



Stabilisation Unit

**Elite Bargains and Political Deals Project:
Ethiopia-Eritrea Case Study**

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Author details

The author is Professor of the History of Africa at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. This study draws on a range of sources. First, the author's own field notes, including both formal and informal interviews, in Ethiopia and Eritrea over a number of years since 1997. Second, a range of published primary sources and other contemporary grey literature is cited to underpin key elements of the narrative and to support the explanation of particular views and perceptions both during the conflict and in the years that followed. Third, the report makes use of the extensive scholarly literature which has emerged since the late 1990s on the war itself. Finally, use has also been made of several media outlets.

Background to Elite Bargains and Political Deals Project

This case study is one of a series commissioned to support the Stabilisation Unit's (SU) development of an evidence base relating to elite bargains and political deals. The project explores how national and international interventions have and have not been effective in fostering and sustaining political deals and elite bargains; and whether or not these political deals and elite bargains have helped reduce violence, increased local, regional and national stability and contributed to the strengthening of the relevant political settlement. Drawing on the case studies, the SU has developed a series of summary papers that bring together the project's key findings and will underpin the revision of the existing 'UK Approach to Stabilisation' (2014) paper. The project also contributes to the SU's growing engagement and expertise in this area and provides a comprehensive analytical resource for those inside and outside government.



Executive Summary

In May 1998, Ethiopia and Eritrea went to war, ostensibly over contested portions of their lengthy shared border. What began as a relatively minor border ‘skirmish’ around the village of Badme rapidly escalated into a full-scale conflict, involving mass mobilisation of armed forces on both sides and intense fighting at particular pressure points along the border. Estimates of war dead vary, but most accounts place the total killed on both sides at between 70,000 and 100,000. Large numbers of civilians were caught up in the fighting, leading to large-scale displacement.

Eritrea had only become independent from Ethiopia a few years earlier – *de facto* in May 1991, *de jure* following a UN-sanctioned referendum in May 1993 – and had done so seemingly with the Ethiopian government’s blessing. The eruption of the war, therefore, came as an enormous shock to people in both countries, although not necessarily to elites in Addis Ababa and Asmara. Tensions had been building up over several months over issues such as banking, trade and border security and demarcation.

The war itself lasted for two years. During that period, there were prolonged periods of uneasy inactivity interrupted by large-scale rounds of fighting: in the wake of the eruption of fighting in May and June 1998, a relatively quiet standoff – during which diplomatic activity aimed at a resolution was intense – was followed in February 1999 by fighting at Badme, which was retaken by Ethiopian forces at considerable cost.

Further intensive fighting took place along parts of the central border and in the far south in May and June 1999. Several months of relative calm followed, until Ethiopia launched an all-out offensive in May 2000. They broke through Eritrean defences in the west of the country forcing a mass Eritrean retreat into the highland plateau, although the Eritrean army managed to halt the Ethiopian advance at a number of key points.

The nature of the agreement

By June 2000, UN led talks had succeeded in bringing about a cessation of fighting. In December, President Isaias Afewerki of Eritrea and Prime Minister Meles Zenawi of Ethiopia signed the Algiers Agreement, formally ending the conflict. Both sides agreed to a Temporary Security Zone (TSZ), which would be monitored by a UN peacekeeping force, the United Nations Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE). Under the terms of the Algiers Agreement, they also agreed to abide by the ruling of an independent boundary commission. The commission reported in April 2002, but while Eritrea accepted the findings, Ethiopia did not. In particular, it objected to Badme being awarded to Eritrea, and Ethiopian forces remain in occupation of Badme at the time of writing.

Over the next few years, there was no normalisation of relations. Although there was no return to full-scale war, there were episodic outbreaks of fighting – especially after UNMEE withdrew in 2008 – and worsening relations between Addis Ababa and Asmara. Ethiopia refused to accept the boundary ruling and wanted to reopen negotiations on the question; and Eritrea accepted the boundary commission findings and refused to entertain further discussion, accusing Ethiopia of illegal occupation of its territory. Each accused the other, with varying degrees of accuracy, of supporting armed groups against them. In particular, Eritrea eschewed the international consensus on Somalia – led at the regional level by Ethiopia – resulting in sanctions being imposed on Asmara in 2009. Eritrea was accused of supporting the Somali Islamist group *al-Shabaab*, with a view – as perceived in Addis Ababa – of continuing the war against Ethiopia by proxy.

Therefore, although the war ostensibly ended in December 2000, its repercussions and aftermath have been hugely significant, and continue to destabilise the region. The war also continues to have



profound implications on the internal politics of both countries. This is especially true of Eritrea, where a heavily militarised regime draws its legitimacy, at least in part, from the spectre of future war with its larger neighbour, which it uses to stabilise the national-level elite bargain. Therefore, there is no significant breakthrough in relations in sight, whether engineered by the parties themselves or through external pressure.

The role of external actors

External engagement has been defined primarily by failure and serious misjudgement on the part of various actors. It has consistently failed to produce a lasting settlement, whether during the war itself or in the years since. While not removing responsibility from the protagonists themselves, from the outset, external interventions were often unhelpful and insensitive, and have certainly worsened the relationship between Eritrea and Ethiopia over the last decade and a half.

On the Eritrean side, regional and international mediation was perceived as inherently biased toward Ethiopia, a position rooted in Eritrea's history of anticolonial struggle. Asmara had little or no faith in the international community to give it a fair hearing, and this trust deficit has only increased in recent years. For its part, Ethiopia has proven relatively immune to international pressure, especially in terms of its occupation of Badme, because of its strategic geopolitical role in the region and its carefully-constructed leadership role in Africa more broadly. Addis Ababa calculated, correctly, that external partners needed a friendly, stable Ethiopia more than they needed Eritrea, and so has been able to circumvent any initiative to allow the full implementation of the Algiers Agreement or the re-entry of Eritrea into the international fold.

No war, no peace

The period since the full-scale war ended in 2000 has witnessed a general reduction in violence. The Algiers Agreement itself has not contributed to a strong, enduring political settlement, but rather has been used by elites on both sides of the border for a mutually convenient cessation of overt hostilities, at least for the time being.

Several other factors explain why an uneasy 'peace' has held over a number of years. First, the Ethiopian government has been reluctant to restart a direct conflict, both because of the potential political and military blowback from doing so while Somalia remains engulfed in violence, and also because Ethiopia has consistently outmanoeuvred Eritrea diplomatically, politically and economically, and therefore has had no reason to initiate an overt war against its weakened neighbour to date. In addition, the Eritrean government has used the perceived ongoing threat of further war to consolidate itself politically at home, with an authoritarian and militarised regime justifying tight internal political control because of external threats and a supposedly hostile international community. The Eritrean government also believes it has most to lose by restarting the war, both militarily (there are evident problems with morale and motivation in the army) and diplomatically, given the government's conviction that it has abided by the Algiers Agreement while Ethiopia has not. Therefore, both sides have so far benefited from the 'no war, no peace' scenario, albeit for different reasons.



Background

Ethiopia emerged in its modern form at the end of the nineteenth century when, following the successful repulsion of an Italian invasion in 1896, it became one of only two independent African states in the era of European imperialism.¹ At the same time, Eritrea to the north – encompassing a swathe of territory over which successive regimes in the Ethiopian Highlands had had periodic if vaguely-defined influence – became an Italian colony, created as a result of defeat against Ethiopia.² In the course of the twentieth century, and especially under Emperor Haile Selassie, Ethiopia emerged as an icon of African political sovereignty, using its independence (notwithstanding a brief hiatus between 1936 and 1941, the period of Fascist Italian occupation) and a carefully crafted image of its glorious antiquity to establish for itself a pre-eminence in the continent's political landscape.

Thus, for example, Addis Ababa was the natural choice for the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) headquarters from 1963, as well as its successor, the African Union (AU). Eritrea, meanwhile, after half a century of Italian rule, was occupied by the British in 1941. Following local consultations as well as deliberations at the newly-founded UN in the late 1940s, it was federated with Ethiopia in 1952.³ This was deemed the obvious compromise once it became clear that opinion within Eritrea was deeply divided over the territory's future.⁴ The experience of Italian colonial rule, and of British administration in the 1940s, had convinced many Eritreans that they were *not* 'Ethiopian', and that their political and economic development was distinct from (and in many ways superior to) the supposedly more stunted, feudal trajectory of their larger neighbour to the south.⁵ At the same time, however, other Eritreans – especially many Orthodox Christian highlanders – had certain cultural, ethnic and religious affinities with Ethiopia, and believed that their future was more secure in some form of negotiated political union with the latter.⁶

The federal compromise quickly unravelled, however. In the course of the 1950s, it was evident that Ethiopia was intent on undermining Eritrean autonomy – despite the fact that the latter was supposedly guaranteed by the UN itself – and that Haile Selassie himself believed Eritrea's only true destiny was as a fully incorporated province of the Ethiopian empire. Complete control of Eritrea also offered clear geopolitical advantages – not least access to the Red Sea via two thriving ports, Massawa and Assab. Meanwhile, Haile Selassie permitted the US a major military base on the outskirts of Asmara, and Ethiopia was now seen as a key Cold War ally.⁷ Any emerging nationalist sentiment in Eritrea itself was seen as secondary to these larger strategic considerations. As political repression and cultural prohibitions intensified in the late 1950s, protest in Eritrea likewise escalated.⁸ The Eritrean Liberation Movement – established by a handful of exiled activists in neighbouring Sudan – was soon supplanted by the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), which began a

¹ Sven Rubenson, *The Survival of Ethiopian Independence* (London, 1976).

