



## Observatoire des Enjeux Politiques et Sécuritaires dans la Corne de l'Afrique

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### Note 14 Eritrea: A Rogue or a Strategically Constructed Threat?

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**ABSTRACT**

Eritrea gained independence in 1993 in the post-Cold War context of changing regional political alliances. From the beginning Eritrea's relationship with Ethiopia was strained, and following the Eritrean-Ethiopian war (1998-2000) Asmara encountered increasing isolation in the international arena.

This paper focuses on aspects of Eritrea's contemporary political history in the sub-regional context. It highlights Asmara's sour relations with some of its powerful neighbors, which have been integrally linked to Eritrea being increasingly portrayed as a regionally destabilizing and terrorism-supporting rogue state. It is therefore argued here that although Eritrea's tactics in its foreign affairs have hardly differed from those of other states in the Horn of Africa, the prevailing political realities in the sub-region have resulted in the strategic image of Eritrea as a threat to regional peace and stability.

**Keywords:** Eritrea; Horn of Africa; foreign relations; rogue state



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## INTRODUCTION

In 1993, following almost 30 years of war, Eritrea obtained independence. However, the initial hope for Eritrea setting an unprecedented example for democratic governance and political order in the Horn of Africa sub-region, where authoritarian regimes are prevalent, soon withered away. Instead, it became clear that the exercise of political power in Eritrea took an authoritarian form, emanating from the political order of the liberation movement mainly dictated by the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF). The legacy of the "liberation struggle" came to occupy a central role in the Eritrean post-conflict state and nation-building, with authoritarian and repressive governance characterizing its political culture and system today.

Similarly, Eritrea's foreign relations were oriented to support the domestic *status quo*.<sup>1</sup> From the beginning, they drew from an increasing confrontation with Ethiopia to justify the prevailing domestic authoritarian order. Eritrean government's foreign policy has also been used to counter Ethiopian influence in the sub-region, to which the United States, China, and other powerful partners have contributed. Through its foreign relations, Eritrea has unsuccessfully sought to promote alternative sub-regional order that has brought it into confrontation with a number of its neighbors and their allies.

It is therefore safe to say that Eritrea has played an important role in the contemporary sub-regional politics of the Horn of Africa. Having already developed vibrant diaspora representation during the liberation war, independence allowed Eritrea to further extend its influence. Yet, Eritrea's poor relations with Ethiopia deteriorated and provoked the 1998-2000 war. The Eritrean-Ethiopian conflict has been largely seen as a consequence of Asmara's policy, and most Western states have sided with Ethiopia. This alignment has developed into a wider consideration of Ethiopia as a stabilizer in the otherwise volatile sub-region where Eritrea has been deemed to approximate a status of a rogue state,<sup>2</sup> Sudan has undergone protracted war, and the collapse of state authority in Somalia has been seen as a source of armed violence, terrorism, and regional instability.

Since the Eritrean-Ethiopian war, an image of Eritrea as a destabilizing threat to the externally promoted "peace and order" in the Horn of Africa has emerged. But Eritrea has been perceived a threat to regional security not only due to its confrontation with Ethiopia. It has been considered to support opposition parties, armed groups, and "terrorist" activities in order to destabilize its neighboring states, including providing arms to al-Shabaab Islamists in Somalia. Ethiopia exerting its influence and Western organizations condemning Eritrea for human rights violations, among other things, has further buttressed Eritrea's negative international image. Yet,

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1 On Eritrea's foreign relations, see e.g. Reid, Richard (ed.) (2009) *Eritrea's External Relations: Understanding Its Regional Role and Foreign Policy* (London : Chatham House).

2 Eritrea is largely seen as an authoritarian state with poor human rights record, which supports "terrorism" and constitutes a limited threat to international "peace". Although Eritrea has not expressed aspirations to acquire weapons of mass destruction, it has often been referred to as Africa's North Korea. It can be said to qualify somewhere between a pariah (an outcast of the international community but not considered a serious threat beyond its borders) and a rogue (seeking weapons of mass destruction and constituting a threat to world peace). See e.g. Myers, Nathanael (2010) "Africa's North Korea: inside Eritrea's Open-Air Prison", *Foreign Policy*, 15 June. Online at: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2010/06/15/africas-north-korea/>

unsurprisingly, Eritrea's foreign policy, and to some degree its domestic politics, is not much different from that practiced by its Western-allied neighbors in the Horn of Africa's "bad neighborhood". In addition, being a small and somewhat poor state in comparison with most of its neighbors, Eritrea's capacity to stage major instability in the Horn is limited.

This paper explains major contours of Eritrea's historical trajectory and its role in the sub-regional political context. It shows how the deterioration of relations with Ethiopia, and the latter's deepening connections with internationally powerful partners, was integrally linked to Eritrea being increasingly portrayed as a regionally destabilizing and "terrorism-supporting rogue state". Eritrea being singled out for supporting armed groups that are seen to hinder a Western-imposed solution in Somalia also led to deterioration of its relations with other states in the sub-region and undermined its overall international position. It is therefore argued here that the strategic image of Eritrea as a menace to regional peace and stability follows the external powers', Ethiopia's, and its regional allies' interests.

### **BACKGROUND: FROM COLONY TO INDEPENDENCE**

During the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Eritrea constituted the northernmost territory of Ethiopian empire's sphere of influence on the African continent. In the course of the early 1880s Eritrea was colonized by Italy, which by 1890 had formalized its dominion. In 1936 Eritrea became one of the constitutive parts of Italian East Africa, which also included Ethiopia (1936-1941) and British Somaliland (1940-1941). However, after Italy's defeat in World War II, Eritrea became a British protectorate until it was federated as part of Ethiopia in 1952.

Following the federal arrangement, Ethiopia sought to consolidate its hold on Eritrea. As a federal part of Ethiopia, Eritrea was to maintain a degree of regional autonomy, including major symbols and institutions of statehood.<sup>3</sup> However, it soon became clear that imperial Ethiopia under Emperor Haile Selassie, itself a polity in which power was centralized through repressive governance and restrictions of civil liberties, would not respect the federal arrangement.<sup>4</sup> Protest letters addressed to the Emperor and the United Nations received no serious response,<sup>5</sup> and in May 1954 Eritrean Legislative Assembly passed a resolution that denounced Ethiopian domination.<sup>6</sup>

3 Eritrea was given the right to its own flag, administrative and judicial structure, police, local administration, as well as exercise control over its domestic affairs, including taxation. See e.g. Habte Selassie, Bereket (1989) *Eritrea and the United Nations and Other Essays* (Trenton, NJ: Red Sea Press).

