

# HORN OF AFRICA BULLETIN

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## Imagining Peace: Ethiopia-Eritrea Rapprochement

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## About Life & Peace Institute

Since its formation, LPI has carried out programmes for conflict transformation in a variety of countries, conducted research, and produced numerous publications on nonviolent conflict transformation and the role of religion in conflict and peacebuilding. The main focus of our work has been on Africa, with the Horn of Africa Programme being established and well-known in the 1990s, not least our work in Somalia. Other initiatives have been carried out in Congo-Brazzaville, Croatia, Sri Lanka and East Timor. We have strengthened the capacity of our civil society partners to address the conflicts in their own context, in some of the most difficult and war-torn countries.

Currently, we run conflict transformation programmes in the Horn of Africa and Great Lakes regions in partnership with local civil society organisations and universities in Somalia, Sudan, Ethiopia, Kenya and the DRC. There is also a common programme including publications, policy work and methodology design based in Sweden.

### Imagining Peace: Ethiopia-Eritrea Rapprochement

The editorial committee of the Horn of Africa Bulletin (HAB) first broached the idea of a thematic issue on the possible process and peace dividend emerging from a rapprochement between Eritrea and Ethiopia in early 2016. However, contextual factors and the sensitivities around the proposed theme discouraged any further follow-up. That the HAB issue on Ethiopia-Eritrea rapprochement can finally see the light of day is a testimony to the profound nature of the changes in Ethiopia unleashed since Prime Minister Abiy ascended to the helm of power, and, the rapidity of the rapprochement process between the two countries.

The shift in relations and the rapprochement is now widely accepted as having been a long time in the making, attributable in part to high-level contacts mediated by the Gulf governments and other supportive entities. The initial statement from the executive committee of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) issued on June 5, 2018, indicating the Ethiopian government's willingness to unconditionally accept the terms of the Algiers Agreements (2000) and the rulings of the Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission (EEBC), led to a flurry of reciprocal visits by the heads of government and high-level officials.<sup>i</sup> On July 9, 2018, during Prime Minister Abiy's trip to Asmara, the two governments signed a 'joint declaration of peace and friendship' which formally ended the state of war between the two countries and committed the Ethiopian side to implementing the decisions of the EEBC regarding the border demarcation. On September 5, 2018, the leaders of Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia signed a tripartite agreement in Asmara, committing the three governments to work on regional peace and joint economic cooperation. Following the signing of the agreement, foreign ministers of the three countries travelled to Djibouti and held meetings with President Ismail Guelleh, in a successful bid to pave the way for eventual rapprochement between Djibouti and Eritrea.<sup>ii</sup> During Ethiopian new year celebrations on 11 September, 2018, the border was reopened along Zalambessa and Bura, and local communities and troops of the two countries celebrated the holiday and were able to cross the border at will. On 18 September, 2018, President Isaias and Prime Minister Abiy signed the Jeddah peace agreement which contains seven articles.<sup>iii</sup>

The formal agreements and negotiations between Eritrea and Ethiopia have been accompanied by the lifting of the proscriptions against the factions of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), the Ginbot 7 (G7) etc. (all of them previously based in Eritrea) and their return to Ethiopia. In a reciprocal gesture, the Ethiopian government has also formally requested Eritrean opposition organizations based in Ethiopia to cease their activities against the Eritrean government.<sup>iv</sup> Travel and trade ties between Eritrea and Ethiopia have been restored and experienced a revival.

The rapprochement between Eritrea and Ethiopia has been greeted with euphoria and broad support from wide sectors of the urban public in both countries. Furthermore, the international and regional reaction to the process has been largely positive and supportive. Both Prime Minister Abiy and President Isaias have been widely acclaimed for taking the initiative to break the deadlock over the conflict. Observers have interpreted the rapprochement as completely overturning the prevailing pattern of relations in the region and hailed the process as a positive step in enhancing the wider peace and security agenda in the Horn of Africa. There is also widely held consensus that the peace dividend specifically in the form of the benefits from enhanced economic links and cooperation and reduction of tensions would help both countries and the larger region. The current rapprochement is anticipated to have a positive impact on efforts to manage and resolve several intra-state conflicts in the Horn such as the civil wars in

South Sudan and Somalia. Peace between Ethiopia and Eritrea is also widely expected to reduce the flow of migrants across the Mediterranean by rendering redundant policies that have supposedly led to the outflow of migrants in search of better opportunities.

In a similar vein, the articles in this issue of the HAB reiterate many of the hopes and expectations associated with peace between Eritrea and Ethiopia. The article by Jason provides a panoramic overview of the potential impact of Ethiopia-Eritrean rapprochement on regional peace and security dynamics. Jason's overview of the larger regional context, while optimistic, is also nuanced in its recognition of potential unpredictable effects over the long term, for instance in terms of the stand-off between Egypt and Ethiopia over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD).

Several articles in this issue seek to explore the dynamics that explain the Eritrean government's acquiescence to the signals emanating from Ethiopia and the Eritrean perspective on the rapprochement. The article by Tania explains the rapprochement and the Eritrean government's willingness to engage with the process, as primarily emanating from the geo-political maneuverings and shifts in the Horn and the Gulf region. Tania's article argues that hopes for political reforms in Eritrea as a by-product of the rapprochement may be overblown and also underlines the parallels between the current rapprochement and the earlier honeymoon period between the two governments which was the prelude to the 1998-2000 war. The article by Olivia also focuses on Eritrea and is optimistic about the positive by-products of the rapprochement process in the form of expanded economic ties between the two countries, the lifting of travel restrictions which she describes as 'low hanging fruit', which over the long term could lead to changes in Eritrea. Olivia's article takes an interesting detour in emphasizing aspects that have been ignored in the conventional narrative on the rapprochement, for instance the risks to Eritrea emanating from the multiple ethno-nationalisms in Ethiopia and their possible domino effect. Martin's article is extremely insightful as befitting his long-term experience with the two countries. His article emphasizes the positive dimensions of the rapprochement, while sounding a cautionary note regarding aspects such as the modalities of the border demarcation and the necessity to institutionalize bilateral relations. The jointly-authored article by Hirt and Abdulkader analyses the challenges and problems of the rapprochement from the vantage point of the Eritrean opposition and diaspora civic groups. The article by Hirt and Abdulkader implicitly subscribes to the 'democratic peace paradigm' in resolving inter-state territorial disputes which assumes that lasting peace is dependent upon democratization.<sup>v</sup> Their articles raise several critical issues in relation to policy and political reforms which they see as integral and having a bearing on the long-term sustainability of the peace process.

Two contributions in this issue diverge from the emphasis and lens utilized by the earlier authors. The article by van Reisen focuses on the migrant crisis and weighs the potential impact of the rapprochement on regional and international efforts to combat human trafficking and smuggling. In the article, she suggests that the rapprochement has created conducive conditions for a renewed effort to tackle the crisis by allowing for different actors such as the Gulf states, governments in the Horn and regional sub-state administrations to coordinate their efforts and resources. The article by Belete analyzes the rapprochement and its potential challenges from an Ethiopian vantage point. After an overview of the geopolitical context that provides the backdrop for the rapprochement, the article discusses the potential challenges and possible solutions. Belete points out that the parallels between the current rapprochement and earlier honeymoon phase of the relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea (a point alluded to by several authors in this issue), provide many useful lessons which should not be ignored.

As stated earlier, the rapprochement has been met with widespread relief and expressions of support from different stakeholders. While understandable, it is also striking how much of the analysis concerning the coverage is undergirded by a certain un-spoken consensus. A substantial component of the media coverage and analysis has exclusively focused on the positive outcomes and peace dividend accruing from Ethiopia-Eritrea peace, while ignoring or sidelining critical gaps and criticism regarding how the process has unfolded.<sup>vi</sup> Coverage and analysis on the rapprochement focuses on potential policy changes in Eritrea which could lead to political liberalization and mitigate the flow of migrants from Eritrea, while curiously sidelining the ramifications of the rapprochement for Ethiopia. A final point is the tendency to understand the conflict as a 'border dispute' at the expense of the trade, currency exchange and investment issues between the two countries, which were a critical contributing factor to the 1998-2000 war. The articles by Tania and Belete provide a necessary corrective to this view of the 1998-2000 war.

The support of Gulf states such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is understood to have been essential to the success of the rapprochement. However, the process has also been marked by the sidelining of key continental and regional actors such as the African Union (AU) and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD). This is an aspect that has been almost completely ignored in the media and observer commentary on the process but its implications have yet to be analysed and understood. Belete's article rightly raises the absence of the AU and the IGAD in the rapprochement as a gap.

The rapprochement has yet to be evaluated through a peacebuilding lens. A defining feature of the rapprochement has been its state-centric character, the absence of public consultations and people to people peace initiatives. Several articles in this issue of the HAB emphasize to varying extents the necessity to involve borderland communities in the peace process and above all in the border demarcation process. The consolidation of peace between Eritrea and Ethiopia will be determined by the degree of popular legitimacy and transparency of the rapprochement process, which suggests the urgency of non-state actors such as religious institutions, civil society and borderland communities to be involved in the process. This point is also spelt out in the 2012 Draft AU Strategy for Enhancing Border Management in Africa, which makes local communities a key pillar in managing border issues in Africa, and states "...by giving community involvement the status of a pillar, this Strategy recognizes the importance of local communities as key stakeholders in the management of borders in Africa. ... decisions and subsequent actions taken with regard to border security will be doomed to fail if they are not backed by these key stakeholders at the borders".<sup>vii</sup>

**Demessie Fantaye, Editor**

## References

<sup>i</sup> A high-level delegation led by Eritrean Foreign Minister Osman Saleh travelled to Addis on 26 June, 2018. On July 8, 2018, an Ethiopian delegation led by Prime Minister Abiy landed in Asmara and was warmly welcomed by the public. On July 14, President Isaias of Eritrea travelled to Ethiopia amidst a warm welcome from the public and formally re-opened the Eritrean embassy in Addis Ababa.

<sup>ii</sup> Shaban, Abdu Rahman Alfa. "Eritrea-Djibouti relations: UN hails successful regional diplomacy." Africanews.com, 2018.