² Tekeste Negash, *Italian Colonialism in Eritrea, 1882-1941: policies, praxis, and impact* (Uppsala, 1987); Redie Bereketeab, *Eritrea: the making of a nation, 1890-1991* (Trenton NJ, 2007).

³ G.K.N.Trevaskis, *Eritrea: a colony in transition* (London, 1960); S.Pankhurst & R.Pankhurst, *Ethiopia and Eritrea: the last phase of the reunion struggle, 1941-1952* (Woodford Green, 1953); Duncan Cumming, 'The UN disposal of Eritrea', *African Affairs*, 52:207 (1953).

⁴ Lloyd Ellingson, 'The emergence of political parties in Eritrea, 1941-1950', *Journal of African History*, 18:2 (1977).

⁵ This came to be viewed as the 'nationalist' position, and by the late 1940s a number of groups had come together to form the 'Independence Bloc': Ruth Iyob, *The Eritrean Struggle for Independence: domination, resistance, nationalism, 1941-1993* (Cambridge, 1995); Ellingson, 'Emergence'.

⁶ This was broadly known as the 'Unionist' camp, or *Andinet* in Tigrinya: Iyob, *Eritrean Struggle*.

⁷ Colin Legum & B.Lee, *The Horn of Africa in Continuing Crisis* (New York & London, 1979); Okbazghi Yohannes, *Eritrea: a pawn in world politics* (Gainesville FL, 1991).

⁸ Tom Killion, 'Eritrean workers' organisation and early nationalist mobilisation, 1948-1958', *Eritrean Studies Review*, 2:1 (1997).



guerrilla war against Ethiopian forces in 1961.⁹ The following year, the Eritrean Assembly was abolished, the federal constitution scrapped, and Eritrea fully absorbed into Ethiopia.¹⁰

The armed struggle against Ethiopia intensified in the course of the 1960s. Initially the ELF drew much of its support from the predominantly Muslim western lowlands, but as it expanded, it began to recruit from the Christian plateau, especially from the mid-1960s. This led to growing tensions within the movement, and by the early 1970s several groups had split off from the ELF to form their own organisations. Some of these coalesced to form the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) under a small cohort of fighters, prominent among whom was a former engineering student, Isaias Afewerki.¹¹ In the 1970s, the ELF and EPLF waged a bitter civil war, resulting at length in the expulsion of the ELF by the beginning of the 1980s from the field of combat.¹² By that point, the EPLF had become the dominant political and military force in the Eritrean nationalist struggle, espousing dogged self-reliance and social revolution, and characterised by a remarkable *esprit de corps* underpinned by a tight disciplinarian structure.¹³ The EPLF thus fashioned itself into one of the most impressive anticolonial liberation movements anywhere in Africa.

Meanwhile, the imperial regime of Haile Selassie was overthrown in 1974, to be replaced by a socialist dictatorship known as the *Derg* (Amharic for 'committee') under Mengistu Haile Mariam. Hardening political and economic conditions in Ethiopia sparked other insurgencies, notably in Tigray across the border from Eritrea, where the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) emerged in 1975 with some assistance from the EPLF. The TPLF began in essence as a Tigrayan ethno-nationalist movement, but came in time to see itself as fighting for the liberation of all of Ethiopia.¹⁴ The TPLF and EPLF, both dynamic and innovative movements, had a difficult relationship: at times they cooperated in their military endeavours against the Ethiopian armed forces, but at others they disagreed profoundly over military tactics, ideology, and, more ominously, the definition of 'Eritrean' and 'Tigrayan' identities and the precise location of their shared border.¹⁵

In principle, the TPLF accepted Eritrea's right to self-determination, but by the middle of the 1980s relations between the two movements had broken down completely. Only in 1988 did they begin to cooperate again, and in 1991, working in alliance, they successfully overthrew the *Derg* regime. EPLF forces entered Asmara and declared the *de facto* independence of Eritrea in May 1991; at the same time, TPLF forces – now operating as the dominant group within a larger coalition of ethnic and regional insurgents known as the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) – seized control of Addis Ababa. They were also assisted by a contingent of EPLF fighters. The two movements – under the leadership of Meles Zenawi and Isaias Afewerki respectively – now formed the new regimes in Ethiopia and Eritrea respectively, and carried into power much of the baggage of their liberation struggles. Together, the accession to power of these movements represented a new political settlement in the Horn of Africa, in which two new sets of elites, linked by both conflict and

⁹ David Pool, *From Guerrillas to Government: the Eritrean People's Liberation Front* (Oxford, 2001); John Markakis, *National and Class Conflict in the Horn of Africa* (Cambridge, 1987).

¹⁰ This is described in Roy Pateman, *Eritrea: Even the Stones are Burning* (Lawrenceville NJ, 1998), 73.

¹¹ Pool, *From Guerrillas to Government*.

¹² Bereket Habte Selassie, *The Crown and the Pen: the memoirs of a lawyer turned rebel* (Lawrenceville NJ, 2007).

¹³ Basil Davidson et al (eds.), *Behind the War in Eritrea* (Nottingham, 1980); L.Cliffe & B.Davidson (eds.), *The Long Struggle of Eritrea for Independence and Constructive Peace* (Trenton NJ, 1988); James Firebrace et al, *Never Kneel Down: drought, development and liberation in Eritrea* (Trenton NJ, 1985); Dan Connell, *Against All Odds: a chronicle of the Eritrean revolution* (Lawrenceville NJ, 1997).

¹⁴ John Young, *Peasant Revolution in Ethiopia: the Tigray People's Liberation Front, 1975-1991* (Cambridge, 1997); Jenny Hammond, *Fire from the Ashes: a chronicle of revolution in Tigray, Ethiopia, 1975-1991* (Lawrenceville NJ, 1999).

¹⁵ John Young, 'The Tigray and Eritrean Peoples' Liberation Fronts: a history of tensions and pragmatism', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 34:1 (1996); Richard Reid, 'Old Problems in New Conflicts: some observations on Eritrea and its relations with Tigray, from liberation struggle to interstate war', *Africa*, 73:3 (2003).



collaboration, assumed total control over the political space and economic resources, underpinned by innovative military might, and laid out fresh agendas for national reconstruction.

Initially, it seemed as though a new beginning was at hand. Ethiopia fully supported the internationally-observed referendum in Eritrea in 1993 in which 99.8% of those who voted chose independence from Ethiopia.¹⁶ Meles Zenawi – despite some misgivings within the TPLF about the ‘loss’ of Eritrea and, in particular, of its coastline – attended Eritrea’s independence ceremonies and publicly declared his hope that the two countries could now move forward together in a spirit of cooperation, leaving behind the devastation of the past.¹⁷ They envisaged an elite bargain that recognised Eritrea’s right to independence alongside that new country’s unavoidable dependence on trade with Ethiopia, as well as the supposed shared cultural links across their shared border, and was thus characterised by a recalibration of the relationship between the two countries.

By the mid-1990s, a number of agreements had been signed between the two governments in the realms of banking, commerce and defence, denoting an apparently sincere belief that their future lay in close collaboration.¹⁸ Underneath, however, there were mounting tensions – some old, dating to the disagreements of the liberation war, and some new, as Eritrea increasingly asserted itself as an independent state and Ethiopia struggled to consolidate itself as the historic regional hegemon under new management and with no direct access to the sea.

Immediate drivers of the conflict

One immediate source of tension was the economic relationship between the two countries. Although the introduction of Eritrea’s own currency was anticipated by mutual agreement in 1993, the appearance of the nakfa in November 1997 led to strains in trade, and increasingly heated disagreements around the exchange rate and Ethiopia’s commercial position vis-à-vis the Eritrean ports.¹⁹ Meanwhile, if arguments over the commercial relationship between the two countries reflected a resurgence in tensions over regional dominance, so too did more localised conflicts over the border. In the course of 1997, problems along the border escalated significantly. Eritrea protested the build-up of a Tigrayan militia in the Badme area, which Ethiopia had long administered.²⁰ Meanwhile an Ethiopian force crossed the border at Adi Murug, on the central portion of the border (Bada), ostensibly in pursuit of local insurgents, and established a base in Eritrean territory. Letters were exchanged between Isaias and Meles,²¹ the tone of which was reasonable and conciliatory.²² At the same time, a committee was established including members from the Eritrean and Ethiopian governments to examine border security and demarcation; it met in Addis Ababa on several occasions in the course of 1997 and early 1998.²³

¹⁶ Pateman, *Eritrea*, 239; Iyob, *Eritrean Struggle*, 140.

¹⁷ Iyob, *Eritrean Struggle*, 143.

¹⁸ See ‘Joint Communique of the First Round-Table Meeting of the Ethio-Eritrea Joint Ministerial Commission, 22-27 September 1993, Asmara’, in Tekeste Negash & Kjetil Tronvoll, *Brothers at War: making sense of the Eritrean-Ethiopian war* (Oxford, 2000).

¹⁹ Patrick Gilkes & Martin Plaut, *War in the Horn: the conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia* (Chatham House Discussion Paper, London 1999), 13-15.

²⁰ Negash & Tronvoll, *Brothers at War*, 26-7; Dan Connell, ‘Against More Odds: the second siege of Eritrea’, *Eritrean Studies Review*, 3:2 (1999), 196-7. It needs to be noted that this issue is highly contested, and it is difficult to establish ‘facts on the ground’ with any real degree of certainty.