4 Emperor Selassie appointing his son-in-law, Andergatchew Messai, as the crown's representative in Eritrea, with extensive political power, symbolized to many the great extent of Ethiopian domination. Andergatchew took over as a supreme administrator and worked actively to undermine Eritrea's federal status by using the Chief Executive of the Eritrean Legislative Assembly, Ato Tedla Bairu, to terrorize local leaders and to implement repressive measures that often violated the Eritrean constitution. See e.g. Connell, Dan and Killion, Tom (2011) *Historical Dictionary of Eritrea* (2nd edition, Plymouth: Scarecrow), pp. 70-71.

5 This paragraph draws heavily from "Eritrea: General Facts, 1989", <http://www.qsl.net/eritrea/facts.htm>, and "Fact and Evidence Part II: [1952-1962] The Consequent Disunity of Political Leaders", Eritrea Human Rights Electronic Archive, <http://www.ehrea.org/1952.php>.

6 Bimbi, Guido (1982) "The National Liberation Struggle and the Liberation Fronts". In *The Eritrean Case*, edited by Research and Information Centre on Eritrea, Rome: RICE, pp. 167-206.

The continuation of repression orchestrated by Ethiopia led to growing political conflict in Eritrea. In 1955, Haile Selassie eventually replaced the Eritrean political leadership in an attempt to extend control and preparation to end Eritrea's federal status. The following year students demonstrated,<sup>7</sup> which caused further repression. In 1957, a campaign was initiated to impose Amharic as Eritrea's official language by burning Tigrinyan and Arabic books, and the year after Ethiopian flag was established as the official symbol of Eritrea.<sup>8</sup> By this time, the authorities violently coerced a number of legislators opposing union with Ethiopia, and many of the numerous pro-unionist Eritreans began realigning with those aiming to secure Eritrean political rights, causing demonstrations that were violently suppressed. Hundreds died and were injured, and thousands imprisoned.<sup>9</sup> Finally, by 1959 Ethiopia had assumed administrative and judicial control of Eritrea by a mix of coercive and co-optive measures, which led the Eritrean Legislative Assembly to change the name of Eritrean government to "Eritrean Administration", while Ethiopia took charge of Eritrean school system.<sup>10</sup>

At this stage, the non-violent struggle gave way to those advocating liberation of Eritrea by violent means. In November 1958 the Eritrean Liberation Movement (ELM) had been established in Port Sudan, and in 1960 it held a founding conference in Asmara while maintaining exile representation in Cairo. Around the same time however, some Muslim hardliners, seeking independence from Ethiopia through an armed struggle, founded the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) in Cairo. The ELF was a Muslim organization, and by using religious and ethnic agitation its leaders sought it to become the sole liberation movement in Eritrea. The ELF leadership deemed the attempt to eradicate the ELM as necessary for unifying the armed struggle that could have only one true representative,<sup>11</sup> and its military efforts to eliminate ELM were the first manifestation of bloody religious, sectional, and regional rivalries that set the stage for further violence between liberation groups and factions during the war.<sup>12</sup> In September 1961, the ELF initiated an armed struggle, targeting the ELM, its ethnic constituencies, and Ethiopian security forces.<sup>13</sup> In response, the ELM also sought to wage armed resistance, but Ethiopian security forces suppressed the attempt<sup>14</sup> and a number of its members were eventually co-opted in the ELF's military organization.<sup>15</sup> In order to counter the rising Eritrean armed opposition, on 14 November 1962 Ethiopia finalized the annexation of Eritrea. It had put pressure on the Eritrean legislative body to accept the end of the federal arrangement,

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7 See e.g. "Reflections on the Eritrean People Struggle for Independence [sic.]", Eritrea Human Rights Electronic Archive, <http://www.ehrea.org/19591.php>, and Gebre-Medhin, Jordan (1989) *Peasants and Nationalism in Eritrea* (Trenton: Red Sea Press), p. 171.

8 Yohannes, Ogbazghi (1993) "Eritrea: A Country in Transition", *Review of African Political Economy* 57, July, pp. 7-28.

9 "Reflections on the Eritrean People Struggle", <http://www.ehrea.org/19591.php>.

10 "Fact and Evidence Part II", <http://www.ehrea.org/1952.php>, and "Reflections on the Eritrean People Struggle", <http://www.ehrea.org/19591.php>.

11 Iyob, Ruth (1995) *The Eritrean Struggle for Independence: Domination, Resistance, Nationalism 1941-1993*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 112, and Bereketeab, *Eritrea*, p. 184.

12 Bereketeab, *Eritrea*, p. 185.

13 Idris Mohammed Adam, Idris Osman Geladewos, and Osman Saleh Sabbe led the ELF military effort from Cairo, claiming exclusive ownership of the Eritrean cause and portraying ELM's secular and ethnically inclusive stand as communist and against religion.

14 Mengisteab, Kidane and Yohannes, Ogbazghi (2005) *Anatomy of an African Tragedy: Political, Economic, and Foreign Policy Crisis in Post-Independence Eritrea* (Trenton, NJ: Red Sea Press), p. 41, and Negash, Tekeste (2005) *Eritrea and Ethiopia: The Federal Experience* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Uppsala: Nordic Africa Institute), p. 138.

15 Sherman, Richard (1980) *Eritrea: The Unfinished Revolution* (New York: Praeger), p. 42.

dissolved the Eritrean government, and declared Eritrea an Ethiopian province. This fueled Eritrean resistance and efforts to strengthen armed opposition.

The military effort to liberate Eritrea in the early 1960s became largely possible due to external support. The exile representation of the Eritrean opposition was successful in attracting foreign assistance largely by exploiting the Cold War competition between the United States and the Soviet Union, aspirations by powerful states in the sub-region, and rivalries between the neighboring states. In the early 1960s, the United States' presence in the Horn of Africa was still unrivaled by the Soviet Union. However, by late 1960s, pan-Arabism had consumed the Soviet allies Egypt, Iraq, and Syria, and pan-Somalism was dictating the aspirations of another Soviet ally, Somalia. A common aspiration was to curb Ethiopia's and the United States' influence. Supporting the Eritrean cause therefore became an opportunity to advance towards this objective. The aid from the revolutionary Arab states, including Libya after 1969, as well as Soviet Union, China, and North Korea, enabled a sustained armed struggle in Eritrea. On the other side, the United States and its allies continued to back Ethiopia.<sup>16</sup>

By 1970, the incoherencies within ELF had led to a factional confrontation. This favored Isaias Afewerki and Ramadan Mohamed Nur, who had received training in China and Cuba, and allowed them to establish independent external support networks for their guerrilla constituencies. Relying on authoritarian strategies and an established constituency of largely Muslim lowlanders, Afewerki now commanded an independent force called the EPLF, founded in 1974, which allowed him to weaken potential rival leaders by using their religious and regional differences to his advantage. The use of violence and terror (allegedly murders, questionable trials, and executions) served EPLF's consolidation, and eventually enabled Afewerki to claim supreme leadership of the liberation movement.

