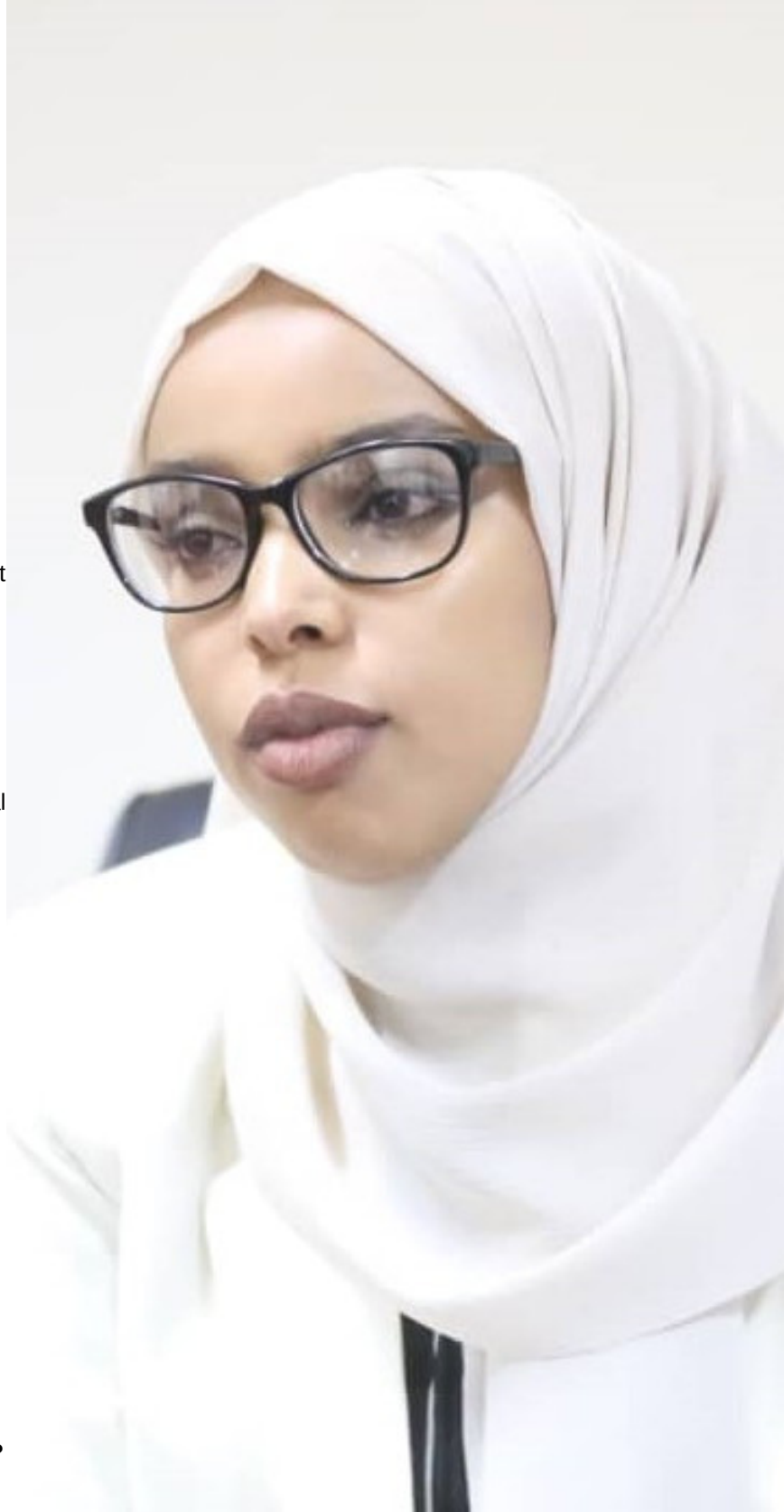
We were successful at our panel discussions in Addis. We then took the program to Jigjiga by the 15th of August. I have reached to multiple victims, which I hate to use the word 'victim' itself because it sounds people felt helpless. But the fact was that it all was devastating. There were victims on the way, but it makes us hopeless, which is not the case. We visited this woman for instance, who has been arrested for 14 years and gave birth to a daughter while in jail; she was also raped multiple times. Now she cannot walk and is on a wheelchair. This woman only saw her kid after all these years. She and her likes have been people with no one to reach for them. The woman was suspected of working with the ONLF, the Somali opposition party which recently returned to Ethiopia after years in exile. There are several others with similar stories. Now we went there, people like us have gathered together, there is a room for making to the ills of the recent past.