²¹ Note that in highland Ethiopian and Eritrean culture, individuals are not known by their second names, which are not family surnames in the conventional sense, but by their given first names.

²² ‘Extracts from letters exchanged between President Isaias Afwerki & Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, July-August 1997’, in Negash & Tronvoll, *Brothers at War*.

²³ Gilkes & Plaut, *War in the Horn*, 18-20.



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But the committee's work was overtaken in dramatic fashion in May 1998, and indeed the committee had been meeting in Addis Ababa when the first incident took place at Badme. While the exact details remain unclear, the consensus is that there was an exchange of gunfire between Tigrayan militia and some Eritrean soldiers in the Badme area, the latter counting senior commanders in their number. Several Eritreans were killed. The Eritrean army immediately sent a large armed contingent into the area, thus escalating the situation dramatically. The Eritrean army occupied Badme and expelled the Ethiopian administration.²⁴ The Ethiopian government regarded this as a flagrant and unnecessary act of aggression, and within days the Ethiopia parliament declared war on Eritrea.²⁵

Ethiopia appears to have been largely unprepared for the rapid escalation,²⁶ and whatever the local complications around the border, evidently believed that the situation could be contained. Certainly, the Ethiopian army was not mobilised at the time of the Badme firefight, with their main concentrations of troops housed in barracks some way south. Yet there is no doubt that leading members of the regime were taken aback by the sudden conflagration, and had no say in the order to send in the army – in part because of the speed with which matters escalated on the ground.²⁷ To some extent, this is contradicted by the organisation of a National Development Campaign in early 1998, involving the mobilisation of thousands of young men and women and their distribution to various parts of Eritrea ostensibly for agricultural and other forms of 'development' work. Yet at least some of them appeared to have been placed in uniform, and deployed in the west of the country, some weeks before the Badme incident.²⁸

There has subsequently been much discussion and conjecture around how the situation was able to escalate so quickly. On the Eritrean side, there is no question that a highly secretive and militarised regime made for a dangerous combination, especially as it rested on the unstable pivot that was the person of the President himself. It meant that there could be sudden and unplanned military decisions without need for wider consultation, or recourse to political deliberation. In other words, the Eritrean military complex continued to behave like a liberation movement during the armed struggle – *not* as a state, with all the behaviours and conventions associated with state-centred, institutional diplomacy.

It seems reasonable to suggest that at the very least the government was content to permit Tigrayan militia activity along the border, and even to encourage cross-border incursions, as it also did in the case of the Adi Murug incident. This may or may not have reflected a deeper, longer-term strategy of undermining and destabilising the Eritrean state. However, it certainly reflected a disregard, even a contempt, for Eritrea's hard-won sovereignty, and considering what the inner circle around Meles Zenawi knew of the EPLF, they should have understood that continued low-level provocation would eventually produce a sudden, violent response from the Eritreans. One view, expressed to the author on numerous occasions by diplomats, is that this was the plan: that a trap was laid, and the Eritrean government walked into it, enabling the Ethiopian government to claim that it was the victim of armed aggression.²⁹

²⁴ Connell, 'Against More Odds', 197.

²⁵ See 'Statement of the Ethiopian Government to the UN Security Council, 15 May 1998, available at <https://teachwar.wordpress.com/resources/war-justifications-archive/badme-border-war-eritrean-ethiopian-1998/#eth15may>

²⁶ Author's interview with General Tsadkan Gebretensae, Addis Ababa, 14 September 2005. General Tsadkan was Chief of the General Staff of the Ethiopian National Defence Forces from 1991 to 2001.

²⁷ Kidane Mengisteab & Okbazghi Yohannes, *Anatomy of an African Tragedy: political, economic and foreign policy crisis in post-independence Eritrea* (Trenton NJ, 2005), 259-60.

²⁸ Author's field notes, Asmara, February–April 1998.

²⁹ Author's field notes, Asmara, especially during 1998 and 1999.



The 1998-2000 war and its 'resolution'

Eritrea and Ethiopia were now at war, and the conflict escalated quickly. Troop mobilisation and deployment proceeded apace, and there were several weeks of intense fighting around Badme and sections of the central and southern border, involving infantry alongside tanks and artillery. In early June, the Ethiopian air force bombed the outskirts of Asmara, and hours later the Eritrean air force retaliated, bombing the Tigrayan town of Mekele. At that point, against a backdrop of rising numbers of civilian casualties and internally displaced people, the two governments agreed in principle to a moratorium on air strikes. While the actual fighting had subsided substantially by the end of June, the ensuing months of lull simply allowed for extensive reconnoitring, the gathering of intelligence, and the stepping-up of mobilisation programmes in both countries.

Meanwhile, a new 'front' opened up in the form of mass deportations. From June 1998 onwards, the Ethiopian government deported tens of thousands of Eritreans and Ethiopians of Eritrean descent from Ethiopia, including the sizeable and well-established Eritrean business community which had been based in Addis Ababa for many years.³⁰ Eritrea initially sought to demonstrate restraint,³¹ but in time large numbers of Ethiopians were expelled from Eritrea. It was a poignant reminder of how interconnected the two countries had been, but it was also a brutal demonstration of the deep-seated animosity that had developed between the two rival political movements, if not necessarily between the peoples themselves, although there was certainly plenty of visceral anger in the border areas.³² It was certainly one of the earliest indications that this war was not actually about the location of parts of the border.

In February 1999, fighting re-erupted. The Ethiopians launched a major assault on Badme and, after several days' fighting, seized control of the area and pushed several miles into Eritrean territory.³³ At this point, the Eritrean government accepted the US-Rwanda plan (see below) which it had rejected several months earlier. Its acceptance was partly forced by military losses, but also represented an attempt to regain diplomatic poise and traction with external actors. Regardless, the war continued, and fighting was especially intense on parts of the central front – at Tsorona and Zalambessa – between April and June 1999, while there was also fighting on the Afar/Assab front further south.³⁴

May 2000 saw the *denouement*, the final act in the war 'proper'. Months in the planning, and after the failure of 'proximity talks', the Ethiopian army launched a massive offensive in the west, breaking through the Eritrean lines.³⁵ It was a crushing defeat: the Eritreans were compelled to abandon the western third of the country, withdrawing their forces to more easily defensible positions in the highland plateau. Meanwhile Ethiopia launched further offensives on the central front.³⁶ At one point in May, the Ethiopian army was a single further breakthrough away from marching directly on Asmara, and rumours circulated of an attempt to remove Isaias from within the Eritrean government.³⁷ But the Eritrean army held its position – at Adi Begio on the southern border, and at Areza to the west of Mendefera – at great cost to both sides, especially the Ethiopians who were

³⁰ 'The Horn of Africa War: mass expulsions and the nationality issue', *Human Rights Watch*, 15:3 (January 2003).

³¹ Author's field notes and informal interviews among the Ethiopian community of Asmara, August 1999.

³² Author's field notes and informal interviews, Tessenei (August 2000) near the Eritrea-Sudan border, and Ksadika (July 2004) near the Eritrea-Ethiopia border on the central front.

³³ Martin Plaut, 'The conflict and its aftermath', in Dominique Jacquin-Berdal & Martin Plaut (eds.), *Unfinished Business: Ethiopia and Eritrea at War* (Lawrenceville NJ, 2005), 97.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 95-99; Alex Last, 'A Very Personal War: Eritrea-Ethiopia 1998-2000', in Jacquin-Berdal & Plaut (eds.), *Unfinished Business*, 68-75.

³⁵ 'Ethiopia gains upper hand in war with Eritrea', *The Guardian*, 18 May 2000.

³⁶ Plaut, 'The conflict', 104-7.

³⁷ Author's field notes and informal interviews, Asmara, May 2000.



frequently attacking uphill.³⁸ It was certainly a feature of the war that while Eritrea tended to entrench and sit back, the Ethiopian army had the manpower to launch sustained ‘human wave’ attacks in a manner that was frequently described by foreign journalists as akin to ‘First World War’ tactics.³⁹ At any rate, while the two sides fought one another to a standstill, it was the Eritrean government that was most bloodied.

A ceasefire was agreed in June, and further negotiations, under the auspices of the OAU, led to the signing of the Algiers Agreement in December 2000. Under the terms of Algiers, Eritrea and Ethiopia agreed, among other things, to binding arbitration of the dispute, particularly with regard to a Boundary Commission, and to the creation of a Temporary Security Zone (TSZ) twenty-five kilometres wide on the Eritrean side of the *de facto* border.

There is no agreement on exact numbers of war dead and displaced, but most accounts place the total killed on both sides at between 70,000 and 100,000, with more than half a million people displaced on both sides of the border.⁴⁰ While the border was the epicentre of the conflict itself, the war was not, in the end, about the border alone, or even primarily; it was only one of many issues in what was a complex relationship between the two countries.

‘No war, no peace’? The volatile border since 2001

Although the conventional war ended with the Algiers Agreement, underlying issues were far from resolved. Over the next decade and a half, there were frequent incursions and incidents along the border in violation of the TSZ, established to keep the two armies twenty-five kilometres apart. The TSZ itself was patrolled on both sides of the border by a force representing the UN Mission to Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE).⁴¹ While UNMEE sought to keep the peace – which it did, more or less, along large chunks of the border – two separate legal processes unfolded. The first was the Boundary Commission, and the second was the Claims Commission, (see below). Suffice to note here, the Boundary Commission’s ruling in April 2002 that Badme belonged to Eritrea meant continued tensions along what was in fact a highly militarised and volatile border.