The same year in Addis Ababa Ethiopian junior left-wing army officers overthrew Emperor Haile Selassie. They established a socialist regime under the supreme leadership of Mengistu Haile Mariam, which had far-reaching consequences because Ethiopia began drifting towards the Soviet bloc causing a domino effect of shifting alliances in the sub-region. It also opened more space for Eritrean opposition. As a result, "By the mid-1974, [the Eritrean armed opposition] was firmly based in eastern Sahel and along the Red Sea coast and began to move to the Christian highlands, where its social revolutionary political program attracted the support of many young people and peasants".<sup>17</sup> Two years after, in the Red Sea Province alone, there were 25,000-30,000 guerrilla fighters controlling most of the territory but facing 20,000 Ethiopian army troops.<sup>18</sup>

Afewerki's EPLF continued the already established practice of organizing liberation groups by coercive violence under highly centralized leadership. The regional and religious differences under the military command ran deep, which favored the

<sup>16</sup> In 1964, the United States sent a counterinsurgency team to Ethiopia. Keller, Edmund (1994) "The United States, Ethiopia, and Eritrean Independence." In Amare Tekle, ed., *Eritrea and Ethiopia: From Conflict to Cooperation* (Lawrenceville, NJ: The Red Sea Press), p. 172.

<sup>17</sup> Connell and Killion, *Historical Dictionary of Eritrea*, p. 224.

<sup>18</sup> Connell, Dan (2003) *Taking on the Superpowers: Collected Articles on the Eritrean Revolution (1976-1983)*, Vol. 1 (Trenton NJ: The Red Sea Press), p. 31.

maintaining of intra-organizational repression and violence as methods to keep reformist sections and dissenters at bay. The EPLF relied heavily on diaspora resources and sought to build national unity through violence, political indoctrination and mobilization. This buttressed Afewerki's sole control of the ideological and political agenda and his supreme leadership position. During the latter stages of the war, EPLF effectively administered the territory under its control with meager resources. Thus, the authoritarian and repressive nature of the movement, ostensibly necessary for survival, was deeply ingrained in the EPLF's political culture by the time Eritrea obtained its independence,<sup>19</sup> along with the ability to survive without extensive dependence on external resources and relations with third parties.

In May 1991, Ethiopia's socialist Derg regime was overthrown by the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) umbrella of opposition forces. The Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) had assumed the prominent role in the EPRDF because it was the strongest military organization in the Ethiopia proper. After the Derg's downfall, Ethiopia entered into a period of uncertainty during which TPLF ceased the opportunity to take over *de facto* administration of the country.

Eventually, it was the combination of Ethiopian and international politics which decided the faith of Eritrea. During the war against the Derg Eritrean support for TPLF had at times been instrumental, and the latter had promised Eritreans independence upon Mengistu's downfall.<sup>20</sup> However, in the context of post-Derg Ethiopia in which TPLF sought to control the state, it was mainly the EPLF's strength, and perhaps to a lesser degree TPLF's earlier promise, which persuaded the latter to respect its commitment to the Eritrean opposition. This is because EPLF had a large, committed, and battle-hardened army which TPLF was unwilling to confront and unable to defeat. In addition, any showdown with EPLF would have weakened TPLF and threatened its rule in Addis Ababa. Although TPLF's other allies were militarily substantially weaker, TPLF's armed confrontation with EPLF would have undermined its relative strength and the ability to fend off a possible claim on the central authority in Ethiopia by the other EPRDF or non-EPRDF groups.

Second, the EPLF enjoyed international support. The United States had assisted it against the Ethiopian socialist regime, and Western states generally viewed EPLF in positive light. Having been victorious against the Derg, Eritrea was seen as deserving of independence. The expectation was, to an extent, that independent Eritrea arising from the ashes of repressive Ethiopian socialist regime would become an exemplary democratic state and a Western ally, bringing new hope to the sub-region largely plagued by authoritarian rule and instability. The United States, a key player, was above all preoccupied by the continuation of endemic war and regional instability if Eritreans were denied separation from Ethiopia, and therefore backed Eritrean self-determination referendum vigorously.

19 The Eritrean Human Rights Electronic Archive estimates that the liberation movement eliminated 3,000-5,000 of its own fighters in 1973-1991. See more at <http://www.ehrea.org/whoaret.php>.

20 However, relations between EPLF and TPLF had already been conflictive during the armed struggle, especially in the mid-1980 when the EPLF cut off the supply lines of the TPLF in the north. The divergences were mainly based on military strategy and ideology (conceptions of imperialism and secessionism). See Young, John (1996) "The Tigray and Eritrean Peoples Liberation Fronts: A History of Tensions and Pragmatism", *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 34, 1, pp. 105-120.

Following the Derg's downfall, the Ethiopian revolutionary forces established a provisional government. This was heavily influenced by the United States. In May 1991, a conference was held in London in which TPLF leadership recognized EPLF to have been victorious against the Derg, and reluctantly agreed to the Eritrean referendum for self-determination that would likely lead to its independence.<sup>21</sup> In July, another conference, presided by the interim government Chairman and TPLF leader Meles Zenawi, was held to establish the Transitional Government of Ethiopia. The TPLF then reaffirmed its commitment to the Eritrean referendum within two years, while Eritreans promised that the port of Assab would remain open for Ethiopians to maintain access to the sea.<sup>22</sup> Although initially both TPLF and EPLF showed interest in working together in defense, economy, and to ensure free movement of people between Ethiopia and Eritrea, the EPLF began preparations for separating Eritrea from Ethiopia by establishing border checkpoints, denying entry of diplomats and journalists, and expelling non-Eritreans.<sup>23</sup> Finally, during 23-25 April 1993, the self-determination referendum took place and 99.83% of the voters (with 98.52% turnout) decided that Eritrea should become independent. On 27 April, Eritrea declared independence which Ethiopia subsequently recognized.

### **FROM A BEACON OF HOPE TO THE SUB-REGION'S MENACE**

Already before independence Afewerki's EPLF claimed state power in Eritrea. Soon after, in a move that mirrored TPLF's efforts in Ethiopia, EPLF began curbing opposition and civil liberties in an attempt to consolidate its exclusive command of the political system. The long war and related divisions had left a legacy of suspicion and mistrust, which the leadership's emphasis on common national identity sought to remedy. The EPLF made an effort to portray the Eritrean political system as democratic and inclusive. As part of this attempt, in 1994 it changed its name to People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), passed a National Charter, ". . . and resolved to become a broad-based political movement, distinct and separate from the state, open to all nationalist Eritreans regardless of social class and political convictions".<sup>24</sup> On 23 May 1997 Eritrean constitution was ratified, and its Article 7 called "Democratic principles" promised citizens "broad and active participation in all political, economic, social, and cultural life of the country". However, drafted as essentially democratic document,<sup>25</sup> it hardly corresponded with the prevailing political reality emanating from the authoritarian and violent order of the liberation struggle. Arguably, this is one of the main reasons why the constitution has not been implemented.