But on the other hand, this same period was also the time when claims came to surface that a growing number of Ethiopian Somalis tend recognize themselves as being part of the 'Greater Somalia', having closer bond to the Republic of Somalia in the horn than that of a federal region in Ethiopia. During the weekend of August 04 last year, we have even seen some of the youth waving Somali's flag. Did that in anyway the Nbad Project's interaction with the youth?

This is one important discussion for the Somali people and those of us like me and others, who were never been to the region before. We are, yes, Somalis, who have lived our entire lives being Ethiopians. Although that still being the case, the Somali region has been neglected by the federal government, and its people have always been seen as a 'second class citizens'. That is one of the very reasons most of the people there always identify themselves as part of the greater Somalia. Such a history itself made it very difficult for the Somali people who were born, raised and lived in Ethiopia to identify as Ethiopians. The oppression there was on them; the things they face and see in their everyday lives, including names they were named and nicknames given to them when they visited places in central Ethiopia, say the capital city - all these made them not to simply accept themselves as Ethiopians, and it will take time for that to heal. We are Somalis and being that, we share lots of similarities, including language, with the Somali people in neighboring Somalia, but we will never be in the greater Somalia. Ethiopians need to understand and accept that we are part of them and let go the second class citizen discourse, which we are not. That is one of the reasons I started through the Nabad Project - to show Ethiopians that a Somali young female can actually bring the love, harmony and prosperity among them.

Your peace campaign has also been spread to the Oromia regional state, which experienced a violent confrontation along the border between the two regions. I understand that you met and had discussions with some members of the 'Qeerroo', young people of Oromo community. What was inside this particular platform of reconciliation under your project with the theme '*Is Cafis iyo midnimo*' in Somali?

Even though we started our project from the Somali region that was not just the picture. We set out to unify the whole Ethiopia as much as we can. We went to the Oromia region to create a platform for communication between youth leaders from the Qeerroos, the political leadership, and elders after the conflict that has been happening between the two neighboring communities. It was fruitful that we understood each other as a team together with other youth fgroups of other regions. While dealing with that particular platform, we first had a panel discussion in Addis Abeba, attended by scholars, religious leaders and elders including the Abba Gadas from Oromia, government officials, and many more others.



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I learnt that Jawar Mohammed, executive director of Oromia Media Network, has attended the meetings you had. How important was his role in the process?

Yes he was there. I often say 'he is the father of the Qeerroos'. If I have to be going there and do something I have to work with people like him, and he has been very helpful and has really motivated us to keep pushing the envelope because he understood what we were advocating for.

How impactful were the campaigns between the two regions after the panel discussion you had in Addis?

We took the campaign from Addis Abeba all the way to Jigjiga. Under our project, we took around 180 people including the Somali youth and members of the Qeerroos and have together marched for a 'peace journey' in the course of the move towards the communications between the two communities from Addis to Jigjiga, passing through major towns and cities in the two regions including Adama, Assebe-Teferi, Haramaya, Babile, and fewer more. Before reaching Jigjiga in Somali region, the things we have seen in the major cities we have stopped by were too beautiful. The children and every one of the community we passed in were welcoming and running towards us with a smile; it touched me. It made me more emotional to straight picture a child without a country and without a family and a place to go, but is just happy to see his people, who is coming to him. And there was even greater welcome at Jigjiga for the Qeerroo, and the broadcasting media from Oromia including the Oromia Media Network (OMN), who were visiting for the first time. It was a testimony that there was no true conflict between the two communities. The elders and the Abba Gadas were happy to see us for we are part of the community, part of them; not funded by the government or from within it. That made it unique. It was a journey of peace and love, knowledge and experience; an eye-opening for me and I am grateful I did that under the Nabad Project; I felt a kind of a hero for doing that.