Over the next few years, incidents were common. These were sometimes low-level, such as cross-border patrols and skirmishes, or the stealing of livestock; but on occasion were rather more dangerous, involving sustained exchanges of fire. With each major incident came warnings from external actors, fearful that a full-scale war would restart. Two of the more serious incidents in recent years, for example, came in March 2012 – when Ethiopian troops launched an attack inside Eritrean territory, ostensibly to neutralise armed groups purportedly planning an attack⁴² – and in June 2016, when there was a clash at Tsorona involving troops from both Eritrea and Ethiopia and described by a leading analyst as “the most serious conventional military engagement for some time”.⁴³ A number of smaller incidents appear mostly to have involved local militia groups sponsored by one side or the other.⁴⁴

³⁸ Author’s field notes and informal interviews, former central front areas, July-August 2000.

³⁹ Patrick Gilkes, ‘War in Africa: the biggest conflict in the world’, *The Independent*, 21 June 1999.

⁴⁰ For example, Xan Rice, ‘Annan warns of another war between Ethiopia and Eritrea’, *The Guardian*, 1 November 2006; Dominique Jacquin-Berdal, ‘Introduction: the Eritreo-Ethiopian war’, in Jacquin-Berdal & Plaut (eds.), *Unfinished Business*, ix.

⁴¹ Sally Healy, *Lost Opportunities in the Horn of Africa: how conflicts connect and peace agreements unravel*, Chatham House Report, 2008, 13.

⁴² ‘Ethiopian troops attack rebels in Eritrea’, *Reuters*, 15 March 2012.

⁴³ Cedric Barnes, ‘A Wake-up Call for Eritrea and Ethiopia’, International Crisis Group (hereafter ICG), June 2016. See also ‘Eritrea accuses Ethiopia of planning a full-scale war’, *AllAfrica*, 22 June 2016, available at <http://allafrica.com/view/group/main/main/id/00044218.html>

⁴⁴ Barnes, ‘A Wake-up Call’.



Yet in reality, since 2001 there has been no real chance of the war restarting in its 1998-2000 form, for several reasons. First, proxy war had become the primary *modus operandi* for both governments. In Eritrea, there was genuine concern that there were serious military weaknesses in the army which might be catastrophically exposed by another serious round of fighting, despite its public military swagger. In Ethiopia, initially, there were heated disagreements within the government and the TPLF about whether they (and in particular the half-Eritrean Meles Zenawi) had ultimately let Eritrea off the hook when they could and should have ‘finished it’ in June 2000. But in time it was clear that Eritrea was deeply damaged, and the Ethiopians had their northern neighbour exactly where they wanted it: politically insecure, materially weakened, and diplomatically isolated. In Ethiopia, too, more pressing conflict in Somalia also meant that Eritrea was less of a priority in time, and indeed no senior Ethiopian political or military leader would have seriously proposed reopening the war with Eritrea when the wider region was so unstable. After all, they controlled Badme: Meles calculated that his immediate aim had been achieved.

Second, there were domestic considerations: the political settlement refashioned by Meles Zenawi was based on the idea that the EPRDF, under the leadership of the TPLF, was the only viable guarantor of Ethiopia’s internal economic growth and external security. It involved the effective co-option of more sceptical political and cultural leaders within Ethiopia, and in many ways drew strength from the weakness of the ‘peace process’ with Eritrea as well as (paradoxically) the reduction in overt conflict since 2000. There were also domestic implications within Eritrea, as the threat of further war served important political functions. While prior to 1998 the Eritrean government had assumed the vote for independence to be in effect a vote for the EPLF, the post-2000 political settlement in Eritrea meant the substantial fortification of the idea of the EPLF as the sole guardian of the nation’s destiny, even its very survival as a sovereign entity.

Ultimately, it was not fear of international sanction nor the robustness of the Algiers Agreement that prevented the war from re-starting. It did not restart because it suited neither Asmara nor Addis Ababa to do so: renewed full-scale, direct conflict was seen as ultimately inimical to their respective national interests and, more aptly, to the political interests of the EPLF and EPRDF respectively. The revised political settlements within Eritrea and Ethiopia were in many ways premised on the feebleness of the peace process between the two countries, while they depended, too, on the avoidance of a new escalation of fighting. This is not a permanent, immutable state, of course; the situation might change, and change suddenly. In many ways, therefore, the key is to observe shifts in the respective domestic politics of the two countries.

Internal Dynamics

The two main parties involved – the Ethiopian and the Eritrean governments – were essentially groups of guerrilla fighters who were now in charge of their respective nation-states and national armed forces. The elites involved in this conflict, therefore, were cohorts of lifelong soldiers, led by inner circles around two charismatic leaders in Isaias Afewerki and Meles Zenawi. Both had sought to create a series of new political settlements and elite bargains and to fundamentally remake the political order in their own countries, and to some extent that of the wider region, too. In distinct but similar ways, these were fundamentally authoritarian regimes driven by the desire to fashion a new kind of patriotism and internal cohesion, but without demonstrable interest in substantive democratic reform.

There were also differences. In Ethiopia, regular elections were held to undergird the legitimacy of the EPRDF, even if the ‘open and free’ nature of those elections was highly questionable and serious opposition was swiftly suppressed wherever and whenever it arose. EPRDF personnel, especially



leading members of the TPLF, filled all key political and military roles, and also controlled local government under the federal system (involving theoretically devolved regional administrations). The EPRDF moved swiftly to take control of the banking sector and bring commercial enterprise under state control, in pursuit of a developmental agenda through which the government would lead Ethiopia to middle-income status. TPLF personnel, in particular, were placed in charge of key economic enterprises. Later, a 'state-led capitalism' model – inspired, to some extent, by China⁴⁵ – was developed, in which the private sector was encouraged but in which private enterprise was dominated either by the government itself or by individuals and corporations with close connections to the regime.

In Eritrea, there were no exercises in electoral legitimisation – they were neither permitted nor regarded as necessary: the EPLF believed it had won a mandate to govern the country in perpetuity following three decades of armed struggle and a successful independence referendum. The EPLF – or the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), as the movement was known from February 1994 – took over all areas of public administration (including all areas of central government, local councils, and the judiciary), and formed the core and command of the newly-christened Eritrean Defence Force. The Eritrean government swiftly took control of financial and other commercial institutions and effectively closed down the private sector, running the economy either through direct state (or military) control or through the Red Sea Corporation, the economic arm of the PFDJ.⁴⁶ As the system of national service expanded, especially from the early 2000s, it was used in the development of infrastructural projects and became, notoriously, a plank of the national economy as well as of national defence.⁴⁷

But despite differences in their internal political settlements, the two regimes had much in common in their deep-rooted conviction that they had the right and the capacity to govern without serious checks or balances – which also goes some way to explaining the intractability of the conflict. Arguably, EPRDF-run Ethiopia had much stronger institutions than EPLF-run Eritrea, where personal rule quickly developed around the President; but in both countries, the governing movements had complete control over political power – despite brief challenges to that power, as in Eritrea in 2001 and Ethiopia in 2005 – and economic resources. Therefore, the war was a matter of high stakes, in material and political terms, for both sets of elites.

Moreover, in both countries, non-elite groups had little role to play. In neither Ethiopia nor Eritrea was there a fully functioning civil society sector that might have been able to apply 'soft' pressure to their respective governments. Religious communities, media organisations, and the judiciary were under tight state control – perhaps more overtly in Eritrea than in Ethiopia, but tightly controlled in the latter nonetheless – and had little leverage in the political sphere. Nor were women accorded any meaningful role: while women served in government (and in the military, in Eritrea's case), these were robustly masculine movements which had co-opted women as 'mothers of the revolution', or other equally stereotyped and circumscribed roles.

Ultimately, the deportation of civilian populations on both sides, and the rapid mobilisation for war in both countries – as well as the adversarial political culture which underpinned militarisation – demonstrated that there were significant internal dynamics at work which prevented the genuine resolution of the war and the normalisation of relations.

⁴⁵ 'Looking East: Meles Zenawi's new best pal', *The Economist*, 21 October 2010; 'Ethiopia keen to be model in China-Africa cooperation: minister', *Xinhua*, 7 April 2016.

⁴⁶ Pool, *From Guerrillas to Government*, 178-9.

⁴⁷ Author's field notes & informal interviews, Eritrea, 2002 onwards; Gaim Kibreab, 'Forced labour in Eritrea', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 41:1 (2009).