No change followed in the leadership and the executive political structures. Afewerki, Secretary General of EPLF and the state's President, became the Chairman of PFDJ, while the EPLF high command structures were converted into government councils

<sup>21</sup>In a famous interview with American scholar Paul Henze, TPLF leader Meles Zenawi openly expressed his interest in federating Eritrea as part of Ethiopia and reluctance of the survival of independent Eritrea due to deep religious divisions that would flare up when the common enemy (Derg) is gone. See Henze, Paul B. (1990) *Conversations with Meles Zenawi*, J3 26/002/92/3, 31 March / 1 April.

<sup>22</sup>Perlez, Jane (1991) "Talks on a New Ethiopia Affirm Right to Secede", *The New York Times*, 4 July.

<sup>23</sup>Farkas, Evelyn (2003) *Fractured States and U.S. Foreign Policy: Iraq, Ethiopia, and Bosnia in the 1990s* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan), p. 52.

<sup>24</sup>Markakis, John (1995) "Eritrea's National Charter", *Review of African Political Economy* 22, 63, p. 126.

<sup>25</sup>*The Constitution of Eritrea* (1997).

without significant changes. From the beginning, the PFDJ, a hierarchical and highly centralized organization, controlled the main legislative body, the National Assembly, occupying half of its seats, and although judiciary was founded as a separate body the President appointed, and exerted influence over, its leading members. Yet, it is the informal institutions and networks, such as the President's group of advisors that functions in parallel with the Council of Ministers, the PFDJ Secretariat, and the high-level army officials who report directly to the Presidency, which give President Afewerki supreme power and extensive control over the state's political, legislative, and judicial institutions.<sup>26</sup>

Ideologically, from the outset, the Eritrean state implemented developmental model based on the expectation of individuals' self-sacrifice for greater good of the society and the state. The state and the community were put ahead of individual political rights and economic aspirations. The expected sacrifice by each individual was to be made through the National Service; by defending the country and engaging in low-pay physical work. Alternatively, if the individual decided to leave the country, the expectation was that he or she contributes financially from the diaspora. The polemic obligatory diaspora tax and fees to deal with Eritrean administration when abroad were put in place to exert a degree of control and to ensure a flow of funding to the state. The underlying logic has it that when more Eritreans emigrate, more government revenue from abroad is generated.

From early on, the government sought to divert attention from Eritrea's internal dilemmas while consolidating the one-party system. It therefore shifted focus to foreign relations with an attempt to secure an influential position in the sub-regional politics that would facilitate managing its internal order. During the early days of independence, the Sudanese government's effort to extend political Islam to the neighboring states gave Eritrea an opportunity to shift attention from its internal politics to external affairs. Sudan's attempts to back Islamist forces to gain foothold in Eritrea failed, however, and Asmara broke relations with its neighbor in December 1994. Around this time, in retaliation to Khartoum's continued support of Muslim and Islamic armed opposition, Asmara began assisting elements of the Sudanese opposition that sought to overthrow the Sudanese government. As previously during the liberation war, the sanctuaries in the neighboring state, and ethnic linkages largely of pastoralist people crossing the porous Sudan-Eritrea border, facilitated supporting guerrillas on both sides. However, now for the first time as an independent state, Eritrea was able to assist rebels in Sudan and received funding from the United States to this end. In the course of 1996-7 the Sudanese opposition umbrella, National Democratic Alliance, backed by Uganda, Ethiopia, Eritrea, and the United States among others, made significant military gains and threatened the very existence of the government in Khartoum. Although this forced the regime to make some concessions to the rebels, it survived. The most acute military pressure on the Khartoum government subsided when Eritrea's confrontation with Ethiopia led to the war between the two states in 1998.

Meanwhile, Eritrea's relations with Yemen were severed because of a dispute over the Hanish Islands. Asmara claimed ownership of the archipelago located strategically in the narrowing southern stretch of the Red Sea leading to the Gulf of

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<sup>26</sup> Connell, Dan (2011) "Countries at Crossroads 2011: Eritrea", Freedom House, p. 2-3.

Aden, and in 1996 attacked Yemeni soldiers on the Greater Hanish Island. Yemen was reluctant to withdraw, and the countries fought a brief war. Eventually, however, the parties referred the situation to the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA), which in its October 1998 award gave the ownership of the main islands of the archipelago to Yemen. Despite having suffered a legal defeat, being already at war with Ethiopia since May prevented Eritrea from pursuing the confrontation with Yemen further. Both parties accepted the arbitration decision.

During the early years of independence, Eritrea's relationship with Ethiopia had deteriorated rapidly. Although a number of cooperation treaties had been initially signed, and EPLF and TPLF had already in 1991 agreed to set up a commission to inquire on any disputes that could emerge from Eritrea's likely independence, these failed to prevent the rising antagonism. It appears that at this stage Eritrean leadership became increasingly preoccupied by Ethiopian influence over its economy which it sought to minimize by introducing its own currency. However, Addis Ababa took this as a threat to Ethiopia's interests, and pressure grew along the partially ambiguously demarcated border between the two countries. As both states focused their attention increasingly on the border, a series of violent incidents took place that were triggered by Ethiopians shooting and killing eight Eritrean soldiers on 6 May 1998.<sup>27</sup> Eritrean military occupied a disputed village of Badme on 12 May, and the following day Ethiopia accused Eritrea of aggression and declared war.<sup>28</sup> On 14 May, Ethiopian government told the United Nations Security Council that Eritrea had violated its territorial integrity. While some have alleged that already in 1996-7 Ethiopia had initiated an orchestrated campaign to harass local inhabitants and to move the border further into Eritrea,<sup>29</sup> others have considered the war to have resulted from Eritrean leadership's attempt to bolster its image and strengthen its position relative to Ethiopia.<sup>30</sup> Having instigated the war or not, Eritrean attempt was clearly to defy Ethiopia's increasing domination in the sub-region, and shift focus from the repressive internal politics to foreign affairs.