<http://www.africanews.com/2018/09/09/eritrea-djibouti-relations-un-hails-successful-regional-di>

[plomacy//](#).

iii<sup>□</sup> Addis Standard, "Full Text of the Ethio-Eritrea Agreement in Jeddah", September 18, 2018, <https://addisstandard.com/full-text-of-the-ethio-eritrea-agreement-signed-in-jeddah/>. Article 4 of the agreement enjoins both parties to implement the decisions of the EEBC, while article 7 of the agreement calls for the establishment a high-level committee and sub-committees to assure the implementation of the agreement.

iv<sup>□</sup> Plaut, Martin. "Ethiopia Orders 'Eritrean Opposition' Parties Cease Anti-Eritrean Activities." *Tesfanews*, July 29, 2018. <https://www.tesfanews.net/ethiopia-order-eritrea-opposition-cease-anti-eritrea-activities/>.

v<sup>□</sup> For a cursory overview of the debate, see; Owsiak, Andrew P. 2012. 'Signing Up for Peace: International Boundary Agreements, Democracy, and Militarized Interstate Conflict, in *International Studies Quarterly*. Pgs: 59-63; Gibler, Douglas M & Alex Braithwaite. 2013. 'Dangerous Neighbours, Regional Territorial Conflict and the Democratic Peace', *British Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 43, Issue. 4; Gibler, Douglas M. 2007. 'Bordering on Peace: Democracy, Territorial Issues, and Conflict', in *International Studies Quarterly*. Vol:51.

vi<sup>□</sup> For an overview of the type and content of the mainstream coverage of the rapprochement process between the two countries, see; Nyabola, Nanjala. "Why the Eritrea-Ethiopia peace process is good for African politics." [www.aljazeera.com](http://www.aljazeera.com), 2018. <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/eritrea-ethiopia-peace-good-news-africa-180711081433471.html>; *Addis Fortune*. "Breaking the Ethiopia-Eritrea Impasse." June 16, 2018. <https://addisfortune.net/columns/breaking-the-ethiopia-eritrea-impasse/>; In the Ethiopian context, criticism and questions regarding the rapprochement are often equated with the opposition to Prime Minister Abiy and the political reform agenda he is pursuing, which has in a way stifled debate and discussions on the issue. Criticisms and discussions on the rapprochement are confined to articles on certain websites such as the [www.aigaforum.com](http://www.aigaforum.com) and <http://www.tigraionline.com/>.

vii<sup>□</sup> African Union Border Programme. Draft African Union Strategy for Enhancing Border Management in Africa. May 2012. [https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwiKiJONwOTdAhULxoUKHT2VA64QFjAAegQICBAC&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.peaceau.org%2Fuploads%2FAU-DSD-WORKSHOP-MARCH-2013%2FBorder-Programme-docs%2FAU-BM-Strategy-Revised%2520Draft.pdf&usg=AOvVaw3\\_\\_8um8cM4gafn2XKKeSsz](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwiKiJONwOTdAhULxoUKHT2VA64QFjAAegQICBAC&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.peaceau.org%2Fuploads%2FAU-DSD-WORKSHOP-MARCH-2013%2FBorder-Programme-docs%2FAU-BM-Strategy-Revised%2520Draft.pdf&usg=AOvVaw3__8um8cM4gafn2XKKeSsz).

AFRICA, DJIBOUTI, EGYPT, ERITREA, ETHIOPIA, HORN OF AFRICA, KENYA, REGIONAL PERSPECTIVES, SOMALIA, SOMALILAND, SOUTH SUDAN, SUDAN, UGANDA, UNITED ARAB EMIRATES, YEMEN

## Eritrea-Ethiopia rapprochement and wider dynamics of regional trade, politics and security

By Jason Mosley

For the Horn of Africa and the wider Red Sea region, 2018 has been a momentous year. In particular the recent rapprochement between Ethiopia and Eritrea opens the possibility of redrawing regional economic and security dynamics which have become entrenched over the last two decades. To understand the broader implications, we need a multi-level analysis, starting with the interests and dynamics of the two governments themselves, then considering regional and global dynamics.

### Beyond the impasse in the Horn of Africa

The 'no war, no peace' stalemate has been a primary axis for instability within both countries, with both governments supporting the other's opposition movements (including armed opposition). Although this dynamic fits into a long-standing regional pattern of mutual destabilisation, it cuts across the national and economic security interests of both countries.

In particular, landlocked Ethiopia is seeking economic (and thus political) security through becoming a net exporter (and an accruer of foreign exchange reserves), via the physical integration of transport networks via its neighbours to the global market, and to some degree through exports of power and key commodities (e.g. sugar) to its neighbours themselves. Ethiopian foreign policy since the 1950s has been characterised to some degree by a strategy of resisting encirclement and seeking to prevent the emergence of an effective and well-resourced state with contrary interests on its periphery (especially Sudan and Somalia). To some degree this has shifted since the 1990s, but only in recent months has the government in Addis Ababa openly embraced what is in effect a policy of mutual interdependence — although new Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's administration has yet to officially update the 2002 Foreign Affairs and National Security Strategy which underpins Ethiopia's economic agenda.

From Asmara, the priorities under President Isaias Afewerki's government appear to have been first and foremost continued existence for the state, in the face of hostile relations with Sudan and Ethiopia in particular. (Hence the invitation to Somali Federal Government President Farmaajo to normalise relations in early August.) Asmara presents itself as a small actor, doing its best to avoid being swamped by dynamics driven by larger players (especially across the Red Sea, or by 'global forces' – read, the 'imperialistic' United States). The rapprochement is opportunistic as a reaction to drivers from inside Ethiopia. However, Eritrea's shifting relations with the Gulf States during the last three years are crucial here.

### Emirati influence: a new order?

This brings in the next level of dynamics, revolving around the Red Sea and the Nile basin, where these developments would appear to have uneven impacts.

First, because of the prominent presence of Emirati crown prince Mohamed bin Zayed in Ethiopia amid the rapprochement, and particularly because both Isaias and Ethiopian PM Abiy Ahmed visited Abu Dhabi following the restoration of relations and the reopening of the Eritrean embassy in Addis Ababa, there has been much speculation on the Emirati role in the rapprochement. The Emiratis extended an emergency loan/deposit of \$1bn to the National Bank of Ethiopia, with a pledge of a further \$2bn in investments in the tourism industry, to help relieve the country's persistent balance of payments pressure. This Emirati influence is seen as a part of a wider push for hegemony in the Horn of Africa, linked to the Emirati (and Saudi) agenda in the wider region – which is mainly concerned with containing Iranian influence in the absence of a coherent US-Iran containment policy, countering Turkish/Qatari support for MB-style Islamist reform movements that threaten the ruling families in the Gulf States, and countering jihadist movements.<sup>1</sup> In the region, this is playing out most clearly in the conflict in Yemen. However, it's not clear yet whether the Eritrea-Ethiopia rapprochement fits neatly into this pattern.

Eritrea – along with other coastal states in the Horn – has indeed engaged the Saudi-Emirati regional security/counter-terrorism alliance, with an Emirati military base established in Assab, as part of the operations in Yemen. Asmara has also downgraded relations with Doha (with the subsequent impact that Qatari troops were withdrawn from the disputed Eritrea-Djibouti border).

However, Ethiopia has not declared sides in the Gulf crisis. Rather, it recently improved relations with Doha, and al-Jazeera has re-opened an office in Addis Ababa. It is not clear that Ethiopia wants to be drawn into that crisis. And as an emerging middle-sized player, it is not obvious that it can be pressured into doing so. As such, an important indication that an Emirati-led regional security order is emerging would be a clear signal from Ethiopia that it has joined that alliance, and a downgrade/severing of relations with Doha. (Turkey is another important investor in Ethiopia, which also militates against such an outcome.)

The UAE may have achieved a short-to-medium term alignment which will help it to regain clear influence over the federal government in Somalia, which also tried to remain aloof in the Saudi/Emirati vs Qatar crisis. President Farmaajo's visit to Asmara is interesting in this context, although it is unclear that Isaias would want to pressure Mogadishu at this point. Ethiopia has more to be gained from cooperation with the Emiratis – Ethiopian support for federal solutions to regional stability is unlikely to have shifted with the change of government.

### **Links to the crisis in the Gulf States**

For the Emiratis and Saudis, a more stable Horn of Africa, and in particular, the cultivation of influence across the African side of the Red Sea (including Sudan, Egypt and the Horn), is part of a regional and national security strategy linked to

important shifts in the last decade.

First, the Arab Spring from 2010 presented a fundamental challenge to the existing political economy of the Gulf monarchies. Revolutions in Egypt and Yemen were too close for comfort. Bahrain has also struggled for stability, with its resources more limited than KSA or UAE to allow it to spend its way out of its legitimacy crisis. Support from KSA helped Bahrain to avoid revolution, but those dynamics have not been erased. In the meantime, KSA and UAE also worked actively to undermine the Morsi administration in Egypt and support the coup by El-Sisi in 2013.

Since 2015, with the ascension of King Salman in KSA, and particularly with the appointment of his son Mohamed as Crown Prince and Defence Minister, KSA regional security policy has shifted dramatically. By the end of 2015, KSA had launched a regional counter-terrorism alliance, and intervened militarily in Yemen. UAE influence on Mohamed bin Salman seems clear, with Emirati Crown Prince Mohamed bin Zayed playing a mentoring role to his younger counterpart.

Continuing insecurity in Yemen is seen as a threat to KSA/UAE because of the opportunity it creates for Iranian influence on the Arabian Peninsula. Shifts in US policy under the Obama administration towards regional security – in terms of its response to the Arab Spring, but more importantly in terms of its attempts to normalise relations with Iran in exchange for a halt to its nuclear program – presented shifts in the regional balance of power in ways that the KSA found threatening. Iran has a demographic advantage and has for years been increasing its influence in Iraq. It is also a potential major hydrocarbons producer, and its Islamic revolutionary democracy presents a fundamentally different political model that threatens KSA's dynastic oligopolistic autocracy.

The Gulf Crisis – with the KSA and UAE spearheading an effort to isolate and undermine the Qatari royal family – is an extension of these dynamics. Doha has supported Islamist reform movements (particularly the Muslim Brotherhood) across the wider region. Like Iran's political system, Qatar and its ally Turkey represent incompatible political economy models. Although KSA/UAE concerns probably extend beyond the wider Red Sea region (encompassing competing visions for influence across North Africa and especially in Iraq and Syria), the Horn of Africa and Nile basin are important regional theatres for influence.

Turkey is a major investor and potential influencer in Somalia, Ethiopia and – more recently – Sudan. As an economic competitor, Turkey also presents a challenge to the UAE. Turkey has embassies in every country in the Horn of Africa and has developed a regional foreign policy framework.<sup>ii</sup> A Turkish company runs the port of Mogadishu<sup>iii</sup>, and recently the governments of Turkey and Sudan reached an agreement to rehabilitate a formerly important port in Suakin, Sudan.<sup>iv</sup>

### **Nile Basin politics and development**

Even less conclusive is the outlook for Nile basin relations, although Ethiopia

appears to be the winner in the near term.

Tensions between Ethiopia and Egypt over the development of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam on the Blue Nile have continued for several years. One source of leverage for Cairo was its relations with Asmara, with the occasional rumour of an Egyptian military presence there (or more recently a rumour about Berbera), a pressure point on Ethiopia. (The apparent murder of GERD chief engineer Simegnaw Bekele will fuel such conspiracies.) However, with the rapprochement, Egypt loses an important source of potential leverage. Egyptian relations with Sudan are already strained, with Khartoum fairly well aligned with Ethiopia on Nile Basin development.

However, Egypt and the UAE are allies. This shift may bring some tensions between Egypt and the Gulf players, including some pressure from Cairo for the Emiratis/Saudis to lean on the Ethiopians about Nile basin development.