Ethiopia

In the months following the signing of the Algiers Agreement, rifts emerged within the TPLF, among the inner circle around Meles Zenawi, about the prosecution of the war. Some were critical of Meles, and suggested that he had pulled his punches in dealing with Eritrea and had allowed Isaias Afewerki to survive. Meles purged his government of those critics, arguing that key objectives had been achieved – the recapture of Badme and the effective containment of Eritrea – and demonstrated a desire to concentrate on other priorities for Ethiopia both at home and abroad.⁴⁸ However, a general feeling persisted among many Ethiopians that the war had been stopped prematurely, and that victory could have been ‘total’ – meaning, the capture of Asmara, the removal of Isaias, and possibly a new kind of relationship with Eritrea.⁴⁹ It was common to hear Ethiopians bemoaning the fact that their Eritrean ‘brothers and sisters’ were left labouring under the tyranny of Isaias, when in fact they properly belonged back in the Ethiopian fold.⁵⁰ On one level, the political settlement buttressing the EPRDF involved a tacit acceptance that in the longer term the government would bring socio-economic development to Ethiopia and would eventually be in a position to resolve the Eritrean ‘problem’. Interestingly, however, this coincided with the emergence of a more immediate problem for the EPRDF government, namely the rise in domestic opposition. Anti-government sentiment escalated to the point that the 2005 elections, hotly contested by opposition parties, were attended by violence and a brutal government clampdown in the months that followed.⁵¹

Ethiopia’s ethnic diversity needs to be taken into account here, for the war meant different things to different ethnic constituencies.⁵² The EPRDF’s political settlement was therefore multi-layered. At the national level, Badme was hugely symbolic to a domestic audience; Ethiopia could not possibly hand it back to Eritrea without ceding significant political ground at home. It was no coincidence that days after its recapture by Ethiopian forces in late February 1999, the annual commemoration of the battle of Adwa in 1896 – held on Adwa Victory Day, 2 March – was designed to resonate with the broader public.⁵³ Clear parallels were drawn between Italian and Eritrean aggression and Ethiopia’s historical ability to ward off antagonists. But while many Amhara viewed Eritrea as a problem to be solved, their central concern was the now-decaying port of Assab, which they believed was much more ‘obviously’ an Ethiopian (and more specifically an Amhara) port. For many Amhara, the war was a sordid ‘Tigrayan’ affair, a matter between the EPLF and TPLF, brutal northerners one and all.⁵⁴ For other groups, including the Oromo and Somali, there was either ignorance of, and indifference toward, the Eritrean situation; or, among armed groups within Ethiopia, such as the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) or the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), sympathy for the Eritrean ‘struggle’ against historic Ethiopian imperialism of which southern Ethiopians believed they were victims, just like Eritreans. The Ethiopian government was keenly aware of this, owing to its own position as, in effect, a Tigrayan minority regime bolstered by the co-option of representatives from

⁴⁸ ‘Crisis inside the TPLF regime’, *Ethiopian Review*, April-June 2001, available at http://www.ethiopianreview.com/2001/Article_ERStaffAPRJUN2001.html

⁴⁹ Author’s field notes & informal interviews, Addis Ababa, August-September 2005 & August 2009. In particular, informal conversations with Yemane ‘Jamaica’ Kidane, former central TPLF Politburo member and formerly close ally of Meles Zenawi.

⁵⁰ Author’s field notes & informal interviews, Addis Ababa, August-September 2005 & February 2006.

⁵¹ Jon Abbink, ‘Discomfiture of democracy? The 2005 election crisis in Ethiopia and its aftermath’, *African Affairs*, 105:419 (2006).

⁵² Kjetil Tronvoll, *War and the Politics of Identity in Ethiopia: the making of enemies and allies in the Horn of Africa* (Oxford, 2009).

⁵³ Alessandro Triulzi, ‘The past as contested terrain: commemorating new sites of memory in war-torn Ethiopia’, in P.Kaarsholm (ed.), *Violence, Political Culture and Development in Africa* (Oxford, 2006).

⁵⁴ It was common to hear this privately expressed by Amhara: author’s field notes & informal interviews, Addis Ababa, since 2005.



other ethnic groups.⁵⁵ The political settlement skilfully crafted by Meles and his circle was therefore also a complex one, and rather less robust than might first appear.

With Meles Zenawi's death in 2012, a brief window opened for the normalisation of relations. However, while the personal relationship between Isaias and Meles was not unimportant, a common theory that the bitterness of the war related to personal hostility between the two men tended to neglect and oversimplify much more profound and complex factors. Hailemariam Desalegn, Meles' successor, was a southerner, and was not a member of the TPLF. But Hailemariam himself, seen by some as a technocratic stopgap and lacking real power within the TPLF, had to demonstrate that he could be tough on Eritrea, and that he was no more willing to surrender Badme and open the door to Isaias than Meles had been.

There were some conciliatory notes made in early speeches, and there were low-level contacts between the two regimes.⁵⁶ But Isaias otherwise refused to bite, and in any case Hailemariam soon had to contend with the TPLF old guard, and to demonstrate that he had authority against Eritrea and everyone else.⁵⁷ The political settlement on which the EPRDF's authority was based required Hailemariam to maintain the goals and principles fashioned by his predecessor, and to distance the Ethiopian political establishment from any meaningful peace process or mollifying dialogue with Eritrea. Therefore, Ethiopia once again ratcheted up its language with respect to Eritrea, episodically threatening action unless Eritrea ceased its support for groups intent on destabilising Ethiopia.⁵⁸

In some ways, this reflected the improving situation in Somalia, which had been Ethiopia's primary concern since 2006-7 (see below). While the Ethiopian military was certainly cautious about any form of direct intervention, or about creating a new and potentially uncontrollable military situation in the north, it nonetheless needed to have plans in place in the event of a collapse of Isaias's regime – especially after the brief 'coup' attempt in Asmara in 2013. And while it remained the case that Eritrea was pretty much right where Addis Ababa wanted it, the escalating re-engagement initiative toward Eritrea from the EU from mid-2015 onward, with a particular view to reducing the Eritrean refugee flow to Europe, was duly noted in Ethiopia which thus needed to episodically remind the international community of the continued threat Eritrea supposedly posed to regional stability.

Overall, however, Ethiopia in some ways became less concerned with Eritrea from the mid-2000s. Economic growth was impressive, even allowing for exaggerated government figures;⁵⁹ the EPRDF regime was more interested in becoming a showcase for the achievement of the UN's Millennium Development Goals, and of leading the 'African renaissance' agenda. Ethiopia aimed for middle-income status, and the government had ambitions that went far beyond the desolate scrubland around the former hamlet of Badme. It positioned itself at the forefront of the global struggle against terrorism in a region deemed a major source of terrorist activity;⁶⁰ it had elevated status within the G20, and was often identified as Africa's leading voice; and it was a dominating presence in the

⁵⁵ See David Turton (ed.), *Ethnic Federalism: the Ethiopian experience in comparative perspective* (Oxford, 2006). Ethiopia's ethnic composition is as follows: Oromo, 34.4%; Amhara, 27%; Somali, 6.2%; and Tigrayan, 6.1%; Sidama, 4%; Gurage, 2.5%; all others, 19.8%. 'Are Ethiopian protests a game changer?', BBC News, 7 October 2016.

⁵⁶ 'Ethiopia's new leader keen for face-to-face talks with Eritrean President', *AllAfrica*, 6 December 2012, available at <http://allafrica.com/stories/201212070273.html>. There were always *some* communications between particular individuals, who knew one another very well, and who were able to meet and talk when outside the region.

⁵⁷ ICG Policy Briefing, *Ethiopia After Meles* (Nairobi/Brussels, 22 August 2012).

⁵⁸ For example, 'Ethiopia threatens action against Eritrea', *Sudan Tribune*, 7 July 2015; 'Prime Minister Hailemariam says if Eritrea tries anything it will be the last time', *Ethiopian News / Tigray Online*, 20 September 2015, available at <http://www.tigraionline.com/articles/ethio-pm-threat-eritea.html>

⁵⁹ See for example, 'The Lion Kings?', *The Economist*, 6 January 2011.

⁶⁰ Richard J. Reid, 'Horror, Hubris and Humanity: the international engagement with Africa', *International Affairs*, 90:1 (2014), 164.



African Union.⁶¹ This was true despite episodic international criticism of its human rights record at home.⁶² In sum, Eritrea was seemingly skewered on various fronts. The Ethiopian regime believed it had no interest, no beneficial stake, in normalising relations with Eritrea, or properly demarcating the border, or allowing Isaias back into the world; nor had it – for the time being – any particular interest in re-escalating the war and resolving the issue of its northern rival once and for all.

Eritrea

As in Ethiopia, 2001 in Eritrea was a landmark year: Eritrea had survived the war, but at great cost. Questions were asked about the conduct of the conflict, and about the failure of political and military leadership which had led Eritrea, independent for barely a decade, into this grim situation.⁶³ Isaias faced growing criticism from key colleagues within the government and the EPLF, as well as from intellectuals in exile, who demanded that he enact the constitution – drafted but in abeyance since 1997 – and convene the long-dormant National Assembly.⁶⁴ The President, famously stubborn and immune to pressure, refused to comply, and warned his critics to back down. In September 2001, a few days after the terrorist attacks in the US, he used diverted international attention to move against a range of perceived enemies, rounding up political critics, dissidents, journalists and others in a dramatic clampdown.⁶⁵ He depicted a number of his former detractors as traitors who had conspired with Ethiopia to undermine Eritrea's war effort, and later as 'terrorists' intent on attacking Eritrea from within.⁶⁶

In the years that followed, the political-military complex around Isaias tightened its control on Eritrean state and society. Isaias argued that he had demonstrated the appropriate measure of good faith in due international process, but that the international community had been found wanting. Now, as before in Eritrean history, the only reasonable position was righteous defence. After September 2001, if not before, the political settlement in Eritrea was centred on the President himself as the embodiment of the EPLF's struggle and its goals, and the nexus through which political and material resources flowed. As in Ethiopia, if differently projected, that authority was reliant upon a lack of meaningful progress in achieving a genuine peace agreement. The spectre of another war with Ethiopia was deployed to justify a system of indefinite national conscription, with young people in particular regularly absorbed into the army or into state service in other capacities.⁶⁷ Exit visas were granted only in exceptional circumstances, and Eritrea was increasingly depicted as existing in a state of 'siege', as a large-scale prison, or a garrison.⁶⁸ It has driven thousands of Eritreans to escape the country illegally, fleeing to Sudan and Ethiopia with a view to getting to Europe or North America.⁶⁹

In the meantime, there was zero tolerance of political dissent, and the recent war with Ethiopia was linked seamlessly in state propaganda to the era of the liberation struggle, with an emphasis on the

⁶¹ For a critical view of this, see M.G.Zimeta, 'Why Ethiopia is not the voice of Africa', *Prospect Magazine*, July 2010.