The eruption of war between the former allies had an effect on their neighboring states. Eritrea's relations with Djibouti deteriorated rapidly, as Djibouti sided with Ethiopia that desperately needed a sea access after losing the route through the Eritrean port of Assab. In 1996 Eritrea and Djibouti had already almost gone to war over the poorly demarcated and disputed border in Ras Doumeira area, and in November 1998 Djibouti broke relations with Eritrea in solidarity with Ethiopia. By doing this, it capitalized on the opportunity to gain economic benefit and political goodwill from becoming Ethiopia's main port. The relations between Eritrea and Djibouti continued being contentious after the Eritrea-Ethiopia war, and marred by the United States, Djibouti's major ally, which increasingly considered Eritrea as a source of instability in the sub-region. Djibouti, hosting the main American military base in Sub-Saharan Africa, and a French base, continued to side with Ethiopian and Western interests. This led to further deterioration of Djibouti-Eritrea

27 Reports of International Arbitral Awards (2005) "Eritrea-Ethiopia Claims Commission – Partial Award: *Jus Ad Bellum* – Ethiopia's Claims 1-8", 19 December, pp. 464-465.

28 Giorgis, Andebrhan Welde (2014) *Eritrea at a Crossroads: A Narrative of Triumph, Betrayal and Hope* (Houston, TX: Strategic Book Publishing), p. 516.

29 Tesfai, Alemseged (no date) "The Cause of the Eritrean-Ethiopia Border Conflict", <http://www.dehai.org/conflict/analysis/alemsgghed3.html>

30 Abbink, Jon (2003) "Badme and the Ethio-Eritrean Border: The Challenge of Demarcation in the Post-War Period", *Africa: rivista trimestrale di studi e documentazione*, 58 (1-4), pp. 221, 226.

relations, partly because of accusations of Eritrea supporting rebel groups in the neighboring states.<sup>31</sup> In June 2008 the situation culminated in a brief border conflict in Ras Doumeira after Djibouti accused Eritrea of territorial encroachment.<sup>32</sup> The confrontation finally ended when Qatar engaged in mediation, which resulted in both armies withdrawing to their positions prior to the fighting and in the establishment of a buffer zone between the two states monitored by Qatari soldiers. The relations between the two states have remained cold.

The Eritrea-Ethiopia war also affected Somalia, which had been without effective central government since the fall of Siad Barre regime in 1991. Eritrea's relationship with Egypt and Yemen improved since both had sought to weaken Ethiopia's power in the sub-region, and these states appeared to lend active support to Eritrea to arm and train the Ethiopian separatist Oromo Liberation Front (OLF)<sup>33</sup> based in Somalia under protection of warlord Mohamed Farah Aideed. Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) in eastern Ethiopia also received assistance from Eritrea-linked armed groups in Somalia and intensified its activities.<sup>34</sup> Other smaller armed opposition groups were active in Ethiopia as well. In response, Addis Ababa supplied arms and training to armed groups in south-central Somalia, such as Rahenweyne Resistance Army and Puntland militia.<sup>35</sup> Ethiopia also rejuvenated its relations with Sudan, seeking to relieve concerns on the Millennium Dam (currently known as The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam) on the Blue Nile, and engaging in economic cooperation, which contributed to Khartoum's interest in supporting the Eritrean revolutionary armed opposition group, Eritrean Islamic Jihad, operating from the Sudanese territory. Finally, the Eritrea-Ethiopia conflict eased pressure on Sudan and permitted it to launch new military offensive against its main opponent, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army in Southern Sudan, while Yemen gained the upper hand over Eritrea in the Hanish Islands dispute.<sup>36</sup>

In 2000, the Eritrean-Ethiopian war came to an end. Although Ethiopian military emerged victorious in terms of territorial gains, it had done so with a terrible cost due to direct loss of life, displacement of hundreds of thousands, and economic deterioration that included a famine which the Ethiopian government was accused of using strategically to weaken armed opposition in its Ogaden, Sidama, and parts of Oromia regions.<sup>37</sup> The final Ethiopian military offensive in May 2000 had resulted in Eritrean withdrawal from approximately ¼ of its territory, and forced Asmara to come to the negotiation table in Algiers where a ceasefire agreement was signed in July ahead of the final peace treaty in December. According to the treaty, Eritrean-Ethiopian Boundary Commission was established to demarcate the border, and PCA

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31 For instance, the Djiboutian government has accused Asmara of supporting Afar rebels in Djibouti and encouraging violence in the sub-region. See e.g. "Qatar to Deploy Troops to Djibouti and Eritrea", *Somalilandpress.com*, 10 June 2010. Eritrean support for Ethiopian armed opposition and armed groups in Somalia has been widely documented.

32 On 10 June Eritrean forces initiated the fighting by firing on Djibouti units that rejected demands to return defected Eritrean soldiers. The fighting lasted for three days during which the Djibouti army received non-lethal support mainly from France.

33 Ehteshami, Anoushiravan and Murphy, Emma C. (2011) *The International Politics of the Red Sea* (Abingdon: Routledge), p. 69.

34 Gilkes, Patrick (1999) "The Somali Connection", BBC, 23 July.

35 *Ibidem*.

36 Ehteshami and Murphy, *The International Politics of the Red Sea*, p. 70.

37 Human Rights Watch (2001) *World Report: Ethiopia – Human Rights Developments* (New York, NY: Human Rights Watch).

was put in charge to determine the boundary between the two states after the war. United Nations Mission to Eritrea and Ethiopia (UNMEE) was established to monitor the temporary security zone that extended 25 kilometers into Eritrean side of the border. Eventually PCA gave the disputed Badme area to Eritrea. Both parties initially agreed to the decision, but tension over the border continued.

### **HOW ERITREA BECAME THE HORN OF AFRICA'S "ROGUE STATE"**

The Eritrean-Ethiopian war changed the political climate in the sub-region. The sour relations continued, and reinforced the established practice of supporting the neighboring states' armed and non-armed opposition groups particularly between Ethiopia and Eritrea. But more threatening for Eritrea, the major international powers and regional players, led by the United States, were aligning increasingly behind Ethiopia. In this situation, Eritrea sought to promote itself internationally and courted the United States, offering cooperation in the war on terror, access to its military installations, and pleaded for consideration of establishing American military base in Eritrea instead of Djibouti's Camp Lemonnier.

Yet, despite its efforts, Eritrea was unable to turn the wave of powerful states backing Ethiopia. It then adopted a confrontational approach and illegally occupied the demilitarized areas on its side of the Ethiopian border, which did not work in its favor in attracting external alliances among powerful states and international organizations that were aligning behind Ethiopia. In addition, despite the authoritarian TPLF-led political culture, Ethiopia attracted external investment. International businesses were increasingly interested in infrastructure projects, and exploiting its natural resources and agricultural potential. Eritrea, on the other hand, became largely considered as an aggressor in the war against Ethiopia and a troublemaker in the sub-region. The authoritarian nature of its regime had by now ended the naïve hopes in some quarters for Eritrea becoming a model democratic political system that would generate a wave of democratization in the sub-region.