### **Geopolitical implications of a changing Red Sea context**

The third and final level is where post-Cold War, post-9/11 American/Western foreign policy in the region is bumping up against other interests, especially from China (and to a lesser extent, India).

The most immediate dimension will be the unravelling of the case for the UN sanctions regime against Eritrea, which are tied to its involvement in Somalia and its unresolved dispute with Djibouti. Given President Farmaajo's visit, the former case is collapsing. Accusations of destabilisation would seem unlikely to continue to hold much water, given the restoration of relations with Ethiopia. A range of players with an interest in Djibouti (the US, UAE, Saudi Arabia and Ethiopia, foremost) can be expected to lean on Guelleh's government to accept an end to the sanctions regime in exchange for some negotiated settlement of the dispute.

Competition with China for security and especially economic influence and access in the strategic Red Sea region is already underway: China has displaced DP World for important port infrastructure in Djibouti, where Beijing also operates its first permanent overseas military base (alongside a range of other players).

To the extent that the US has had influence on the rapprochement, perhaps particularly in encouraging Emirati involvement, a question remains as to how this might affect its kinetic-led counter-terrorism strategy in the region. This will play out largely in Somalia. In the medium term, should peace hold with Eritrea, Ethiopia may be in a position to redeploy its military resources more assertively to the east and west, although it's not clear that it would do so. For now, all regional players remain committed to the FGS model in Somalia. However, a more coherent IGAD (including restored Eritrean membership) might shift towards a mediated outcome, to try to bring in some elements of al-Shabaab (especially given the penetration of the national security infrastructure in Mogadishu).

It is difficult to see a deep relationship emerging between the United States and

Eritrea, given the foundational role of ‘malign US imperial influence’ in Eritrea’s explanations of and approach to regional foreign policy (and its historical narrative of the betrayal of Eritrea’s nationalists by the West). However, should that shift occur, it will present an interesting opportunity to observe the rewriting of important aspects of Eritrea’s foundational mythology in real time.

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<sup>i</sup> De Waal, Alex. “Beyond the Red Sea: A new driving force in the politics of the Horn.” African Arguments, July 11, 2018.

<http://africanarguments.org/2018/07/11/beyond-red-sea-new-driving-force-politics-horn-africa/>.

<sup>ii</sup> The government of Turkey developed an ‘Africa Action Plan’ in 1998. Activities and actions to realize the ‘Africa Action Plan’ begun in 2002 after the Justice and Democracy Party (usually abbreviated as the AK) won the elections in 2002. The AK party headed by Recep Teyyip Erdogan is still in power after winning the controversial 2018 elections.

<sup>iii</sup> Jama, Mo Ahmed. “Somalia gives Turkish firm 20-year contract to run Mogadishu port.” WARGANE. <https://wargane.com/2018/03/04/somalia-gives-turkish-firm-20-year-contract-run-mogadishu-port.html>.

<sup>iv</sup> Kucukgokmen, Ali & Khalid Abdelaziz. “Turkey to restore Sudanese Red Sea port and build naval dock.” Reuters, December 26, 2017. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-sudan-port/turkey-to-restore-sudanese-red-sea-port-and-build-naval-dock-idUSKBN1EK0ZC>.



## Where now for the Horn?

By Martin Plaut

I have a book on my shelf entitled: "Eritrea and Ethiopia: from conflict to co-operation". In it is a chapter by Andreas Eshete, who wrote: "Poised at the present favourable position – as free and equals [sic.] – what political ties should Ethiopia and Eritrea try to forge? I believe we should seek a form of political affiliation – say, a confederation or commonwealth – that would bind together Ethiopia and Eritrea while preserving the freedom and equality of the two communities. A common political life would steadfastly safeguard the abiding interests of Ethiopia and Eritrea is available."<sup>i</sup>

The book, edited by Amare Tekle, was published by the prolific Red Sea Press in 1994. Dr Tekle was not just a scholar: he was the Commissioner who oversaw the Eritrean referendum that led to the country's independence in 1993. Not everyone would have agreed with Andreas Eshete's position, but it was not a particularly contentious argument at the time. The past two decades have been so disfigured by conflict and animosity that it is easy to forget that between 1991 (when Asmara and Addis fell to Eritrean and mainly Tigrayan rebels respectively) and 1998 relations between the two countries were really good. For example, how many remember that the security of Meles Zenawi was guaranteed by Eritrean troops during the first years of his rule?<sup>ii</sup>

Are we about to return to a similarly positive and collaborative relationship between the two countries? The answer is: possibly. The Eritrean government's semi-official website, Tesfanews, published a poorly judged article crowing over the humiliation that has been inflicted on their former allies in the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF).<sup>iii</sup> Tesfanews declared that the: "TPLF as a political entity is dead. Its soul has been bound in hell, but for a little while, its skeleton will be walking like a zombie to create chaos and harm innocent civilians to disrupt the ongoing transition in Ethiopia and terrorize its people... The devil and its surrogate, the TPLF junta has been cornered and thrown into the bottomless pit."<sup>iv</sup> This is not the language that good neighbours use about each other. The TPLF may have lost power since Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed came to power in Ethiopia on 2 April 2018, but it is still an influential force just across the border. How do such sentiments add to reconciliation?

Having said this, there is no doubt that there are other signs that point in the opposite direction. There have been, of course, the visit by Prime Minister Abiy to Eritrea and the return trip by President Isaias to the Ethiopian capital. The receptions they received can only be described as ecstatic. Thousands turned out to greet them. The first flight from Addis to Asmara has been successfully completed.

So what are the issues ahead that need to be confronted?

Firstly, the border itself needs to be fully and officially demarcated. This should be undertaken carefully and will probably require the assistance of United Nations

cartographers. Fortunately, the UN has already pledged any support that is required.<sup>v</sup> As António Guterres, the UN secretary general said: “The UN is ready to do whatever the two parties ask us to do...The UN will be entirely at their disposal to do whatever is necessary to facilitate the success of what needs to be done.” The border is over 1,000 kilometres in length and cuts through rugged terrain, villages and farms: this will not be an easy task.

Secondly, it is vital that the border is designated with a measure of humanity. The Algiers Agreement ending the 1998 – 2000 war did not allow for this: both countries demanded a strictly legalistic approach to the issue.<sup>vi</sup> The subsequent ruling left many communities along the border facing transfer to the other country, or being deprived of access to fields, churches or traditional trading routes. The issues have been described by Jean-Louis Péninou.<sup>vii</sup> It is really important that both countries show a measure of flexibility and do not demand their rights. As Portia argued in Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice*, justice must be tempered with mercy.<sup>viii</sup> “Though justice be thy plea, consider this: That in the course of justice none of us should see salvation.” Peace and reconciliation will require a sympathetic interpretation of the rules.

Thirdly, let neither nation make the mistake of the past of relying on personal ties to administer complex international relations. Prior to the 1998 war when difficulties arose between Ethiopia and Eritrea they were often resolved by President Isaias picking up the phone to Prime Minister Meles, or vice versa. Useful as these interventions may have been, they were no substitute for the arduous, detailed work of civil servants, who are required to cement lasting ties. If reconciliation is to be permanent, let the bureaucrats play their proper role.

Fourthly, it is unlikely that peace will be permanent if there is a continuing exodus of refugees from either country. This implies that development needs to be encouraged and human rights observed. Ethiopia has already made impressive strides on both fronts. Its growth is among the fastest in Africa, rebel movements have been unbanned, political prisoners freed, the media is less restricted. Eritrea has only begun to go down this road. Growth has been poor to negligible, finances are maintained abroad and no official budget is published. On the human rights front even less progress has been made. Some religious prisoners are reported to have been freed (a most welcome development) but political and other prisoners continue to languish in jail. The constitution has not been enforced, there has been no announcement of free and fair elections and no independent media of any kind is allowed to operate. Although there are reports that the Eritrean military are beginning to move away from the border, there has as yet been little indication that National Service (or conscription) will be reduced to eighteen months.<sup>ix</sup> Unless these issues are tackled the flight to Ethiopia, Sudan and beyond is likely to continue.

Finally, it is important that both countries encourage peace in the region, so that there is less incentive for outside powers to stir up trouble in the Horn. For Ethiopia this means settling its long-standing row with Egypt over the Great Renaissance Dam. Unless this is filled slowly it will deprive Cairo of so much water it is hard to see how the Egyptians

will survive. This issue – which also involves Sudan – appears to be on the agenda, which is encouraging.<sup>x</sup> For Eritrea this means resolving its border dispute with Djibouti, which has festered for far too many years. Djibouti has already appealed to the UN: Eritrea needs to respond positively and imaginatively.<sup>xi</sup> Eritrea also needs to extricate itself from involvement in the Yemeni war. This has dragged powers from afar a field as Turkey and Iran into the region. Eritrean involvement needs to be ended, even if this threatens lucrative ties with Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

Clearly, then, there is much for both sides to tackle. None of these problems are insuperable. They require foresight, good judgement – and above all – goodwill. So far only the latter has been much in evidence. Both the president and the prime minister need to build on the enthusiasm of their peoples for peace to cement reconciliation in place. Then, who knows? Perhaps even Andreas Eshete's dream of a confederation or commonwealth between these old adversaries might be realised.

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## The Promise and Pitfalls of the New Peace for Eritrea

By Olivia Asmara Woldemikael

The agreement of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed of Ethiopia and President Isaias Afwerki of Eritrea on 9 July 2018, ended a 20-year stalemate between the two nations.<sup>i</sup> The long overdue reconciliation has ushered in optimism and hope of swift reform in Eritrea. Eritreans all over the world are celebrating with tears of joy as relatives are reunited and there is a chance for a political opening for the first time in twenty-five years.<sup>ii</sup> The widespread jubilation reveals the deep popular longings for peace and the hidden sufferings of the Eritrean people. During the honeymoon period of the rapprochement, it's important to recognise the opportunities for domestic change within Eritrea and the potential spoilers. This article will first explain how the no-peace-no-war status quo was the foundation of national politics, and then discuss the consequences of the detente for the regime and the society.

### The Border as the Means to the Centralization of Power

The border war from 1998-2000 and the resulting standoff has defined Eritrean politics and the everyday lives of Eritreans since independence. Occurring only five years after the 30-year war of Eritrean Independence,<sup>iii</sup> the two-year land dispute was a symbolic battle for regional dominance. It was also a loose end that should have been addressed in 1993 when the referendum granting Eritrea sovereignty passed.<sup>iv</sup> The matter of the borderline, in many ways, was a technicality that escalated into a violent conflict, lasting decades without resolution. While the emergent no-war no-peace had an immeasurably high economic and human cost for the Eritrean people, the regime has used the perpetual threat of war to its advantage. The guerrilla leader-cum president, Isaias, instrumentalised the military stalemate with Ethiopia to consolidate power and eliminate all potential competitors and contenders for power.