⁶² For example, Kjetil Tronvoll, 'Human rights violations in federal Ethiopia: when ethnic identity is a political stigma', *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights*, 15 (2008); 'Ethiopia's human rights record poses awkward questions for its aid donors', *The Guardian*, 3 February 2012.

⁶³ Author's field notes & informal interviews, Asmara, during late 2000 and through 2001.

⁶⁴ In Dan Connell, *Conversations with Eritrean Political Prisoners* (Trenton NJ, 2005), 171-89.

⁶⁵ Connell, *Conversations*, 13-14; Gaim Kibreab, *Eritrea: a dream deferred* (Woodbridge, 2009), chap. 2.

⁶⁶ Author's field notes, Eritrea, 2002, and subsequently.

⁶⁷ Human Rights Watch, *Service for Life: state repression and indefinite conscription in Eritrea* (New York, April 2009); ICG, *Eritrea: Ending the Exodus?*, Update Briefing, 8 August 2014.

⁶⁸ ICG, *Eritrea: the Siege State*, Africa Report No.163, 21 September 2010; Kjetil Tronvoll & Daniel Mekonnen, *The African Garrison State: human rights and political development in Eritrea* (Woodbridge, 2014).

⁶⁹ Council on Foreign Relations, *Authoritarianism in Eritrea and the Migrant Crisis*, 16 September 2016, available at <http://www.cfr.org/eritrea/authoritarianism-eritrea-migrant-crisis/p37239>



need for sacrifice and vigilance.⁷⁰ The vision of the nation was frozen in a particular frame of historical memory: military struggle, self-reliance and the refusal to trust anyone. This was extended onto the international arena. After the Boundary Commission released its findings in 2002,⁷¹ Eritrea accepted them; but once Ethiopia refused to, and appeared to escape serious sanction from the UN, the Eritrean government was able to point once again to the duplicity of the international community, and to the double standards which attended its dealings with Ethiopia and Eritrea respectively. Increasingly hostile and belligerent, Isaias's relations with international actors – the UN, the AU, the EU and individual members, and the United States – deteriorated rapidly.⁷² This, too, served the purpose of legitimising the militarisation of the state. One key initiative was greater involvement in a range of regional conflicts, including Somalia, which led to UN sanctions being imposed on Eritrea in 2009: we return to this below.

Isaias Afewerki's position was increasingly powerful, and his rule increasingly personalised. Eritrea was essentially governed through the President's Office,⁷³ but there were constraints even on him. He needed to manage a group of senior army officers, who commanded the loyalty of their own men and who increasingly ran personal political and economic fiefdoms in their particular zones of operation.⁷⁴ It constituted a new internal elite bargain, if a potentially unstable one. In many ways, it was a dysfunctional relationship, characterised by resentments, rivalries and power struggles, but one on which the governance of Eritrea was fundamentally based. At times it constituted a curious stand-off, with Isaias suspicious and even to some extent fearful of his senior commanders but simultaneously relying on them for his own position. By early 2010, the government in Eritrea was characterised by an elite bargain involving the old EPLF/Eritrean Defence Force veterans and serving commanders on the one hand, and the immediate circle of advisers and 'shadow' ministers around Isaias on the other. Rendering this cocktail even more volatile was the new mass of conscripted national service soldiers who were increasingly unreliable and prone to illegal exodus.

Given these dynamics, the normalisation of relations with Ethiopia was awarded a very low priority, and was arguably even inimical to Isaias's – and the army's – own position. Ethiopia became the *sine qua non* of Eritrean political culture, and its menacing presence provided legitimacy for prolonged militarisation. A short-lived attempted *coup* occurred in January 2013, during which a group of soldiers briefly seized control of the Ministry of Information.⁷⁵ It was rapidly suppressed, but served as a reminder that Eritrea was increasingly built on kindling, and that there were dark undercurrents beneath the image of unified and patriotic militarism which the government was keen to project.

Regional Repercussions

The essential flaws in the Algiers Agreement had major implications for peace and stability across the wider region. Unable or unwilling to confront one another directly across the supposed demilitarised zone that was now the border, Eritrea and Ethiopia resorted to a series of proxies, and used a diverse range of actors and armed groups to exert pressure on one another. In reality, the border itself was highly militarised after 2000, and this now seeped out in various and sometimes unexpected directions.

⁷⁰ Author's field notes & informal interviews; ICG, *Siege State*.

⁷¹ See the full report at <http://www.haguejusticeportal.net/index.php?id=6162>. We will return to the Boundary Commission again later.

⁷² For an examination of Eritrean foreign policy, see Richard J. Reid (ed.), *Eritrea's External Relations: understanding its regional role and foreign policy* (London, 2009).

⁷³ ICG, *Siege State*, and ICG, *Eritrea: scenarios for future transition*, Africa Report No. 200, 28 March 2013.

⁷⁴ ICG, *Scenarios*.

⁷⁵ Martin Plaut, 'Seething Discontent in the Horn of Africa: Eritrea's Strange "Coup"', *New Statesman*, 23 January 2013.



Stabilisation Unit

Eritrea was particularly assiduous in intervening in conflicts in order to undermine Ethiopia. In the case of the Somali region of Ogaden in eastern Ethiopia, the Eritrean government reactivated relations which reached back to the 1980s in offering material as well as moral support to the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) waging its guerrilla war against the EPRDF regime. The ONLF's chief *modus operandi* involved relatively low-level assaults on infrastructure projects and occasionally on isolated police or military garrisons. Arms and training were also provided to the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), formerly a member of the EPRDF coalition which had returned to the bush in the mid-1990s,⁷⁶ and whose tactics were similar to those of the ONLF. There were also links with a range of smaller armed groups along the Ethiopian-Sudanese borderlands, with the Eritrean government keen to exercise leverage among insurgents of various hues in arms against the Ethiopian state.⁷⁷ Once more, these were small bands of guerrilla fighters who, when active targeted isolated police posts and local government infrastructure.

Eritrea's sense of having lost military ground and diplomatic initiative as a result of the war even led to its involvement in the Darfur conflict. This was a more indirect outcome of Algiers and the resulting impasse, but an outcome it undoubtedly was: Eritrea sought to position itself as regional pivot and broker, and to regain momentum as a regional power to be reckoned with. It ultimately backfired, as the Sudanese government quickly saw through Asmara's machinations and the Darfur conflict itself span out of Eritrea's control.⁷⁸ More conventionally, Asmara was willing to host a range of Ethiopian opposition movements, including Berhanu Nega, a leading figure in the 'Ginbot 7' movement which was declared a terrorist organisation by Addis Ababa and accused of seeking to overthrow the Ethiopian state by force.⁷⁹ Ethiopia accused Eritrea of being behind bomb blasts in Addis, and of planning a major terrorist attack on a meeting of the African Union.⁸⁰ Meanwhile there was a brief conflict with Djibouti, seen to be pro-Ethiopia on a range of issues, including Somalia and trade.⁸¹

In sum, a range of relatively small armed groups and actors showed themselves willing to use the Eritrea-Ethiopia war to advance their own agendas across the region, but there were few positive outcomes for anyone in this: these groups were vulnerable to shifting political priorities in Asmara, and saw no substantive improvement in their position, while their very presence merely perpetuated the actual standoff between Ethiopia and Eritrea.

Most dramatically, and with the most significant repercussions for Eritrea itself, was its alleged involvement in Somalia. Almost certainly the Eritrean government would have taken a deep interest in the Somali conflict even if the Algiers Agreement had proven final and binding: Asmara was always emphatic that Somalia was the concern of every state in the region, and that it had the right to support what it called the Somali people's 'struggle'.⁸² But there is no question that the 'no war, no peace' stalemate between Ethiopia and Eritrea prompted the latter to actively engage with Somali groups known to be antagonistic to the former. Eritrea rejected the Ethiopia-led international consensus on Somalia, and specifically the transitional government supported by Addis Ababa. It sponsored and hosted the Alliance for the Re-liberation of Somalia, and in the mid-2000s declared

⁷⁶ Healy, *Lost Opportunities*; Markakis, *National and Class Conflict*.

⁷⁷ For example, Human Rights Watch, *Targeting the Anuak: human rights violations and crimes against humanity in Ethiopia's Gambella region* (New York, March 2005); also John Young, 'Along Ethiopia's western frontier: Gambella and Benishangul in transition', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 37:2 (1999).

⁷⁸ See numerous contributions to Alex de Waal (ed.), *War in Darfur and the Search for Peace* (London, 2007); and also Gerard Prunier, *Armed Movements in Sudan, Chad, CAR, Somalia, Eritrea and Ethiopia*, for the Centre for International Peace Operations (Berlin, 2008).