The growing international isolation pushed Eritrean government to revert its focus back to internal politics to maintain the domestic *status quo*. Afewerki leadership had initially promised to hold elections in 1998, but these were first postponed to 2001 and then indefinitely in the context of confrontation with Ethiopia. In the aftermath of the defeat in the war, the government faced increasing criticism. This came mainly in the form of a letter signed by 15 prominent members of the PFDJ (G-15), which demanded the implementation of the suspended constitution, the opening up of political space for democratization, and accountability and freedom of speech. Instead, however, in September 2001 President Afewerki ordered a crack-down of within-the-regime critics who either disappeared or were imprisoned in the course of the following months. Many were detained without charges. The following year, Christian leaders and congregations were increasingly targeted, and the continuation of arbitrary arrests created an atmosphere of terror. This campaign orchestrated from the highest leadership concentrated power further to a diminishing circle of trusted individuals around President Afewerki.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>38</sup> See Connell, "Countries at the Crossroads"; pp. 1-4.

Largely owing to the lack of reliable external alliances, confrontation with Ethiopia continued paramount in guiding Eritrea's internal politics and foreign relations. By December 2005 tensions between Eritrea and Ethiopia had again built up as part of the competition for influence in the sub-region. This resulted from Eritrea's disillusionment of the powerful states and international and (sub)regional organizations, namely the UN, the African Union (AU), and Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD), which all appeared favoring Ethiopia. Eritrea imposed increasing restrictions on UN operations in the border region with Ethiopia, and contested the PCA decision that condemned it for having attacked Ethiopia and broken international law. Subsequently Eritrea expelled aid workers, which contributed to remilitarization of the border and an escalation that was feared to lead to resumption of war between the two states. However, rather than aiming at new war which it could not afford, Eritrean government used the border dispute in which Ethiopia was allegedly occupying territory belonging to Eritrea to maintain state of emergency at home. This in turn justified upholding authoritarian rule, the continued suspension of the constitution, the postponing of elections, and mass recruitment to the National Service.<sup>39</sup> At the same time, Eritrea played a key mediation role in Sudan's Eastern Peace Agreement that aimed at ending armed insurrection in Eastern Sudan following the Comprehensive Peace Agreement between the Government of Sudan and the SPLM/A. This paved way for a temporary improvement of Eritrea-Sudan relations, but these have since been tarnished by Sudan's good relations with Ethiopia, namely Sudan allowing Eritrean opposition factions to operate in its territory and handing over Eritrean-supported Ethiopian armed opposition elements to Ethiopia.

In 2006, the Eritrea-Ethiopia proxy confrontation intensified in the context of resurgence of political Islam in the Horn of Africa. Islamist forces were gaining ground in Somalia, and the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) defeated the American-backed Alliance for Restoration of Peace and Counter-Terrorism and advanced to Mogadishu.<sup>40</sup> This fed further antagonism between Eritrea and the United States because Eritrea was seen as responsible for assisting militias, including those widely considered as terrorist organizations such as al-Qaeda. By seemingly destabilizing Somalia, Eritrea was considered to be working against Western and Ethiopian interests, and against regional peace and stability.

At the same time, Ethiopia continued experiencing armed opposition in its peripheries. It feared that the situation in Somalia, and Eritrean assistance to the ICU, ONLF, and OLF, would strengthen rebellions at home, mainly in its eastern and southern regions. In this situation, the United States encouraged Ethiopia to attack ICU in Somalia in order to boost the Western and Ethiopian-backed Transitional Federal Government (TFG), which had been established in April 2004 and only maintained limited influence around Baidoa. As a result, following TFG's invitation to intervene, Ethiopia, backed by a small United States military contingent, invaded Somalia in July 2006, which led to increasing ONLF activity and that brought about an extremely violent counterinsurgency campaign by the Ethiopian security forces in the Ogaden area of its Somali Region. Meanwhile, Ethiopia lent heavy support to

<sup>39</sup> Human Rights Watch (2009) *Service for Life: State Repression and Indefinite Conscriptioin in Eritrea* (London: Human Rights Watch), p. 20.

<sup>40</sup> Turse, Nick (2015) *Tomorrow's Battlefield: US Proxy Wars and Secret Ops in Africa* (Chicago: Haymarket Books), p. 126.

TFG and related groups, and Yemen sent arms to Somalia despite the UN embargo in place since 1992.<sup>41</sup>

Ethiopia's intervention in Somalia was approved by the sub-regional organization, IGAD, based in Djibouti. Eritrea contested the IGAD's decision which it claimed contravened international law, and suspended its IGAD membership in April 2007. Although TFG controlled limited territory in Somalia at the time and its legitimacy to invite Ethiopia to intervene can be questioned, the UN and AU were complicit. Eventually the Ethiopian and TFG forces prevailed, which forced ICU to splinter and laid basis for the strengthening of its armed Islamist militant faction, al-Shabaab. Following the collapse of the ICU in Mogadishu, and the forging of a power-sharing deal between TFG and an Islamist splinter group Alliance for the Re-liberation of Somalia (ARS), Ethiopia stated it would withdraw from Somalia in January 2009. Meanwhile, in April 2008, the ARS split and its second faction based in Asmara continued to receive money, arms, and training from Eritrea.

In July 2008 UNMEE mandate ended at the Eritrea-Ethiopia border. Following this, pressure on Eritrea increased with the expectation of Ethiopian withdrawal from Somalia which was feared to leave more space for armed opposition groups that were working against Western and Ethiopian interests. Therefore, with respect to the situation in Somalia, international community assumed a position according to the posture of its most powerful states. On 23 December 2009, United Nations Security Council passed Resolution 1907 which singled out Eritrea's actions in Somalia and in the border dispute with Djibouti as constituting "a threat to international peace and security".<sup>42</sup> Although Eritrea's support of armed groups in Somalia was principally motivated by an attempt to counter Ethiopian domination of the sub-region, internationally powerful states and governmental and non-governmental organizations siding with Ethiopia pushed for increasing international condemnation. Meticulous UN investigations specifically on Eritrea's involvement were conducted, although a number of other external actors were also involved in subversive activities in Somalia. Amply endorsed by Ethiopian (and American) intelligence, the investigations detailed Eritrean support to the Ethiopian armed opposition groups (which the Ethiopian government has designated as terrorist organizations) and other militant groups in Somalia. Although recognizing activities of other states also affecting the security situation in Somalia, but not emphasizing for instance Ethiopia's heavy support to the TFG that commanded little legitimacy, the investigations targeted particularly Eritrea. No similar inquiry was conducted on Ethiopian, or other states', support of Eritrean opposition. Yet, the investigations resulted in a UN embargo on arms and similar materiel, which prohibited Eritrea from supporting "armed opposition groups which aim to destabilize the region, as well as harbouring, financing, facilitating, supporting, organizing, training or inciting individuals or groups to perpetrate acts of violence or terrorist acts against other States or their citizens in the region".<sup>43</sup> A number of Eritrean leaders were also subjected to travel bans and asset freezes.