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But I don't believe setting out to solve such post-violence social trauma is possible without facing the reasons behind. It may be my personal opinion, but if I can ask you to walk me through what you believe are the real reasons behind the clashes between the two?

I firmly believe there was no true conflict between the people of the two communities. They share borders and the language itself. They lived together and have a common history before being specified as they are today. But you always expect conflicts because there are age old unresolved land issues, and the pastoralist communities have interests. There are existential economic interests too. However, the conflicts were taken far because of the leadership itself. Some of the things were misguided. What made it hard at this point is the fact that the two communities were used as a weapon by naysayers and dictators, who operated them; making them see the true friend as an enemy of the mass between the two communities. While working in this project and going to different cities within the two regions, I have witnessed love but nothing. I have understood it was resolvable. If there was a major issue between the people, I knew that as a Somali female, the Oromos would not have welcomed me to their eyes.

Speaking of the leadership, the former president of the region Abdi Muhamud Omer, a.k.a Abdi Iley and others are on trial. What are your personal reflections? Do you believe he should face justice? And what is your view of those, especially Somalis, who feel his arrest was unjust and that his trial is a mockery of justice?

People are sometimes troublesome. It is ironic for me to have Somalis of that claim. Regardless of all the drama of destruction, pain and the trauma he caused them, Abdi left them with the warning message: "be careful! The Oromos are coming for you." All their minds think and care are that their enemies are coming for them to take their boys. They may have lost their family because of him, they cannot see Abdi is someone who destroyed their region. Human beings in general are like that to part of their nature. They tend to take sides with whomever they identify themselves with.

You have watched this based in the UK. How have you been following the events unfolding at home? How alarming was it for you as a Somali?

I am from the largest clan in the Somali region that is the Ogaden. I was very aware of what was happening. I always wanted to be part of the solution while understanding all the trauma. But things there were not easy and the then president never wanted people like us to be there. Did I want to come down there and do something? I did. What we do at the Nabad now also emancipates from those same feelings.

Let us take the case of the Somali and you as a youth peace campaigner. Coming from the current generation, how do you understand Ethiopia's current federal arrangement? Do you, as many tend to, see it as a source of what many say is ethnic clashes between different communities?

We are governed under the federal system of governance. It is ideally a system, destined for holding various regions and ethnic groups under them together. I believe the state in the course also holds a responsibility to make sure that not a single citizen is left out. Safeguarding over 80 different ethno-linguistic groups under the umbrella of Ethiopia is yet another task. The governance under its narrative of Federalism is indeed much of ethnic centered. This is what the past has created, which we should ask our choice to stick to and believe it should hold us. In principle it is one created as a system for equity by every means. But it will be a system questioned whether to take with us for long. The problems within local governments, for instance, have been often buried within the ruling government itself. In the Somali region's case, when there was a conflict the federal government personally sat down with the former president and with that not a thing was solved out. The trauma is one that will take long to heal.

You work with activists like Jawar and others of different background. Given the type of activism and discourse with the public they are akin with, some in the political elite zone claim such activists are 'flaming divisions' and 'extremism' in Ethiopia? How do you reflect on that?

Just to be clear first, I am not working with Jawar or I do not have a work with him. Yes, we were working with his team from the Qeerroo community while in our discussions between the Somali-Oromo communities. Jawar helped us create the connection. When it comes to the concept of ethnic issues, these activists rather believe their ethnic community, so does Jawar for instance. I understand that the Oromo community has been oppressed, and he was in a struggle towards that for they needed a voice. Do I follow him on being just an Oromo? No! Because I have a firm believe that Ethiopia is what makes all of us one. I have not, however, spoke with him regarding such issues to the specific. He had a huge impact for the change which affected all of us positively, but it was not only an Oromo change. If a certain activist is fighting for the people s/he claims to be part of, it turns out in the end that they are fighting for Ethiopia. I am a Somali, but I don't put myself out from being an Ethiopian.



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Will the Nabad Project consider working with various youth federations within the ruling party's youth leagues? If so do you think it will take away your credibility in being neutral from politics?