⁷⁹ Author's informal briefing session with Berhanu Nega, London, June 2009.

⁸⁰ 'Ethiopia accuses Eritrea of bomb plot', *The Independent*, 2 February 2007.

⁸¹ 'Eritrea and Djibouti square off over wasteland at the Horn of Africa', *New York Times*, 25 May 2008.

⁸² Author's field notes and informal interviews, Asmara, April & Aug-Sept 2006.



itself sympathetic to the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC) which by that time had established some degree of control in and around Mogadishu.⁸³ Then, following the Ethiopian armed intervention to remove the UIC in late 2006 and 2007, Eritrea indicated its sympathy for *al-Shabaab*, the Islamist militia which emerged out of the UIC as the violence escalated. Ethiopia won the support of the regional grouping, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) – Eritrea suspended its membership of the organisation in 2007⁸⁴ – to request that UN sanctions be imposed on Eritrea as punishment for its support for terrorist groups. The sanctions were imposed in 2009, and remain in place.⁸⁵ While Eritrea was clearly sympathetic to *al-Shabaab's* war on the transitional Somali government and the Ethiopian occupation, hard evidence of material support was thin; certainly the UN Monitoring Group set up to investigate Eritrean links with *al-Shabaab* was hard-pressed to identify a smoking gun.⁸⁶ But IGAD and the UN Security Council believed there was sufficient evidence to justify sanctions, and by 2010 Eritrea's international isolation seemed complete.⁸⁷

Arguably Ethiopia had less reason to cast its net quite as wide as Eritrea in terms of proxy war, having rather less to gain from doing so, and being in a much stronger regional position in any case. But the EPRDF certainly nurtured and hosted a range of Eritrean opposition groups, both ostensibly armed and otherwise.⁸⁸ To date these have had relatively little impact in terms of actual violence or military activity, but their presence is of considerable symbolic significance. Meles himself took a personal interest in a number of leading opposition groups, and regarded himself as facilitating the emergence of a future post-Isaias administration – though in reality the Ethiopians were sceptical as to whether the Eritrean opposition would be able to organise itself sufficiently.⁸⁹

Meanwhile, Eritrea's manifest foreign policy failings played into the hands of the Ethiopian government, and relatively little effort was required to ensure that Asmara would be ostracised. Thus, while Eritrea walked out of IGAD in 2007 over the issue of Ethiopian interference in Somalia, in truth the organisation was already dominated by Ethiopia – a geopolitical reality which Eritrea resented profoundly. As a result, Eritrea was sidelined from regional economic and political strategy, and was increasingly portrayed as a regional spoiler and a destabilising entity – an image which in truth Asmara did little to combat. Above all, Ethiopia – despite the fact that its occupation of Badme contravened the Algiers Agreement – managed to control the narrative about the war itself and its aftermath.

Only in the early and mid-2010s did Eritrea begin to regain some initiative by re-joining IGAD in 2011 and nurturing relations with 'friendly' states such as Libya (before Qaddafi's ouster), Egypt (both before and following Mubarak's overthrow), South Africa, Qatar and Iran.⁹⁰ These external actors were motivated by economic interests, diplomatic influence, or a combination of both. Iran, for example, was interested in an oil refinery in the southern Eritrean port of Assab, and also in gaining some political and possibly military traction in the Red Sea; Qatar sought diplomatic stature, as well as business opportunities. The Eritrean mining boom, meanwhile, attracted international partners and investors. A number of companies – including from Canada and the UK – signed agreements with the Eritrean government with the latter retaining tight control of production and profits, while also

⁸³ Richard Reid, *Frontiers of Violence in Northeast Africa: genealogies of conflict since c.1800* (Oxford, 2011), 241-44.

⁸⁴ 'Eritrea rejoins East African bloc IGAD', *Reuters*, 28 July 2011: <http://www.reuters.com/article/eritrea-ethiopia-idAFL6E7IS17A20110728>

⁸⁵ 'UN sanctions shameful, says Eritrea', *BBC News*, 24 December 2009; see also https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_Nations_Security_Council_Resolution_1907

⁸⁶ See a sequence of reports at <https://www.un.org/sc/suborg/en/sanctions/751/work-and-mandate/reports>

⁸⁷ ICG, *Siege State*.

⁸⁸ 'Eritrean opposition groups vow to struggle against "rogue" regime', *Sudan Tribune*, 15 September 2015.

⁸⁹ Author's field notes & informal interviews, Addis Ababa, 2005 & 2009.

⁹⁰ ICG, *Siege State*, 25.



permitting the use of national service conscripts for work in the mining areas.⁹¹ The South Africans were also interested in Eritrea's nascent mining economy, offering investment in return for Eritrean support for South African leadership ambitions within the AU. This happened in spite of the sanctions, which Ethiopia sought to maintain, while also arguing that they should be tightened further, though there was little appetite for this in the UN more broadly. In all cases, would-be external partners and investors dealt directly with the Eritrean government, not with private Eritrean companies, and ultimately all deals were agreed or rejected by Isaias himself: the Eritrean state retained complete control of external economic relationships and their internal arrangements.

It is generally true that Eritrea's regional marginalisation from the political mainstream was at least as much its own doing as the outcome of Ethiopian machinations. The same developments can be seen on a much larger, international scale.

External engagements and interventions

A war on the scale of that between Eritrea and Ethiopia inevitably attracted high-level external interventions.⁹² The last two decades have witnessed a series of international responses to outbreaks of violence and transgressions of the Algiers Agreement, mostly condemnations and exhortations to return to negotiations on the part of the OAU/AU and UN. Yet in many ways, this intervention is primarily defined by failure and serious misjudgement on the part of various actors. While not removing responsibility from the protagonists themselves, from the outset, external engagement was often unhelpful and insensitive, and has certainly worsened the relationship between Eritrea and Ethiopia over the last decade and a half.

It is worth observing, by way of a preliminary note, that the respective governments in Asmara and Addis Ababa – and the liberation movements out of which they had grown – had markedly divergent histories and experiences of external engagement before 1998. Throughout the twentieth century, Ethiopia had generally enjoyed a status as a globally strategic state and the preeminent African one; the country's ruling elites had long been diplomatically astute, and thus in the early 1990s the TPLF/EPRDF inherited a well-established diplomatic international domain. The new government made skilful use of its own global networks and grafted those onto Ethiopia's existing international linkages.⁹³ Most obviously, it was already a full member of the UN, and host of the OAU (soon to be relaunched as the AU), and therefore well positioned to build on its continental and global presence.

The Eritrean experience was very different. While the EPLF had engaged in some successful targeted 'outreach' during the 1980s,⁹⁴ its liberation war had been fought largely in isolation, and it developed a solipsistic and aloof attitude toward a range of external actors, often eschewing normal diplomatic channels.⁹⁵ The EPLF's political struggle was in large part rooted in the idea that Eritrea had been routinely let down by the international community, neglected and sacrificed on the altar of Cold War expedience.⁹⁶ This stemmed from the experiences of the late 1950s and early 1960s, when Ethiopia

⁹¹ Mark Anderson, 'Mining: Eritrea digs deep for jobs', *The Africa Report*, 31 March 2016.

⁹² It is worth noting that diplomatic activity has often taken place alongside humanitarian efforts aimed at alleviating severe distress brought about by drought. Food shortage has been recurrent in the region historically, and forms the grim backdrop to much of the analysis here. I do not deal with it in this report, however, as it is not directly germane to the resolution of the war itself.

⁹³ Author's field notes & informal interviews, Addis Ababa, September 2005.

⁹⁴ Connell, *Against All Odds*; author's field notes & informal interviews, Asmara, 1999-2000, including with fighters assigned to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs who had worked for 'Protocol', the EPLF's external affairs division, during the struggle.

⁹⁵ Dan Connell, 'The EPLF/PFDJ Experience: how it shapes Eritrea's regional strategy', in Reid (ed.), *Eritrea's External Relations*.

⁹⁶ Yohannes, *Eritrea: a pawn*.



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had undermined Eritrean autonomy and then annexed the territory in blatant violation of the UN-sponsored federal constitution. Notably, the EPLF was hostile to the OAU which had manifestly failed to support Eritrea's armed struggle between the 1960s and the 1980s; indeed Isaias Afewerki's maiden speech to the OAU as leader of sovereign Eritrea had been an excoriating critique of the organisation, which, however understandable given Eritrea's recent history, was short-sighted and would come back to haunt Asmara.⁹⁷ In the 1990s, the EPLF's insistence on blunt talking and its elevation of a cult of self-reliance to national ideology won it admirers in the international community, but it had few obvious friends once war erupted in 1998.

Diplomatic initiatives were launched almost immediately.⁹⁸ The initial UN Security Council response was Resolution 1177 (1998), condemning the use of force, urging an immediate cessation of hostilities, and calling on both parties to cooperate with the OAU. More concretely, the Clinton administration in the US – which had nurtured good relations with both Isaias and Meles⁹⁹ – worked with the Rwandan government to put forward a proposal (the US-Rwanda plan) which it was hoped would be acceptable to both sides. One of the key requirements was that both sides should withdraw to positions held prior to 6 May 1998, when the Badme incident began.¹⁰⁰

The essential elements of this proposal were endorsed by the OAU,¹⁰¹ which later expanded them into the Framework Agreement of December 1998, including recommendations that the respective armies should redeploy to positions held before 6 May and that the prior civilian administration in Badme should be allowed to return; that an investigation should be held into the events of 6 May; and that the boundary should be demilitarised and demarcated by the UN cartographic section.¹⁰² Ethiopia was willing, but Eritrea was not, as it regarded its military action after that point as entirely justified, as well as providing it with significant military and political advantage. Isaias and his circle calculated that (a) Eritrean military might would prevail, as it had in the past; and that (b) the righteousness of Eritrea's position would be recognised in due course.