As the tension between Eritrea and Ethiopia continued, the view of Eritrea as a

41 UN Security Council (2008) *Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 1811 (2008)*, S/2008/769, 10 December, pp. 24-26.

42 *United Nations Security Council (2009) Resolution 1907*, 23 December, p. 2.

43 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

sub-regional spoiler of peace prevailed. Despite this, following Ethiopia's partial withdrawal from Somalia, Eritrea stated its return to IGAD in July 2011. Its protest of the IGAD-endorsed Ethiopian intervention in Somalia appeared to be over. The move was seen as an attempt to avoid further sanctions amidst of accusations of plotting to bomb African Union summit in Addis Ababa and continuing to assist al-Shabaab.<sup>44</sup> Eritrea's statement came ahead of United Nations Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea report released on 13 July 2012, which indicated that Eritrea continued to support OLF and ONLF by deploying their elements through Somalia in an attempt to destabilize Ethiopia but at the same time having seized its assistance to al-Shabaab.<sup>45</sup> This indicates that already by 2012 Eritrea had ended its support to the widely considered Islamist terrorist organization, which has largely been used to portray Eritrea as a rogue state.

Eritrean motivation to end its support for al-Shabaab had to do with Asmara's attempt to improve its international image. Yet, despite Eritrea's apparent conciliatory moves, Western powers have continued to promote antagonism against it. Headed by the United States, they have persistently endorsed the confrontational stand against Eritrea by their sub-regional partners Ethiopia and Djibouti, while Sudan has sought a balance between improving its relationship with Ethiopia and United States and maintaining good ties with Eritrea.

Meanwhile, United States has continued to consider Ethiopia as the core of its strategy in the Horn of Africa. Following the 2005 elections and during the intervention in Somalia, increasing focus was put on authoritarianism and human rights violations in Ethiopia. This contributed to the 2007 bill by the United States House of Representatives to condition American military aid to the country, but the initiative was eventually rejected.<sup>46</sup> Washington continues to rely on Addis Ababa as its main ally in promoting its interests in the sub-region, countering terrorism and contributing to international peacekeeping operations,<sup>47</sup> while operating from and providing military aid<sup>48</sup> to Ethiopia. At the same time American geo-political strategy has given Djibouti an important role, as it hosts the principal base for United States military operations in Africa and provides Ethiopia the much-needed sea access.

Finally, the highly unstable Somalia has continued to serve as the main venue for violently clashing interests in the Horn of Africa. However, despite having been condemned for allegedly supporting armed groups in Somalia, Eritrea has not been the only state assisting armed factions or ostensibly engaging in destabilizing activities there. For instance, elements of the African Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), active since February 2007, have been accused of undermining peace and stability. The Kenyan AMISOM contingent, which originally entered Somalia in October 2011, has reportedly engaged in dealings with al-Shabaab that have significantly contributed in the latter's financial viability.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, Ethiopia, which has

44 - (2011) "Eritrea Seeks to Rejoin East African Body Igad", *British Broadcasting Corporation*, 2 August.

45 See e.g. *Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 2002 (2011)*.

46 Jopson, Barney and Dombey, Daniel (2007) "Ethiopia Bill Faces Bush Backlash", *Financial Times*, 3 October; and *Ethiopia Democracy and Accountability Act of 2007*, 110th United States Congress, 3 October.

47 US Department of State, *Congressional Budget Justification, Foreign Operations, Fiscal Year 2010, Book II*, p. 52.

48 Wezeman, Pieter D. (2010) "Arms Flows and the Conflict in Somalia", Background Paper, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, October, p. 8.

49 Journalists for Justice (2015) "Black and White: Kenya's Criminal Racket in Somalia", Nairobi, November.

gradually developed domestic arms industry,<sup>50</sup> has reportedly provided weapons to various factions and has been repeatedly accused of promoting instability in Somalia to advance its hegemonic designs in the sub-region.<sup>51</sup> In January 2014, Ethiopia overturned its earlier decision to withdraw from Somalia and formally joined AMISOM,<sup>52</sup> while it has continued to heavily support confrontational, instead of reconciliatory, stand of Somali armed forces against some other Somali factions. These activities by AMISOM members contributing to instability have been taking place under the umbrella provided by the internationally funded peacekeeping mission. Still, no international investigation has been conducted on the specific activities of the AMISOM participants and other interveners in Somalia, while Eritrea has been singled out for its actions to promote alternative political order in the sub-region.

### **ERITREA'S REGIONAL POLICY AND INTERNATIONAL PARTNERS TODAY**

Eritrea's confrontational stand with Ethiopia has shaped its foreign policy and is directly linked to its internal politics.<sup>53</sup> President Afewerki and his narrowing leadership circle have remained in total control of formal and informal institutions. Maintaining this *status quo* and repressive rule has required the continuity of confrontation with Ethiopia. It has justified the curbing of opposition and the prevention of political opening that could lead to the unraveling of the highly centralized and narrowly based regime. The situation in the aftermath of the wave of repression in 2001, and the continuous conscription to the National Service, have fueled mass emigration. But the strategy to extract obligatory formal taxes and fees from the diaspora has been ailing, in part due to restrictions in the host countries, which has resulted in informal channels of extraction gaining relative importance. Some prominent regime individuals have reportedly been involved in arms trade and human trafficking through Sudan, and funds have been collected through diaspora cultural events. The regime has also stepped up gold mining and other mineral extraction activities to acquire foreign exchange. As a result, despite the sanctions, until now the Eritrean state has been able to obtain sufficient financial assets and military equipment to ensure the survival of the regime that is accustomed to governing with scarce resources. Still, however, the regime has been pressed to find external sources of funding and other resources for sustaining itself.

Consequently, Asmara's isolation and meager economic situation has necessitated a search for new external alliances. In this regard, the process of lifting sanctions on Iran and normalization of its international status, and a recent grudge between United Arab Emirates and Djibouti, have given Eritrea the opportunity to gain much-needed external support by embracing the Gulf States threatened by the strengthened Iran. Up until recently, Asmara had allied itself with Iran and had been

50 - (2009) "Ethiopia to Boost Arms Production: PM", *Nazret.org*, 14 April.

51 See e.g. Khayre, Ahmed Ali M. (2014) "Can Ethiopian AMISOM Troops Be a Neutral Force?", *International Policy Digest*, 2 July; and Arman, Abukar (2015) "Somalia's New Race Against Time", *Foreign Policy Association*, 5 January. Ethiopia has imported arms from a number of foreign sources, and recently its acquisition of material apt for manufacturing nuclear weapons from the United Kingdom became a source of concern in some circles. See Duffy, Judith (2015) "Concerns Raised over UK Export of Nuclear Weapon 'Ingredient' to Ethiopia", *Herald Scotland*, 1 November.