Ethiopia is not a country that welcomes volunteerism. People do not easily understand you. They feel threatened. Free things are scarce here. They want to believe what is existing. So we have to go through the already formed institution to get a way to the community to the lower level. We only had to work with the federations already formed at some point and make the community believe that we have nothing to hide.

What are the sources of your funds? How have you covered all the costs in the past months all by yourself?

We have been funding ourselves and all of our activities. We are the main source. There are volunteer youths in our team. Funds always dry out when working on projects of our likes. It is often like that. One of the issues we have to deal with is actually funding. Despite our difficulties, however, we will continue to break walls.

Are you registered?

I am the founder and the current Chief Executive Officer. There is a five-member board. Yonas Beyene, an architecture based in Addis Abeba, and a best friend of mine, has been supporting the project throughout including in founding it. First we started it as a volunteer work among a group of young individuals. Then with the discussions we had and the need to do so, we have registered ourselves under the civil society organizations.

The Somali region has a new president, Mustafa Omar. I understand that you have personally met him and some of the members in the Somali People's Democratic Party (SPDP). What have you learnt in this new administration's efforts towards changing the region's *status quo*? Do you see the birth of a new region?

It is too early to give a constructive criticism. But I see being in that place is a very challenging task, and it will be a tough task for President Mustefa. The country and its federal government at large are on a kind of a honey-moon period of reforms. The Somali region too is in transition, but it is one of the toughest regions. It suffered a lot. I see Mustefa as a passionate and unifying figure in the region. But as much as there are people who are optimistic about him, there are others who are not. So it is too early to say he is going to be a hero or a failure.

But from your observation so far, what do you think is missing?

Mustefa is a president full of vision and passion, but who needs to have a stronger cabinet in his administration.

The region must have a gender-balanced cabinet too. Women are not participating in Somali region's politics, which must not be the case. The current state of leadership is contrary to the federal government's trial of giving women the power they deserve. It is below a percent. Apart from that, he has to go through a lot as time goes by. Is he strong enough to go for it? I believe so.

What have you discussed with him specifically?

Our discussions were mainly about the Nabad Project and how we can pursue it together. We also talked about how we can bring the displaced people, who have been deprived and fled from their own home. They are isolated, and they still need help to get them to their normal lives. We have also talked on how our project can help in narrowing down the confusion in communication between the people. The youth are being collectively labeled as 'Heegos', so they are moving out while the Diaspora and people like us are moving in. It is not about the youth, it should be what was behind them. We need to move on forward. We need to cross to the future than our grudges in the past.

Do you see a fault line between the system of governance and ethnicity you see in the region? If so how would you want to change it?

The Somali region and its people are devoted for their tribes and a person within from that same area. Somalis are too proud of what is their own. For one, the next election for members of cabinets in the Somali People's Democratic Party (SPDP) will be held soon in few weeks. If we take 10 zones in the region, not your education or experience matter unless your origin represents a certain community. It came as a culture. There are clans and then divided with sub-clans, then is the tribe. Whether you are a Somali of talent, you cannot be at a position to serve your own people unless you are one of their origins while from the same region. That must be changed before it grows more than a destroying factor within the communication line.

You give me the impression that you are in pursuit of consensus in diversity. What are your views on the rise of extreme form of nationalism?

Ethiopia is still a poor country, but rich in history. It had been a country of strong bond and togetherness. The Battle of Adwa is exemplary for it has dictated and made us recall our forefathers, who were united as one to defeat their then enemy. The children of that same generation are now marred with inter-ethnic fights in whatever means. It is not helping us, it never has.



Why is Ethiopia important? What is it for me? Would I be only a Somali? Would I just to be part of the Greater Somalia rather? These issues must be answered before I go on accepting the ethnic extreme side of me.