Eritrea's frozen bilateral relations with its largest neighbour Ethiopia, compounded by UN sanctions<sup>v</sup> and almost non-existent diplomatic relations with most Western countries, rendered it a global pariah. The regime further sealed off the nation by expelling all foreign aid agencies in the mid-2000s.<sup>vi</sup> The extreme isolation of the country fostered the perfect conditions for totalitarianism. It allowed President Isaias, the only head of state since Eritrea's independence, to bring the whole population under his iron-rule with impunity. A closed border with Ethiopia on one side and the Red Sea on the other, physically boxed Eritreans in. The citizenry was only able to leave at the great risk of being shot by their own government, kidnapped, or taken advantage of by smugglers.<sup>vii</sup> In the walled-off nation, there was little foreign influence in domestic politics; limited imports or exports, little access to media outside of the state-produced sources, nearly non-existent internet connection for the average Eritrean, and no international pressure for elections.

In most countries, the border represents a barely-governed periphery and a political outskirts at the edge of the state's centre of authority. In Eritrea, however, the physical

delimitations of the nation and the border as a conceptual marker were the most salient features of national politics from independence until today. The rapprochement of Eritrea and Ethiopia will therefore compel the state to fundamentally reconfigure its apparatus of control. Instead of rigid and heavy-handed repression, President Isaias may adopt more institutionalised techniques of dominance that rely on the constitution and the law in order to maintain the current authoritarian system.

### **Eritrea as An Island, No Longer**

In the age of globalisation, the Eritrean people had been on an island. Yet, the society's utter sequestration flouted regional history. Eritrea's multi-ethnic population and position on the Red Sea makes it a natural point of commerce, cultural exchange, and transit.<sup>viii</sup> With ties restored with Ethiopia and the UN sanctions likely to be lifted,<sup>ix</sup> Eritreans will once again enter into the global economy and media-spheres. The new flights connecting Eritrea's capital Asmara through Ethiopia's capital Addis Ababa, to the African continent and the world, will bring a new opening to the society.

Prior to the July 2018 peace summit, the Eritrean regime had been highly successful in maintaining ideological isolation. Hardly anyone was allowed in and no forums for political discussion were permitted. The flights from neighbouring Eastern African countries with large Eritrean diasporas were prohibitively expensive and visas were nearly impossible to procure. The highly active political discussion on the internet on sites like Dehai,<sup>x</sup> Awate,<sup>xi</sup> Assenna,<sup>xii</sup> and Asmarino<sup>xiii</sup> (among others), were nearly inaccessible to Eritreans in Eritrea. Now as Eritrea is connected to the vast network of Ethiopian airlines, the nearby and far-flung diaspora can and will return. With them, they'll expose Eritreans to the world outside of Eritrea. As a coastal nation, relatively inexpensive and high-speed connection to the fibre optic cables under the sea will suddenly be possible allowing Eritrea's citizens to participate in the ongoing political dialogue beyond the regime's purview.<sup>xiv</sup> Trade will flow through Eritrea's underutilised and highly strategic ports of Massawa and Assab,<sup>xv</sup> bringing with it economic growth and regional integration. The combined forces of foreign influences, newly accessible media, and economic opening will loosen the control of the Eritrean government, sowing the seeds for political change.

### **Ethnonationalism: An Emerging Threat to the Eritrean Nation**

The strategic and physical importance of the Eritrean border for nation-building cannot be underestimated. The closed border between Eritrea and Ethiopia was the locus of national identity—on one side were Eritreans and on the other, were Ethiopians. In the context of an ongoing conflict, Eritrean leadership forged a militarised and highly nationalist identity. The most well-known example of this is the mandatory "national service" program in which all young Eritreans attended military training and were conscripted for years of labour.<sup>xvi</sup> The practice was a thinly-veiled tactic to maintain a standing army of citizen-soldiers. It was not only the youth, but the whole nation that was kept in a state of constant vigilance, watchful and worried about security and survival. This martial national identity is a form of patriotism born from the shared

traumas and human sacrifice of the 30-year war with Ethiopia and fuelled by the looming threat of renewed conflict.

The other source of Eritrean national identity comes from the geographic divide drawn by the Italian colonists and the experience of Eritreans under colonialism. The shared histories, religion, languages, and heritages of the politically and culturally dominant ethnic group in Eritrea and of the two dominant ethnic groups in Ethiopia, however, cut across the border. A new solidarity among these three groups—the Tigrinya in Eritrea and the Tigray and Amhara in Ethiopia—could be the basis for a strong ethnonationalism that erodes the current Eritrean identity rooted in military-conflict and colonially geography. The alignment of these politically powerful groups could encourage other, disfranchised groups to seek religious, ethnic, and other shared cross-border cultural identities. Closer ties to Ethiopia carries with it a heightened risk of ethnic conflict that would tear the fabric of the contemporary Eritrean national identity and throw both countries back into turmoil and civil strife. For the two nations to remain at peace, the Eritrean leadership and people will have to reconsider what it means to be Eritrean beyond being anti-Ethiopia.

### **Conclusion: The Potentials for Change**

President Isaias' move to open ties with Ethiopia diverges from his previous policies, which has caused Eritreans to speculate about his sudden change of character.<sup>xvii</sup> However, these recent developments might be better understood in light of both internal and external pressures for change. Incentives and closed-door negotiations certainly were offered to his regime from the Gulf states,<sup>xviii</sup> and perhaps, the powerful European countries that are increasingly tiring of receiving Eritrean refugees.<sup>xix</sup> Domestically, Isaias' repressive regime was becomingly unsustainable. Even well-to-do Eritreans face daily electricity outages, often lack access to running water, and have low wages and limited choice of goods. Eritrea had reached a breaking point with its dire economic deprivation and staggeringly high youth exit estimated as up to 5,000 fleeing per month.<sup>xx</sup>

The recent accomplishments—restoration of telecommunications, flights, and promises of cooperation—between Eritrea and Ethiopia have been called the “low-hanging fruit” in the sphere of diplomacy.<sup>xxi</sup> In a similar manner, President Isaias will most likely introduce politically expedient reforms domestically with limited give in the areas of political and religious freedoms. Following the detente, there are already rumours that the national service will be reduced from its current indefinite terms to the mandated two years of service.<sup>xxii</sup> This may prompt Ethiopia to close refugee camps housing ordinary citizens, in addition to political dissidents who worry about their future safety.<sup>xxiii</sup>

To revive the economically depressed country, President Isaias would be wise to allow privatization of the economy and greater foreign investment. Eritrean citizens will then finally have an opportunity to pursue careers outside of national service and the state-controlled economy, and to raise their standards of living. Whether these changes will be

enough to placate the population for the time being or push them to demand that political reform accompany economic development will only be revealed in time. The moment facing the Eritrean regime and populace is uncertain, but pregnant with possibilities for both the regime and the Eritrean people.

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## Back to square one between Eritrea and Ethiopia?

By Tanja Müller

### Eritrean foreign policy and the repercussions of geopolitical re-alignments in the Horn

The recent rapprochement between Eritrean and Ethiopia has taken many seasoned observers of geopolitical dynamics in the Horn by surprise, not least due to the perceived speed with which it was pushed by new Ethiopian Prime Minister Dr. Abiy Ahmed.<sup>[i]</sup>

Different explanations have been offered for the latter, ranging from threats posed by predominately Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) hardliners within the Ethiopian government, to claims that key foundations for the peace process were already laid by former Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn, and in addition pushed by Donald Yamamoto, acting head of the US State Department's Africa bureau, during a rare visit to the region in April 2018. And while it is undoubtedly true that looked at from the Ethiopian side, changes in its stance towards Eritrea, triggered partly by multiple internal political dynamics within Ethiopia, could be detected as early 2015, the claim that US involvement was vital to the process seems to misunderstand wider geopolitical dynamics in the Horn and beyond.<sup>[ii]</sup>

I will focus on the Eritrean part of the equation, and make the case that, after its initial silence,<sup>[iii]</sup> Eritrea's reaction to and engagement with the process instigated by Dr Abiy Ahmed, can usefully be read as keeping with its foreign policy engagement since independence. Arguably, it in fact follows similar patterns and objectives as those of the once liberation movement turned government, even if such an historical analysis goes beyond what is possible in this article.<sup>[iv]</sup> This focus on Eritrea as an aspiring assertive foreign policy actor adds a valuable dimension to assessing potential future dynamics.

The foreign policy of Eritrea as an independent state was from the start underpinned by Eritrean identity politics combined with long-term survival strategies in a contested geopolitical environment within the Horn and the wider Red Sea area. It had as its key reference point a narrative of successful military struggle against Ethiopia as the Horn's hegemonic power, but also victory against the wider geopolitical interests and agendas of both sides in the Cold War. A glorified version of this process became an important part of the foundational myth of Eritrean statehood, with the contours of the country's map being a vital visual symbol of the prime importance of territory as a component of Eritrean identity. It cemented a belief among the Eritrean leadership in its military capacity to fend off any contestation of Eritrean territory and its boundaries, coupled with an assertive stance on the right to defend its own interests in line with international law and global treaties, regardless of global geopolitical power dynamics.<sup>[v]</sup> It is in this light that the multiple border wars of various intensity Eritrea was involved in with all its neighbours need to be understood. The belief in Eritrea's rightful position under international law with regard to the no-peace-no-war stalemate with Ethiopia in turn was

behind the Eritrean insistence on Ethiopian troop withdrawals from contested border areas before any peace talks could take place.

So why did Eritrea apparently change its stance, even though neither the latest Ethiopian initiative nor the Joint Declaration on Peace and Friendship signed by both parties offer a more detailed plan for troops withdrawals and future trade agreements than previous offers of engagement from the Ethiopian side?<sup>[vi]</sup> While Eritrea has often been described as a pariah state, bent on self-reliance coupled with self-imposed isolation and characterised by human rights abuses, such a representation was never the full story. It owed more to skilful Ethiopian diplomacy aimed at isolating Eritrea, and the war on terror that made security concerns the overarching driving force of engagement with the Horn by key actors in the global community. For the latter, Ethiopia was seen as a reliable partner, whereas Eritrea, in simply following the tried and tested foreign policy formula of the Horn-to support the enemy of your enemy- could be accused of abetting Islamist insurgents.<sup>[vii]</sup>

After Eritrean efforts to prove in particular to the United States that it also was a viable and trustworthy ally in the war against terror had failed, Eritrea turned to different powers in the Middle East to retain significance as an important geopolitical actor. Using its strategic location along the Red Sea, Eritrea accommodated military presence and/or intelligence operations from diverse and competing actors including Iran, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Israel as a way to meet its economic survival and security needs while retaining the largest possible amount of agency.<sup>[viii]</sup>

These policies of making the best of its perceived geopolitical importance saw a major shift only from 2015 onwards, following the decision of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to assemble an alliance of Arab states and to go to war against the Ansar Allah movement (more commonly referred to as the Houthi) in Yemen, often regarded as Iranian proxies. While Djibouti seemed the logical hub from where to launch aerial and naval operations in Yemen, a fall out between Djibouti and the UAE in 2015 made this impossible. Eritrea thus stepped into the fray, offering the port of Assab and training grounds for allied Yemeni forces. Port facilities in Assab were in due course expanded by the UAE, a large military base was built, and airport facilities modernised.<sup>[ix]</sup> But Eritrea now had to take sides, thus when the Saudi-led coalition turned to isolating Qatar as an alleged sponsor of terrorism, Eritrea felt obliged to tow the same line. This in turn had repercussions for Eritrea's relations with Djibouti, where Qatar had acted as a mediator in the dispute between both countries since 2010 and had peacekeeping troops stationed at the border, an involvement that ceased as a consequence.<sup>[x]</sup>

For Ethiopia, the intensifying engagement of key Arab powers in the Horn with the UAE as a new driving force, and the close links of the latter with Eritrea, triggered alarm bells. Successive Ethiopian governments have always retained a suspicious attitude towards Arab influence in the Horn, and already at the time of the Eritrean liberation struggle deployed propaganda depicting the Eritrean independence struggle as an Arab ploy to weaken Ethiopia and secure Arab dominance in the Horn.<sup>[xi]</sup> In turn, the UAE

and its allies offered reassurances to Ethiopia, not only on the diplomatic front but equally in relation to economic linkages that saw the UAE and aligned Arab states offer an alternative to Chinese investment in infrastructure and other projects.