52 - (2014) "Ethiopian Troops Formally Join AMISOM Peacekeepers in Somalia", AMISOM, January.

53 Arguably, internal politics in Ethiopia also feed from the confrontation.

complacent of Iran's support of the Shiite Houthi rebels in the neighboring Yemen. However, the lifting of sanctions on Iran have reinforced its position in the Middle East substantially, which threatens the position of Saudi Arabia and the smaller Gulf States aligned with it (especially Bahrain, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, and Qatar). As a result, the confrontation between Saudi Arabia and Iran has heightened, and Asmara has come to the realization that shifting from the long-term alliance with Iran to the Saudi-led camp of Gulf States is more beneficial in terms of obtaining badly needed financial and economic resources from abroad. On the other hand, the Gulf States have been eager to find allies on the African side of the Red Sea to support their campaign in Yemen, especially after the severing of relations between United Arab Emirates and Djibouti.

Thus the war in Yemen, and particularly the Saudi-led coalition's intervention since 2015, has given Asmara an opportunity to shift foreign policy orientation and cement cooperation with its new allies. Eritrea has allowed United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia to use its ports and airport for anti-Houthi campaign in Yemen,<sup>54</sup> sent a significant military contingent that has been incorporated into United Arab Emirates units in support of the Saudi-led coalition, and has gained much-needed economic assistance, rehabilitation of infrastructure, and diplomatic support in return.<sup>55</sup> This could possibly lead to moderate improvement of Eritrea's relations with the United States in the long term, although it is unlikely to happen as long as it continues to confront Ethiopia. Meanwhile, the Ethiopian-supported Eritrean opposition has continued to allege that Eritrea's decision to assist the Saudi-led coalition in the war in Yemen has allowed it to gain financial and economic means against the Security Council resolutions, and that these resources will be used to maintain power and domestic repression as well as to destabilize the sub-region.<sup>56</sup>

At the same time, Eritrea-Ethiopia relations have remained tense. A number of incidents, such as cross-border skirmishes and bombardment, have taken place, and both parties continue to support each other's armed opposition groups.<sup>57</sup> The tensions increased further ahead of Ethiopian 2015 elections, when an alleged Ethiopian air raid destroyed a military depot and a gold mine processing facility near Asmara, the latter of which having been considered to provide a major source of revenue for the Eritrean regime.<sup>58</sup> Eritrea has also accused Ethiopia of preparing for an invasion.<sup>59</sup> On the other hand, Ethiopian leadership has found the improvement of relations between Eritrea and the Gulf States as a source of concern, especially if they result in an attempt to destabilize the Ethiopian state.<sup>60</sup>

54 Fitzgerald, Dennis (2015) "UN Report: UAE, Saudi Using Eritrean Land, Sea, Airspace and, Possibly, Eritrean Troops in Yemen Battle", UN Tribune, 2 November.

55 Solomon, Salem (2016) "Observers See Several Motives for Eritrean Involvement in Yemen", Voice of America, 9 January.

56 Tekle, Tesfa-Alem (2016) "Eritrean rebels raid military base, kill intelligence agents", *Sudan Tribune*, 29 January.

57 A number of armed opposition groups are active in both countries. In Eritrea, the strongest guerrilla opposition has been staged by the Eritrean National Salvation Front, while in Ethiopia the armed opposition organizations Ogaden National Liberation Front and Oromo Liberation Front continue to exist.

58 "Eritrea: Ethiopian Planes Raided Bisha Goldmine", *Asmarino Independent*, 21 March 2015, and "Ethiopian Air Force Jets Attack Key Targets Inside Eritrea, High Ranking Military Officer Confirmed", *Awramba Times*, 22 March 2015.

59 "Eritrea Says Arch-Rival Ethiopia Has Increased War Rhetoric, and Is Threatening to Invade It", *Mail & Guardian Africa*, 7 September 2015.

60 - (2015) "Hailemariam warns Saudi Arabia and UAE over military moves in and around Eritrea's Assab port", *Awramba Times*, 2 September.

## CONCLUSION

Eritrea is an authoritarian state in which political power crystallizes exclusively in the highest leadership, the Afewerki presidency. Although Eritrean political system, in principle, is composed of institutions that resemble democratic order, its political culture continues to be defined by the governing methods and strategies of the highly centralized military-political organization which led the final stage of the long and violent liberation struggle. Despite the early hopes for democratization, President Afewerki has maintained political power by limiting the state leadership to his person and a handful of trusted individuals in charge of the key military and political institutions. Still, the regime has been sufficiently strong to maintain the repressive political order and curb internal dissent with meager resources for years, which indicates that it has the capacity to continue doing so in the near future despite mass emigration and diaspora opposition. Yet, the reduction of the regime's powerbase into a handful of trusted individuals may put into question the survival of the administration after Afewerki because he has no obvious successor.

At the international level, since the Eritrean-Ethiopian war, Eritrea has been increasingly considered a rogue state and a spoiler of peace in the Horn of Africa. However, due to its small size and limited resources, especially after facing sanctions, and its neighbors having secured the backing of internationally powerful states, Eritrea has little capacity to undermine the prevailing power relations in the sub-region. In addition, it is important to highlight that Eritrean foreign policy is not substantially different from the policies pursued by other states in the Horn of Africa. Its external relations aim at supporting the regime's internal order and interests in the neighboring states, and this is hardly distinct from foreign policy strategies pursued by its neighbors. Eritrea's continuing confrontation with Ethiopia draws from the regime's attempt to maintain internal *status quo* and to resist Ethiopia's domination of the sub-region. Ethiopia having become a major ally of principal Western powers, and exerting influence through the regional and sub-regional organizations, the AU and the IGAD, has therefore pushed Eritrea in conflict with Western interests and in confrontation with most of its neighboring states. Its documented support of non-state actors that goes against the interests of the more powerful states in the sub-region, and their local, regional, and extra-regional allies, continues to put Eritrea in a vulnerable position. Eritrea's confrontation with its direct neighbors, although less with Sudan, along with the domestic authoritarian and repressive political environment, hinders Asmara's chances to improve its international image.

Finally, despite the recently improving ties between Eritrea and the Gulf States, there are few prospects for Eritrea under the current leadership to escape its international image as a rogue state in the near future. This is because Afewerki regime's politics have mainly sought to maintain domestic power by confrontational foreign policy aimed at promoting alternative political order in the Horn through assistance to non-state armed groups labeled as "terrorist". Still, its methods have hardly differed from those employed by more powerful states in the sub-region, which also uphold poor domestic human rights records and use their regular armies, non-state armed groups, and diplomatic influence in international, regional, and sub-regional organizations to advance their interests in the Horn of Africa and beyond.