Whoever is on the power of chair, he is moving the same boat, Ethiopia. PM Abiy is an Oromo. But, we should not be busy of the narrow thinking towards him being there to revenge the wreckage of oppression the Oromo people had been through. It is an opportunity. My education in the UK helped me understand a community, who cares about building a true and working legacy of their nation. They have a name, the Great Britain. They foresee to create a generation bound with its history and an aspect of identity under the nation forward to a century. What we are going through in this country today is the reverse. Why is Ethiopia important? What is it for me? Would I be only a Somali? Would I just to be part of the Greater Somalia rather? These issues must be answered before I go on accepting the ethnic extreme side of me. The world is on globalization by every aspect, and we should frame it as a means to answer for the state of poverty we are in. We have to keep in mind that part of our population do not yet fulfill their basic needs. What are we as Ethiopians? What do we have? All we have is a legacy of a country with history left for us, but it is not helping the reality today. When we are feeding our thinking and get busy on creating our mindset of nationalism as a priority, we will lose the greater picture of making tomorrow prospective for either the politics or the economy. It looks like we are leaving the legacy of our history in the past to the dark. We are not going to take it as a privilege or pass it to the generation we are creating. Not everyone is the same in opinion and that is important. But our differences must be thought to come with a reward, benefiting the whole.

You took the campaign to the Ethiopian Diaspora in Seattle in the US. What were the reactions?

Yes, the Diaspora have been way instrumental in our campaign themed '*Is Cafis iyo midnimo*', the platform for unity and reconciliation. They have been helping us in spreading the information all over. They use the social media better and volunteer to support our vision. They responded quickly in a positive discourse and believed that we will go further, better, and we have printed our footsteps. With the Diaspora, especially in the Western world, we will make sure they all have a voice in our campaign. If we take it to the larger aspect, they are not to remain in being just a Diaspora, but engage to do something for their country. They are called in to their country. These people have come with a different energy with knowledge and skill. They can help invest in their region of origin positively. It is very crucial for them to help in social programs and help the local governments.

It's been nine months since PM Abiy Ahmed came to power. How optimistic are you about the future of Ethiopia and that of the Horn of Africa?

The step of reform as a country is positive. I see it differently now that the Prime Minister has worked well in saving the relationships of his country with neighbors in the horn, especially Eritrea and Somalia. The climate of the geopolitics is vulnerable for making an enemy easily and flame the fire. He is trying to make sure we do not allow having enemies, given our vulnerability. If we have to solve our own burning home, we also need to have peace with those next door. With regard to Ethiopia, I take it a success for calling in the Ethiopian Diaspora for positive engagement. It is one of the right moves. Yet if we have called those in exile to bring chaos back to the country, we must check for it is evidently dangerous. How they are going to use the resource they bring in must be dealt with wisely. I believe local governments must be bold in investing on the youth and make them busy as part of the reform too.

The generation you want to reach is mostly on the Social Media almost 24/7. With you having a life in the UK and probably knowing the importance of social media, however, I can say the Nabad Project is not actively communicated. How far did you promote the project? Which Social Media platform are you active on?

Well, I am not a social media person. But I have a twitter account and few others of the platforms. Being not active has impacted the promotion of the project at some point. It is true that we do not update our activities often in contrary to lots of activities we are doing. Our project has not also been active on reaching out to the mainstream media. We have been distracted with our good missions out there, but we are trying to come out active and reach more of the community we must be addressing.

Tell me about your parents. How invested are they in Filsan's project?

My families are well educated, and it has helped my upbringing. My mother is a business woman and my father is a petroleum engineer and has worked most of his life in Saudi Arabia, for about 38 years. They have always perceived and accepted themselves as Ethiopians. They have made me understand that to the core. They have raised seven of us; four boys and three girls, including me. I am the oldest. My father always had his criticism on the government in Somali region under the former president. I especially want to thank my mother. She is an amazing and strong woman, open-minded that she understands what I am going for in this project. She encourages me with her say "you will indeed get there." It is a privilege to have a mother like that, and I am so thankful.



We want to tell our fellow Ethiopians and take the quote that "it is easy to destroy the nation than to build one."

Going forward, where do you see your place in the society?

We are destined to give what we have - our beliefs and knowledges - and make sure there is a consensus in the communication among Ethiopians. The Nabads are the 'peace makers' in their society. We want to tell our fellow Ethiopians and take the quote that "it is easy to destroy the nation than to build one." The wind of change is there to arrive, and we must take it as an advantage to help set our shared destiny of peace and prosperity. **AS**