This raises the broader question of the long term agenda of the UAE in the Horn and what this may mean for the geopolitical position of Eritrea, beyond the need for a quiet hinterland in relation to the war in Yemen and counteracting the influence of Iran and the Qatar-Turkey axis.<sup>[xii]</sup> While concrete details are hard to come by, the UAE seems to have played an important behind the scenes role in the rapprochement between Eritrea and Ethiopia and as a visible gesture of its importance conferred the highest civil honour, the 'Order of Zayed' on the leaders of both countries at a summit in Abu Dhabi shortly after the joint declaration of peace.<sup>[xiii]</sup> Announcements since, for example to build a UAE financed oil pipeline linking the Eritrean port of Assab to the Ethiopian capital, point to longer term engagement strategies, not least on the economic front.

In all these manoeuvres, Ethiopia thus far arguably has enforced its position as regional hegemon and managed to avoid taking clear sides in the complex three-sided dispute in the Middle East pitting the Arab axis led by the UAE and Saudi Arabia on the one hand against the Iranian bloc, and the Qatar and Turkey coalition.<sup>[xiv]</sup>

A small country like Eritrea, even with an important strategic coastline, has much less room for manoeuvre in this new geopolitical environment, as Eritrea's quasi enforced change in its relationship with Qatar has shown, and more recently the odd expression of support for Saudi Arabia and condemnation of Canada in an official Eritrean statement in relation to a spat of no direct relevance to Eritrea.<sup>[xv]</sup> These dynamics, combined with additional shifts in the Horn region involving Eritrea and Sudan as well as Djibouti and Somalia that seemingly strengthened the Ethiopian orbit of influence,<sup>[xvi]</sup> are likely to have led to the calculation by the Eritrean side that in order to take advantage of the changing geopolitical environment and not simply become a pawn in the battle ground of Middle Eastern rivalries, a re-alignment with Ethiopia was the best way forward.

Thus, while Eritrea used the opportunity provided by its strategic position in relation to the war in Yemen to put itself on the map again as an important regional actor, it equally seemed to have realized that to be the reliable hinterland for a war occurring next door does not provide the foundations for a more enhanced regional role and peace.

But has the rather vague declaration signed by both recent adversaries the potential to achieve a new area of cooperation between Eritrea and Ethiopia? It is as vague and much less detailed than the Asmara Pact from 1993, that was to settle the multiple issues of partition then but proved to be a mere declaration of intent.<sup>[xvii]</sup> And in a more general climate of cooperation on the African continent, Eritrea remains one of only three countries who thus far have refused to make any commitments to the African Union's Continental Free Trade Area that is envisaged to enter into force in January 2019. Lest it be forgotten, even though this was downplayed at the time, one of the dynamics behind the outbreak of the 1998-2000 Ethio-Eritrean war were highly divergent approaches towards economic relations on the part of the two states.

Equally, the visual representation of the new peace may act as a cautious reminder of 1991: Then as now, jubilant peoples from both countries were seen dancing in the streets, hugging each other and being simply overjoyed. In parallel, we see the leaders of both countries in big hugs and smiles, going out of their way to praise each other – the main difference being that in the case of Ethiopia, we have a new leader, while the Eritrean president is the very same person – a fact that in itself may provide a powerful symbol of how little might indeed have changed in the structures underpinning the relationship between both countries. I have argued elsewhere that this time around, in spite of many worrying similarities, the reaction of the majority of ordinary people offers hope that peace is irreversible.<sup>[xviii]</sup> In addition, the stalemate that lasted for 16 years has become hurtful for both sides, which makes a lasting solution more likely. One should also not forget that in the first few years after Eritrean independence, Eritrea and Ethiopia collaborated in their foreign policy driven by similar aims and objectives in the Horn and beyond, stretching as far as the Congo.<sup>[xix]</sup> The question that remains is what might happen if geopolitical objectives of both states collide again, and no legal and administrative frameworks are in place to offer mutually beneficial solutions. What may be different in the future might be less hubris from the Eritrean government, as its belief in its capability for military victory against all odds has diminished in the past two decades.

Finally, those who may hope that the recent peace might lead to some form of democratisation within Eritrea might be disappointed. While some small steps have been taken by the Eritrea side in releasing mainly religious prisoners, and national service seems to be scaled back to the envisaged 18 months at least for some, these can only be first steps.<sup>[xx]</sup> But thus far there is no indication that for example the constitution that was shelved in 1997 might finally be enacted. While the Eritrean government might for now bank on the relief of ordinary people that peace has finally come in order to avoid real concessions, a failure to create more accountable structures of government will not mend the breakdown in the relationship between a high percentage of Eritreans and the country's leadership. Without such an internal realignment, the high rates of Eritrean out-migration are unlikely to diminish substantially, and the border and its securitisation will remain high on the agenda from the Eritrean side. Thus, we might be back to square one: for sustainable peaceful relationships across the Horn, territorial security and integrity are vital. But as important is that the people living within a territory regard its borders as a source of identity to celebrate and embrace, not as an obstacle to overcome on the way to a better future.

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## Peace between Eritrea and Ethiopia: Voices from the Eritrean Diaspora

By Abdulkader Saleh Mohammed, Nicole Hirt

### Peace at last? The developments of July 2018

The resignation of Ethiopian Prime Minister Haile Mariam Desalegn in February 2018 came as a surprise. It was a consequence of failed attempts to curb the ongoing protests in the country as a reaction to a closed political space, growing economic problems and lack of political vision. Still more surprising was the election of 41-year old Dr. Abiy Ahmed, who has a PhD in peace and security studies, as his successor. Prime Minister Abiy is the first person in Ethiopian history hailing from an Oromo Muslim father to become the leader of the country, while he himself is an evangelical Christian. Yet, things got even more surprising when the administration of Prime Minister Abiy began issuing public statements that diverged in both tone and content from the past and also to introduce reforms: repeated apologies for past mistakes of the government were offered, thousands of political prisoners were released, rehabilitated insurgent organisations previously classified as “terrorist” groups such as Ginbot 7 (G7), the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), were formally invited to reconcile and legally unbanned; access to proscribed websites and the freedom of the print press were restored.<sup>[1]</sup>

The executive committee of the ruling front in Ethiopia, the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) issued a statement on the June 5, 2018, which announced the unconditional acceptance of the December 2000 Algiers agreement and decisions of the Eritrea-Ethiopia Border Commission (EEBC), removing the key obstacles to rapprochement with Eritrea since the devastating 1998-2000 border war that killed more than 100,000 people. In December 2000 the Algiers Peace Agreement was signed by Isaias Afewerki, Eritrea’s president since de facto independence in 1991 and late Ethiopian PM Meles Zenawi, former brothers in arms in their struggle against the Derg regime. The agreement provided that an independent body, the Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission (EEBC), should delineate the border between the countries. However, in the aftermath of the EEBC ruling, the Ethiopian government decided to postpone the demarcation of the border and negotiate the terms of the EEBC decision, a decision that the Eritrean side rejected. President Isaias declined to enter in any form of dialogue, but used the resulting impasse to introduce the “Warsay-Yikealo Development Campaign” in 2002, which turned the 18 month long Eritrean national service into service for life. Eritreans from all walks of life had to undergo military training and to work as conscripts before they started to serve the state, the military or the ruling People’s Front for Democracy of Justice (PFDJ). Observers have viewed the campaign as a tool to militarize society and to run the country like a wartime-economy under the authority of high-ranking generals and PFDJ cadres. The resulting mass exodus of young Eritreans was only felt in Europe when Eritrean refugees arrived in increasing numbers from about 2013 on, although it had started soon after the introduction of the indefinite

service.<sup>[III]</sup>

According to our research findings the Eritrean government has instrumentalised the ‘no war, no peace situation’ to portray the Ethiopian government as an existential threat to Eritrea. Furthermore, the Eritrean government utilized the impasse and consequent tensions to motivate the Eritrean diaspora to support the government financially through a two percent diaspora tax and other donations to support a “resolute national re-buff”.<sup>[III]</sup> The regime tolerated the ongoing outflow of the youth despite assertions to the contrary, because the refugees supported their families at home, paid their dues to the government and thus prevented the collapse of the otherwise economically unsustainable system. On the other hand, Ethiopia silently watched the gradual economic decline of the neighbouring country. Accordingly, the situation seemed stable, if unpleasant, and the efforts of the international community to resolve the stand-off were unsuccessful.

Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed’s call for peace coupled with the acceptance the EEBC boundary decision came as an unexpected surprise. Without doubt, President Isaias came under pressure to take action, now that his excuse for the internal stalemate was shaken. But the events following Abiy’s announcement from Ethiopia were beyond anything imaginable: during his speech on Martyr’s Day on 20 June, Isaias announced he would send a delegation to Addis Ababa. Only six days later, the Eritrean delegation comprising foreign minister Osman Saleh and Presidential Adviser Yemane Gebreab were heartily welcomed by the Ethiopian prime minister. During the evening reception, Osman Saleh became so emotionally moved that he talked of Eritreans and Ethiopians as “one people”, which irritated many pro-government Eritreans according to their comments on social media.<sup>[IV]</sup> On 8 July, PM Abiy received a rapturous welcome in Asmara. President Isaias of Eritrea reciprocated the gesture in his two-day visit to Ethiopia from the 14 to 16 July, 2018, which saw widespread expressions of public support in Ethiopia and amicability between the two leaders.<sup>[V]</sup> Suddenly, the decade-long enmities seemed to be forgotten: not only had peace been restored, but those who had called each other enemies not long ago suddenly acted as if they had been long-separated brothers who had been happily re-united. All these events were aired live by both Ethiopian TV and EriTV, and the diaspora was certainly taken by surprise given these unexpected developments.<sup>[VI]</sup>

### **Reactions from the Diaspora: scepticism instead of relief**

Neither pro-government nor opposition Eritreans in the diaspora had expected this sudden U-turn. However, government supporters seemed to have no problems to turn swords into ploughshares. To them, the story was sold as a new chapter in history under the theme of “game over” for the TPLF leadership in Ethiopia, as President Isaias had pointed out earlier.<sup>[VII]</sup> Eritrean pro-government websites in the diaspora such as madote.com and tesfanews.net started to paint a optimistic picture of Eritrea’s future with a focus on economic cooperation and new business opportunities with no discussion

on potential reforms of the open-ended national service or the release of political prisoners. On the contrary, government supporters in a striking parallel with certain pro-Prime Minister Abiy websites and bloggers in Ethiopia were demanding that not only PM Abiy Ahmed, but also President Isaias Afewerki, who was in power when the devastating border war started in 1998 should be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.<sup>[VIII]</sup>

On the other hand, members of the Eritrean opposition and government opponents in general seemed to be taken by surprise and have so far reacted reluctantly or even showed a negative stance regarding the peace agreement between Asmara and Addis Ababa. This is a bit surprising, because rapprochement between the two countries would render redundant policies in Eritrea such as the national service, the indefinite postponement of national elections and the non-implementation of the constitution. Yet, it seems that opposition figures and government opponents in general do not expect any positive changes from the latest developments. Here are some of their arguments.<sup>[IX]</sup>

**First:** The current government in Eritrea as an un-elected government does not have a mandate to make peace. The rapprochement has not involved public consultations or involvement which brings into question the legitimacy of the peace process. Those who are living along the border should be involved, but so far the two leaders have not discussed any details regarding the border demarcation. A related argument questions the viability of the rapprochement as Eritrean opposition groups and civic organizations in the Diaspora did not participate and/or were not consulted about the process.

**Second:** The present rapprochement may lead to key Eritrean national interests and sovereignty being affected negatively in the form of agreements regarding Ethiopian utilisation of the Eritrean ports Assab and Massawa and statements speaking of both nations as 'one people', which disrespects the legacy of the martyrs of the independence struggle.

**Third:** The peace will strengthen the government politically, economically and diplomatically. Eritrea's international isolation will come to an end and the sanctions will be lifted. Things will not change inside Eritrea through peace and the people will not benefit. Sawa [the infamous military training camp] is still there and will remain. The current government in Eritrea will profit economically, as has been the case with the Bisha mine; the money is not going to the people.

**Fourth:** The demarcation of the disputed border also carries with it the risk that open borders may allow uncontrolled entry of migrants from Ethiopia, while so many Eritreans have left their home country.

**Fifth:** Some diaspora Eritreans have also argued that a key foundation for the current rapprochement is the short-term political expediency of weakening the common foe of both the Eritrean government and the administration of Prime Minister Abiy of Ethiopia in the form of the TPLF and Tigray regional state. These critics therefore question the viability of the rapprochement without the involvement of local level authorities and communities living along the border.

Another argument comes from a different angle: social workers and others involved in refugee rights advocacy in Europe fear that those Eritreans who have been accepted as refugees in recent years might be forcibly repatriated. So far, only some of the Eritrean diaspora activists and opposition groups, who have been struggling for human rights improvements in Eritrea have embraced the peace process and see it as an opportunity to press for reforms.

### **Demarcating the Border is not enough: the need for reforms and justice**

Of course, making peace with one's neighbour does not equal with internal reforms. As human rights activist Selam Kidane rightly posted on Facebook, "I don't know why a change of a prime minister in Ethiopia equals change in Eritrea".<sup>[X]</sup> However, condemning the reconciliation of both governments due to a lack of legitimacy seems a bit short-sighted. The Eritrean opposition in exile has seldom ever questioned the 2000 Algiers Agreement between Eritrea and Ethiopia, one of whose major architects was the then foreign minister of Eritrea, Haile Woldetensae (Dru'e), a member of the G15 reformers who was imprisoned in 2002 and is believed to have passed away in 2018. According to the agreement, the border was to be demarcated according to the final and binding decision of the EEBC issued in 2002. The only thing that has changed recently is that Ethiopia gave up its reluctance to implement the decision and promised the demarcation of the border. The Joint Declaration of Peace and Friendship signed in Asmara on 9 July 2018 simply expresses the will to normalize both country's relationship by declaring:

- The state of war has come to an end
- The two nations will forge close political, economic, social, cultural and security cooperation
- Trade, economic and diplomatic ties will resume
- The boundary decision will be implemented
- Both nations will work on regional peace<sup>[XI]</sup>

While the declaration contains nothing that sounds unacceptable for a possible future democratically elected Eritrean government, it is imperative that bilateral peace must be accompanied by internal reforms. Now that President Isaias has made peace with his Ethiopian foes and has promised to engage in economic cooperation with the much larger neighbouring country, time has come for overdue changes: first of all, there is no more excuse for the unlimited duration of the national service, and people inside Eritrea will demand an end to the system of forced labour that has been in place since 2002.

However, few people in the diaspora opposition and hardly anybody in the international community have ever thought about how a national service reform might work. In comparison, after the end of the independence struggle in 1991, about 95,000 fighters had to be demobilized; currently, at least 300,000 people are national service recruits. In the 1990s, the ex-fighters received financial compensation, loans and vocational training. At the same time, the economy was cautiously liberalised to create job

opportunities in the private sector.<sup>[XII]</sup> Similarly, after the end of the border war, the World Bank initiated a large demobilisation and reintegration program (DRP) worth \$200 million to facilitate the re-integration of about 200,000 soldiers into civilian life.<sup>[XIII]</sup> This program was cancelled in 2002 when the government decided to introduce the Warsay-Yikealo Development Campaign along with the systematic destruction of the private sector. To reform the state of Eritrea, which is currently operated like a “liberated area” of the struggle, comprehensive economic and political reforms will be necessary, and the government needs to accept foreign aid to shoulder this task. The international community should demand political reforms including the release of all political prisoners, the re-installation of the rule of law and the implementation of the constitution.

When (and if) the border is demarcated on the ground, this may lead to further conflicts because some communities will be torn apart such as the Irob community around Alitena who oppose the prospect of becoming Eritrean, and vice versa the Saho people living around Tsorona who oppose the prospect of becoming Ethiopian. It should be possible to find solutions that reflect the will of the population, for example through local referendums. As it seems now, it will be up to the people inside Eritrea to face the challenges of peace, because the diaspora has provided very few constructive ideas how to handle the future, and the international community has welcomed the end of hostilities but has not come forward with any suggestions to help Eritrea to demilitarize and to democratize. One of the most important things for a lasting peace will be the initiation of a broad range of political and economic reforms. The countless human rights violations perpetrated in Eritrea during the past 27 years cannot be forgotten as a consequence of the peace deal, and those who are responsible must be held accountable.

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during June and July 2018, the months when the breath-taking developments occurred.

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## The Recent Ethiopia-Eritrea Diplomatic Thaw: challenges and prospects

By Dr. Belete Belachew Yihun

### Context

After twenty years of flagrant animosity, replete with intense militarization of the common boundary, acute propaganda campaign and determination to destabilise one another, Ethiopia and Eritrea decided to reverse course and give peace a chance. The drive to normalize relations unfolded in an unprecedented manner following the decision by the executive council of the ruling coalition in Ethiopia, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), to unconditionally accept the Algiers Agreement of 2000 and the ruling of the Boundary Commission in 2002. A series of high-level state visits together with the signing of the Joint Declaration of Peace and Friendship further augmented the initiative for peace.

[\[1\]](#) If the 1998-2000 war took everyone unawares, the way the stalemate ended recently came as a huge surprise to all. Political transformations being implemented in Ethiopia remain the driving force behind this new dynamic that ushered a new chapter in the relationship between the two countries, with potential ripple effects in the sub-region and beyond.

If anything, the recent thaw has shattered the justifications appended to the stand-off between the two countries with its enormous human and material costs and effectively put the sub-region on perpetual stalemate. The ease and speed with which the rapprochement was executed contradicts the integrity of past actions; so do the emotional outburst and the associated human tragedy on full display afterwards testify to the futility of the conflict and the stalemate that followed it.

By the same token, the underlying issues and drivers that led to the conflict and contributed to its intractability should not be underestimated; the actual intent behind the recent thaw remains questionable; and its implications for regional peace and cooperation are open for speculation. Akin to the historical precedents guiding Ethiopia-Eritrea relationship, emotions continue to dictate proceedings, often generating unsolicited and uncensored outcomes. Euphoria and unbridled optimism aside, the whole affair requires serious scrutiny, if the objective is to not squander this historic opportunity. Otherwise, the process risks the high probability of further complicating matters not only for the two countries, but also for the peace and security architecture of the whole region. Given the correlated intricacies, subtleties and manoeuvrings guiding local politics, regional interactions and global alignments, the stakes have never been higher.

There is no questioning the need and urgency for peaceful resolution of the conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea. Maintaining the status quo-ante whereby Eritrea was kept

isolated through a series of sanctions regime has long lost all its justifications; and the fast-changing geo-political realities of the region necessitated reconsideration of the policy framework, particularly on the part of Ethiopia. The current rapprochement is occurring against a backdrop of flux at the national, regional and global levels.

Fast changing geo-political realignments have driven states of the sub-region farther apart. Somalia, South Sudan and Eritrea are officially labeled failed states; Sudan is facing political uncertainty; Djibouti is increasingly becoming a franchise open to the highest bidder; and Ethiopia is trying to regain its footing after years of political turmoil. The ongoing Gulf crisis and the war in Yemen have also affected the Horn through intensifying the competition between the Gulf states for allies in the Horn states. The irreconcilable interests represented by the Saudi-United Arab Emirates (UAE) coalition and the Qatar-Turkey bloc are already on a collision course in Somalia, Sudan and Eritrea; and Ethiopia's alleged neutrality and principled diplomacy in relation to the Gulf crisis has been gravely tested.<sup>[III]</sup>

It is within this complex reality that the recent Ethiopia-Eritrea rapprochement has unfolded. In a region where the conflict-cooperation matrix waxes and wanes rapidly, any bilateral peace effort potentially alters the nature of interactions among states. The Horn is renowned for these complexities, and peace dividends more than often have proven illusory. How the entire situation will ultimately unfolds and with what results, of course, remains to be seen.

### **Striking parallels**

Understanding the underlying dynamics in the Ethiopia-Eritrea relationship requires an objective sequencing of what has transpired in the past two and half decades. Foremost in the priority of considerations is the fact that the overall framework of relations has remained an affair of those at the helm of power. A range of factors, some traceable to pre-1991 times and others driven by fast changing geo-strategic realities, often determine the nature of interaction between the two countries. The post-1991 reality exemplifies the specificity that transcends the conventional norms-references dictating inter-state relations.

For all purposes and intent, the July 1993 Agreement of Friendship and Cooperation, with the adjacent deal establishing a Joint High Ministerial Commission in Sept. 1993, reflected the unprincipled, uncensored and whim-driven interactions between Ethiopia and Eritrea.<sup>[III]</sup> The haste with which the Ethiopian Parliament endorsed the deal without due scrutiny of what it actually entails for the country; blatant concessions on economic, monetary and financial, trade and commerce, and immigration sectors accorded to Eritrea; the blind faith with which the whole affair was approached and handled; and Ethiopia's unilateral request to the UN and OAU demanding speedy recognition for the statehood of Eritrea reflected the lack of institutional checks and balances and accountability on the part of the then Ethiopian government in handling bilateral relations with Eritrea. Cooperation on macro-economic issues, proposals for complete integration, avoidance of tax-barriers, and forging common policies on regional

matters were openly on the table. Though, it soon dawned on the Ethiopian members of the Joint Commission that the devil was in the detail, and their country was suffering the consequences.<sup>[IV]</sup> Inadvertently, the two parties set the ground work for the inevitable conflict that only combusted into an open and costly war five years later. And it took them an additional two decades to realize the futility of their estrangement.

Of course, the post-1991 accord also set in motion positive processes primarily in the areas of regional peace and cooperation. The reorientation of the global order and the coming to the fore of like-minded leaders in the sub-region contributed to the process. In this regard, the Ethiopia-Eritrea combined diplomatic efforts facilitated the cooperation and integration agenda and contributed to the revitalization of the Intergovernmental Authority on Drought and Development (IGADD) to the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) in 1996 and the relatively successful peace efforts in Somalia and the Sudan. But even this was short-lived, for soon after the fateful war of 1998-2000 states in the region opted for their separate ways.<sup>[V]</sup>

In a striking parallel, the current rapprochement process is also dominated by a public discourse in Ethiopia that emphasizes certain tropes relying on appeals to emotion, rhetorical reference to cultural and historic ties, and narratives of common destiny. As was the case in July 1993, lack of transparency clouds the recent agreement.<sup>[VI]</sup> It is also increasingly clear that despite the formal normalization of relations (characterized by the exchange of diplomatic missions, air transport and telephone connectivity), the details guiding their future interactions have yet to be sorted out. Apart from that, however, the whole affair gives the impression that Eritrea is on the driver's seat of the whole process, reaping the utmost and giving little in return.<sup>[VII]</sup> Euphoria and past mistakes aside, the two countries, particularly Ethiopia, cannot afford to repeat the same mistakes, and as a result further complicate the already fragile situation in the region.

### **Challenges and prospects**

Peace always is a plus in every circumstance. But it begs the questions, peace at what cost and whose peace is this going to be? The initiative for peace occurred at a time when great political transformations are taking place in Ethiopia. Rapprochement with Eritrea tramples upon one of the major hurdles in the comprehensive political settlement being envisaged in the country. Eritrea's intentions for peace equally remain questionable in this regard for it could be argued that it has a stake in the ongoing domestic instability in Ethiopia. Whatsoever the justification, if the ongoing peace process in any way clashes with the political changes in Ethiopia, the costs can be profound. Ethiopia needs to first put its house in order and approach any peace effort with unison of mind and collective vision, first for the sake of the nation and then the sub-region, strictly in that order!<sup>[VIII]</sup>

In a similar vein, such a grand peace initiative requires parallel political transformations in Eritrea and the sub-region. Eritrea is bound to reap the utmost from the peace process in the short run – through the lifting of the stifling sanctions and by regaining its status among the community of world states. More significantly, though, the government

in Asmara will amplify this as a corroboration of its claims- that its perseverance has paid off and Eritrea is redeemed as a nation. The potential fallout for the incumbent administration in the medium and long range, however, risks the very sustainability of the rapprochement. Either Eritrea has to introduce radical transformations in all sectors of the governance and human rights index or somehow protract the implementation of the peace deal with Ethiopia.<sup>[IX]</sup>

The regional implications of the Ethiopia-Eritrea diplomatic thaw also deserve serious consideration. Already sensibilities have been poked in Djibouti, Sudan and Egypt. One has simply to factor in the Djibouti-Eritrea boundary conflict, the case of the Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, ongoing border tensions between Ethiopia and Sudan, to mention only few flash points with regional implications. Immediately after the deal, indicative of the fluidity of the situation, Djibouti expressed concerns and Sudan and Egypt agreed to enhance joint cooperation and build strategic relations.<sup>[X]</sup> Putting the record straight with Eritrea should not be accomplished at the expense of estranging others who possess an equal or greater stake in expanding economic and political ties with Ethiopia. As a regional power-house, Ethiopia should approach all its dealings strategically and in a comprehensive manner. In addition, the apparent high-hand the Saudis and Emiratis' are securing in the sub-region clashes Turkish and Qatari interests, who have parallel ambitions and stakes.

There is no doubt that Ethiopia deserves the bulk of the credit for initiating the accord with Eritrea. But there is a danger that the process may be hijacked by other actors harbouring latent and complex geo-strategic intentions. How Ethiopia in particular balances these asymmetric interests and ensures its overall national interests will remain a challenge.<sup>[XI]</sup> More significantly, a shortcoming on the part of Ethiopia was the failure to package the peace effort as an IGAD-led initiative, with the participation of the African Union (AU). Such an approach could have potentially addressed individual misgivings and concerns states of the sub-region might have with the process, and ensured the resilience of the entire initiative. The tendency to disregard the high probability of parallel initiatives in direct contradiction to the current Ethiopia-Eritrea accord, with even the possibility of the latter switching sides, will be tantamount to ignoring the lessons of history and realpolitik.

The Ethiopia-Eritrea rapprochement has every possibility to succeed if it is carefully handled and all angles are properly covered. Foremost on the agenda should be the imperative to anchor the whole exercise on principles guiding inter-state relations whereby mutual benefits as well as regional peace and security are guaranteed. Effective demilitarization of the common boundary, withdrawal of military personnel and equipment, demarcation of the border, agreement on port utilization, immigration, dual citizenship, residence permit, consular affairs, currency, taxation (direct, excise and transit taxes), debt payment, money transfer, and nature and level of investment by respective citizens in the other, are just a few of the issues among the long list of urgent priorities, which remain unresolved.

There has to be real acumen, particularly on the part of Ethiopia, to envision all factors,

with the foresight to secure the country's overall interests in the long-run. How the current rapprochement augments or endangers the political, strategic and economic realities in the region should also be carefully assessed. Estranging others in the region for the sake of 'peace' with Eritrea carries with it immense economic and political costs to Ethiopia. In a similar vein, for the regional integration agenda to prosper, the peace process needs to be accommodative of all stakeholders. It remains incumbent on Ethiopia to remain worthy of its hard-won status of a regional power house, to remain vigilant of untoward consequences and to think strategically. As the maxim goes, opportunities favour those who utilize them wisely.

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[I] The five pillars deal signed in Asmara on 9 July 2018 stipulates a) State of war that existed between the two countries has come to an end. A new era of peace & friendship has been ushered; b) Both countries will work to promote close cooperation in political, economic, social, cultural and security areas; c) Transport, trade and telecommunication ties will be resumed; diplomatic ties & activities renewed; d) Border decision will be implemented; e) Both countries will work together to guarantee regional peace, development and cooperation.

[II] Meester, Jos et al, "Riyal Politik: The political economy of Gulf investments in the Horn of Africa," CRU Report, Netherlands Institute of International Relations 'Clingendael', April 2018

[III] Agreement of Friendship and Cooperation between the Transitional Government of Ethiopia and the Government of the State of Eritrea, Addis Ababa, 30 July 1993; Agreement between the Government of the State of Eritrea and the Transitional Government of Ethiopia on the Establishment of the Joint High Ministerial Commission, Asmara, 23 Sept. 1993. Private Collection

[IV] Difficulties started to manifest as early as January 1995, well before the Joint High Ministerial Commission held its second session. Then afterwards relations progressively spiraled downhill till the outbreak of the War in May 1998. And nowhere in the tension/discussions had the border issue featured.

[V] IGAD's serious institutional and structural shortcoming manifest in the absence of any provision in its mandate to handle inter-state conflicts. There is no single precedent in this regard, and member-states simply opt for the easy way out leaving the regional body fragile and exposed to all the elements.

[VI] Obviously, prior consultations among concerned institutions in Ethiopia and a principled approach to the rapprochement process was lacking in the events leading to the July 2018 deal. All is left to good-will of the leadership of both countries. As was the case in 1993, picking the pieces is yet again left to the joint ministerial commission to be reconstituted soon afterwards. Ethiopia's impromptu request to the UN on lifting the sanctions imposed on Eritrea simply completes the circle.

[VII] Eritrea managed to insert a specific clause attesting to the implementation of the border agreement in the five pillars agreement of July 2018, while leaving the rest of the deal general and non-committal. Likewise, all the explanations on the tenets and intent of the rapprochement come from the side of Ethiopia, with little official corroboration from the other party. The calibre of Eritrean statesmen, in stark contrast to their Ethiopian counterparts, leaves one wondering about the fairness of the playing field.

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AFRICA, DJIBOUTI, ERITREA, ETHIOPIA, EUROPE, EUROPEAN UNION, HORN OF AFRICA, KENYA, SOMALIA, SOMALILAND, SOUTH SUDAN, SUDAN, UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

## The impact of the Peace process in the Horn on the European Union's policy to curb human trafficking and Slavery: The role of the UAE

Mirjam van Reisen Mirjam van Reisen

### Introduction

In recent years, human trafficking has dominated European Union (EU) approaches towards the Horn and Northern African region. In the same period the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has rapidly expanded its maritime military and trade presence in the Horn, as have China and other players competing for access. The UAE has played a key role in mediating a peace process between Ethiopia and Eritrea that led to a historic peace agreement signed on 9 July 2018. The peace agreement may lead to new dynamics in Eritrea and in the Horn. The question examined in this article is how the peace agreement affects the realization of the EU's objective to curb human trafficking in light of the competition between global security networks in the Horn.

### European strategic focus on curbing Human Trafficking in the Horn

In 2014, the EU Ministerial meeting adopted a political declaration in Rome, a key strategic document, initiating The Khartoum Process. In this document the EU committed itself to the fight against international human trafficking and smuggling.<sup>[i]</sup> In the same year, the AU adopted The Khartoum Process as a regional dialogue for "enhanced cooperation on migration and mobility and regional collaboration between countries of origin, transit and destination regarding the migration routes between the Horn of Africa and the European Union (EU)."<sup>[ii]</sup> The Valetta Action Plan set out EU measures to support the Khartoum process.<sup>[iii]</sup>

The EU Trust Fund established to support actions under the Khartoum process included pledges worth 3.3 b€. Both Eritrea and Ethiopia are amongst the beneficiaries of the Trust Fund and additional development cooperation programmes. The EU agreed cooperation packages with the major actors in the Horn to combat human trafficking, included a package of projects worth almost 90 m€ to Eritrea<sup>[iv]</sup>, following an earlier package of 200 m€ guided by EU "efforts to stem the outflow of refugees and economic migrants, many of whom seek asylum in Europe."<sup>[v]</sup> The funding allocated by the EU for the purpose of containing the outward flow of people from Eritrea has been criticised as being "flawed"<sup>[vi]</sup> based on the argument that "aid tends not to improve Eritrean living standards."<sup>[vii]</sup> In Ethiopia, the EU provided in 2017 development aid worth 745 m€ over 2014-2020 through the European Development Fund and an additional 91m€ for emergency relief.<sup>[viii]</sup> In 2016, the EU approved a Special Measure of 100 m€ to Sudan, from the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, in addition to the 196 m€

approved from 2010 onwards through the European Development Fund. The EU was also active in Libya, mobilising 286 m€ on migration-related projects.[\[ix\]](#)

## Strategic Competition in the Horn

Despite considerable efforts of the EU in curbing human trafficking in the Horn, its interests stand in competition with new actors in the region. Recently, the Horn has once again become an arena marked by fierce external competition to secure access through ports. The strategic interest in Africa from China, Asia and the Gulf has made the Horn a flash-point for security interests. This is not without precedent. In ancient times the Erythrean Sea included the Red Sea, the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf. Eritrea's location has been strategic since the beginning of maritime trade.[\[x\]](#)

The Chinese Belt and Road Project is a new dimension of the fierce competition over access in the Horn; its strategic location defined as a 'chokepoint' – a point where key routes could be blocked by naval forces. In 2014, Chinese President Xi revealed the 1+2+3 strategy, a collaboration with the Gulf States aiming to globally secure access to (i) oil, (ii) trade and investment and (iii) high tech.[\[xi\]](#) The interest in raw materials, including oil as well as markets, is driving the competition; controlling the infrastructure to secure routes, ports, means of transportation and pipelines form a critical element of the current changing relations in the Horn, which is a key strategic location, involving Djibouti, Ethiopia, Eritrea and Yemen:

"The Bab al-Mandeb – linking the Indian Ocean to the Red Sea and Suez Canal – is one of the world's most strategic maritime transit points. An estimated 3.8 million barrels traverse the Bab al-Mandeb every day, in addition to being an important jumping off point to the Arabian Peninsula and Africa alike."[\[xii\]](#)

The competition for access to the Horn – and through the Horn to Africa, involves a rapid expansion of trade-facilitation and military ports in the Horn operated by the UAE, Israel, China, Turkey, Iran, Russia and the US and Europe. The competition for control is manifested by a race for military bases to secure such access. When China opened a military base close to the American and French bases in Djibouti in 2014, the UAE decided to open a military base in Eritrea in 2015 in Assab, after having been ejected from Djibouti. Since 2014, three loose coalitions are competing for presence: China, the Saudi and UAE led coalition and the Qatar-Turkey coalition. Recently, the Russian government is engaged in discussions with Eritrea on a new facilitation port for Russia to get foot on the ground in the Red Sea,[\[xiii\]](#) a negotiation that alludes to the interest to help facilitate the transportation of potash exports, through the port of Massawa.[\[xiv\]](#)

Eritrea aligned with the UAE in 2014, after dropping an earlier alliance with Iran, during which the Eritrean government is alleged to have trained members of the Ansar Allah (also known as the Houthi) for the war in Yemen. After changing alliance, Eritrea sent troops to fight alongside UAE troops in Yemen.[\[xv\]](#) UAE's perception of Iran's attempt to gain control to block the strait of Hormuz has led to a critical re-evaluation of its

strategic location of Eritrea and of the Horn[xvi] and Yemen, where UAE established two military bases.[xvii] UAE secured access to the port of Berbera in Somaliland.[xviii] The UAE has been engaged in an intense campaign as a ‘proxy’ for its allies, notably Saudi Arabia, the US and Israel.[xix] The UAE military base in Assab, Eritrea, is almost completed, despite military support to Eritrea being seen as violating United Nations Security Council Resolutions.[xx]

The value of investment generated through the licensing of the ports, military bases and infrastructure generates a sizable revenue stream for the relatively poor countries in the Horn. The UAE Abu Dhabi Fund for Development, provided 3 billion US\$ in much needed aid to Ethiopia, which was on the verge of a financial crisis due to high investment in infrastructural projects[xxi], in an agreement that preceded the Ethiopian offer for peace to Eritrea.[xxii] According to UN monitors Eritrea was offered military aid and compensation by UAE for the use of land, airspace and territorial waters in the fight in Yemen.[xxiii]

### **Human trafficking networks in the Horn and the Gulf**

Whilst Eritrea has maximized its strategic and financial gains from its geo-strategic location, actors in Eritrea are alleged to be deeply involved in the facilitation and organization of lucrative human trafficking with high profit margins from Eritrea to North African and Europe, the Gulf states and Southern Africa. Despite the European partnership to curb migration, the government of Eritrea has pursued policies that inadvertently contribute to the trade in persons – . Trade in persons is facilitated by the alleged involvement of certain officials and human trafficking facilitators to assist people who can organize payments to help them leave the country.[xxiv] Human Trafficking is implemented by networked organizations, which include Eritrean nationals and collaboration across Sudan and Libya.[xxv] This is a lucrative business. Europol, which is Europe’s police agency, estimated in 2016 that people-smuggling may have generated between USD3 billion- USD6 billion.[xxvi]

Among the main culprits, Eritrean human traffickers are also credited with having developed the “Libyan route” which allegedly operates with the involvement of groups in the UAE and also the Libyan faction in the current civil war led by General Haftar:[xxvii]

The UN Sanctions Committee in collaboration with Interpol has identified several individuals engaged in human trafficking networks that cover the Horn, North Africa and the Gulf[xxviii]

The identification of these individuals represents a first step towards the prosecution of individuals engaged in leading human trafficking and slavery structures in the Horn of Africa and beyond.

Coordinated and intensified international cooperation can bolster such initiatives to end human trafficking. This is particularly true of emerging international actors such as the

UAE which aspire to be regarded as a globally responsible actor, an aspiration which is also expressed in the UAE's international cooperation policy<sup>[xxix]</sup>, launched in 2018, which states:

"The overall goal is to bolster security, social peace and stability in all other countries that are in need of assistance, in the Middle East and North Africa in particular."<sup>[xxx]</sup>

The attempts to change the challenges that human trafficking present on the ground may necessitate further action by the regional administration in Tigray and the Ethiopian government. Tigray has played a limited role in the peace process so far, but has a vested interest in supporting the people-to-people peace on the 900 km long border between Eritrea and Ethiopia.<sup>[xxxi]</sup> People living in these border areas seem to be determined to ensure that peace changes the border situation.<sup>[xxxii]</sup> This will positively affect the fight against human trafficking, as smugglers would no longer benefit from profits to facilitate persons across the closed border.<sup>[xxxiii]</sup>

Internal dynamics in Eritrea may also help curb human trafficking, especially if a change of policy on the infinite national service and changes of shoot-to-kill policy at the border would be realised. A first step in that direction has recently been announced by Eritrean authorities, in follow up of the Peace Agreement, although the status of these announcements is unclear.<sup>[xxxiv]</sup>

### **Drawing initial conclusions**

The peace process between Eritrea and Ethiopia has been an externally driven process, especially responding to the interests of competing strategic coalitions for access in the Red Sea, the UAE interest to exploit the Assab-port and gain access to various valuable mining initiatives, requiring a normalization of the situation in Eritrea. The UAE and other actors therefore have an interest to end the international sanctions against Eritrea and to facilitate the normalization of relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea. The investments from the Gulf in the infrastructure development (including ports) and other sectors require stability in the Horn and the avoidance of a resumption of the conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia with all its attendant consequences. The peace process is an important step in this strategy.

In the last decade, human trafficking has emerged as a key cross-cutting security concern in the Horn. Individuals and groups in the Horn, North Africa and Gulf have facilitated human trafficking operations. The normalization of relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea will create a conducive environment for national, regional and international efforts to eliminate human trafficking and smuggling operations. However, looking at a normalization, this may be dispensable for the authorities of both countries, particularly since it has served as a flashpoint of international criminal investigation.

Moreover, the peace agreement between Eritrea and Ethiopia has raised expectations of free movement of people between Eritrea and Ethiopia. The restoration of air and land

transport routes between the two countries is already a reality. Regions on the Ethio-Eritrean border such as the regional states of Tigray and Afar will derive benefits from the lowering of barriers for the movement of people and goods across the border. This would undoubtedly reduce the profit margins of human trafficking networks operating from Eritrea, and hence its financial attractiveness.

In order to gain international acceptability, the UAE is keen to be identified as a player acting for the good of global humanity. The allegations and perceptions of ignoring international human trafficking and slavery related activity will negatively affect the UAE's bid to take on the mantle of a respectable global player. The UAE needs to be seen as taking on a more active stance in combatting human trafficking.

The visibility and presence of the UAE in peace-building in Eritrea and Ethiopia therefore presents the opportunity for a more vigorous approach in combatting human trafficking and slavery networks in the region. The EU should actively engage with the UAE, as one of the key global strategic partners in the Horn.

The peace-building efforts promoted by the UAE should be extended to involve people-to-people peace, ensuring that the encouragement of human trafficking is meaningfully diminished and the criminal organization of it is prosecuted, and it should involve meaningful reforms within Eritrea, notably of the indefinite national service, which has been feeding large migration and human trafficking streams from this country into Africa and Europe.

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[xxviii] United Nations. *Narrative Summaries of reasons for Listings*.  
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[xxx] Gulf News, "UAE launches five-year foreign aid strategy," December 14, 2016,  
<https://gulfnews.com/news/uae/government/uae-launches-five-year-foreign-aid-strategy-1.1946101>

[xxxi] The Eritrean Government announced a withdrawal from the border in July 2018, although the implementation of the withdrawal is unclear according to independent observers at the border. Al Jazeera.

Eritrea withdraws troops from border with former foe Ethiopia. July 20, 2018. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/07/eritrea-withdraws-troops-border-foe-ethiopia-180720071708251.html>. Witness accounts include: <https://www.facebook.com/mirjam.vanreisen/videos/pcb.10215612933013834/10215612651966808/?type=3&theater> (posted on facebook by author after visit to border, August 23, 2018); Kjettil Tronvoll, posted following a visit (Sept 1, 2018) on: <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10212184321783949&set=a.10204074608126176&type=3&theater>

[xxxii] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vUiP4wxOOZo> (translation KFB)

[xxxiii] The facilitation across the border is 2500 – 3000 US\$ (from Eritrea to Sudan), according to latest information provided by administrator of collection centre, Ethiopia (21 august, 2018, face-to-face interview by author).

[xxxiv] Whether this will be realised remains to be seen. Announcements made at lower government levels maybe overruled by the President. Nizar Manek. Eritrea May Alter Army Draft That Forced Thousands to Europe. Bloomberg. Sept 3, 2018. Reposted as Eritrean government suggests smaller army, reform to conscription. 3 Sept, 2018. EritreaHub. Available at: <https://eritreahub.org/eritrean-government-suggests-smaller-army-reform-to-conscription>