For Eritrea, ceding Badme back to Ethiopia would be an admission that the area was, in fact, under rightful Ethiopian occupation. The Eritrean government contended that the border was non-controversial – both sides knew where the border lay – and that Ethiopia's insistence on focusing on the pre-6 May administration was a smoke-screen aimed at drawing attention away from its border incursions in 1997.¹⁰³ Moreover, in May 1998, there was a sense of indignation in Eritrea that the US was not willing to engage with Asmara with quite the same esteem and energy accorded to Ethiopia. When Susan Rice, Clinton's Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, prematurely announced the success of the US-Rwanda plan without waiting for confirmation from Asmara, Eritrea, which had been close to accepting the plan, angrily rejected it. One of the early – and critical – diplomatic failures was thus to apparently treat Eritrea with less respect than Ethiopia.¹⁰⁴ Also complicit in this

⁹⁷ Quoted in Connell, *Against All Odds*, 282-3.

⁹⁸ A large number of documents relating to these initiatives have been helpfully compiled in Walta Information Centre, *Chronology of the Ethio-Eritrean Conflict and Basic Documents* (Addis Ababa, 2001), although much of the attendant commentary is unsurprisingly pro-Ethiopian in tone, as the Walta Information Centre is to all intents and purposes an organ of the government.

⁹⁹ Both were regarded as part of the 'new breed' of African leaders in the 1990s.

¹⁰⁰ This became the basis of all subsequent peace initiatives.

¹⁰¹ 'Testimony of 25 May 1999 by Assistant Secretary of State, Ms Susan Rice, on the Conflict in the Horn of Africa', in Negash & Tronvoll, *Brothers at War*, 140.

¹⁰² 'OAU Framework Agreement for a Peaceful Settlement of the Dispute between Eritrea and Ethiopia', Document 12 in Walta Information Centre, *Chronology and Documents*, 181-4.

¹⁰³ Christine Gray, 'The Eritrea/Ethiopia Claims Commission Oversteps its Boundaries: a partial award?', *European Journal of International Law*, 17:4 (2006).

¹⁰⁴ Gilkes & Plaut, *War in the Horn*, 58; Martin Plaut, *Understanding Eritrea: inside Africa's most repressive state* (London, 2016), 36; Mengisteab & Yohannes, *Anatomy*, 237. This was the common perception in Eritrea at the time, and the memory of American high-handedness – and particularly that of Susan Rice – has endured within the Eritrean government. See also



breakdown in relations was Gayle Smith, responsible for African affairs on the National Security Council, who was regarded (both in the US and in Eritrea) as being overly close to Meles Zenawi and the Ethiopian government, and a wholly unreliable mediator in a complex conflict.¹⁰⁵ In sum, May 1998 represented a missed opportunity for a diplomatic breakthrough and military de-escalation, and instead constituted one of the critical tipping points of the conflict at which the nature of the military confrontation intensified rapidly and trust in external actors deteriorated equally speedily.

The long periods of lull in between fighting allowed ample time for diplomatic activity, and there was certainly plenty of it. Shuttle diplomacy was practiced by President Clinton's special envoy, Anthony Lake, with a view to laying the groundwork for the Framework Agreement. But what is striking is the intractability of the conflict. Between May 1998 and February 1999, Eritrea eschewed the US-Rwanda/OAU plan on the grounds that its military actions in May 1998 were entirely correct, while of course it had also won critical military advantage which it was loath to surrender. It was a position which also reflected the Eritrean government's deepening disillusion with the international community, especially as Ethiopia was seen to enjoy the sympathy of that community. Even more profoundly, there was a sense at the heart of the EPLF state that this was simply a continuation of the independence war against Ethiopia and that concessions were not an option, just as they had not been during the long years of the armed struggle in the 1970s and 1980s. This was war without compromise, a self-reliant struggle for survival. Coupled with this was a belief that the EPLF deserved to be the dominant political and military force in the region, and that the TPLF – pejoratively referred to as *Woyane*, with ethnic Tigrayans dismissed contemptuously as *Agame* – was inferior in all respects.¹⁰⁶ This was not a war which could be lost.

However, after Ethiopia recaptured Badme in February 1999, and Eritrea performed its stunning *volte-face* in accepting the Framework Agreement, the war ostensibly should have stopped. This was another pivotal moment in which appropriate levels of external intervention and pressure could have brought about a significant de-escalation. The fact that this did not happen reflected a new geopolitical and military reality, namely that the Ethiopian government now saw an opportunity to crush Eritrea as a political and military force, and bring Isaias to heel. Eritrea's decision to accept the Framework Agreement was in fact consistent with its history of tactical withdrawal and conservation of military strength, while it may also be seen as a gamble on external support for its position and the plaudits as well as the protection of the international community.

However, there was no meaningful pressure placed on Ethiopia at this critical juncture to cease hostilities, and certainly none that Meles Zenawi could not comfortably ignore. Ethiopia now demanded the return of all its occupied territories and a declaration that Eritrea recognised Ethiopian sovereignty in these areas.¹⁰⁷ Ethiopia's assured and aggressive stance was most plainly and immediately evidenced in the launch of new offensives along the central front weeks after the seizure of Badme. Those offensives failed at great cost, and diplomatic activity was increasingly secondary to military planning. Thus, for example in July 1999, when Eritrea announced that it had

Saleh A.A.Younis, 'The Eritrean-Ethiopian Conflict, or how Ethiophilia blinded Susan Rice', *Eritrean Studies Review*, 3:2 (1999).

¹⁰⁵ See 'Amid Ethiopia elections 2015, Obama's USAID nominee Gayle Smith slammed for supporting Africa's repressive regimes', *International Business Times*, 20 May 2015 (<http://www.ibtimes.com/amid-ethiopia-elections-2015-obamas-usaid-nominee-gayle-smith-slammed-supporting-1927748>).

¹⁰⁶ Author's field notes, Eritrea, between 1997 and 2008; Alemseged Abbay, *Identity Jilted or Re-Imagining Identity? The divergent paths of the Eritrean and Tigrayan nationalist struggles* (Lawrenceville NJ, 1998), 140, 142. *Woyane* literally means 'revolt', and was first used in reference to a rebellion against Haile Selassie (and suppressed with British assistance) in Tigray in 1943; 'Agame' is a historically impoverished district of eastern Tigray, and the source of much manual, low-status labour in Eritrea.

¹⁰⁷ 'Statement by Dr. Tekeda Alemu, Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ethiopia, to the UN Security Council, 22 March 1999', Document 21 in Walta Information Centre, *Chronology and Documents*, 264-71.



accepted the Framework Agreement as well as the practical arrangements for its implementation, Ethiopia announced that it did not take Asmara's acceptance seriously. Diplomats had for months sought to reduce the distance between the Eritrean and Ethiopian positions, but whenever an apparent breakthrough was made, another issue would appear.¹⁰⁸

In many ways, the intransigence and bitterness of the conflict reflected the conviction on both sides that the time was ripe for an absolute victory over the enemy, involving a definitive remaking of the regional order in the image of the victor. There was also a belief in Eritrea that the international community might tacitly accept an Ethiopian victory, and that Meles had been given off-the-record intimations of this.¹⁰⁹ It certainly seems as though senior Ethiopian military planners and political strategists believed that their offensive in May 2000 could not only achieve the effective neutralisation of the Eritrean regime – up to and including, if necessary, Isaias Afewerki's ouster – but also that the new order would be tacitly welcomed by much of the international community.

It is worth reiterating at this juncture that external engagement had singularly failed to produce any tangible or meaningful results, and that the fighting only ceased once the two sides had fought themselves to a standstill. In large part, this failure owed much to the inability of external actors to recognise the historical and emotional significance of the war for each side. The external approach to peace-making was essentially rooted in the idea that the protagonists were somewhat rough-hewn, trigger-happy former guerrillas who would nonetheless learn quickly not to behave in this way, once normative diplomatic pressures were brought to bear and once an appropriate combination of incentive and retribution had been introduced to proceedings. The fallacy of the reductive notion that the war could be resolved by the confirmation of coordinates on a map and judicial pronouncements concerning damages owed was soon exposed, as it denied the rather less quantifiable but altogether more potent senses of grievance, loss, history, and affect on each side.

The Boundary Commission and the Claims Commission, based at The Hague, were each comprised of a group of leading legal experts in their respective fields. The Boundary Commission released its ruling in April 2002.¹¹⁰ There was a more or less equal distribution of relatively unimportant portions of territory to each of Ethiopia and Eritrea, but the critical sticking point was Badme – still under Ethiopian occupation, the trigger for the war itself, and thus of ineffable symbolic importance. The Commission ruled in favour of Eritrea, which immediately accepted the Commission's findings. However, Ethiopia prevaricated and was reluctant to concede Badme to Eritrea. It requested clarifications, and the Commission upheld their initial findings in April 2003. At this point, Ethiopia declared the ruling unacceptable.

That there was insufficient external pressure placed on Ethiopia at this sensitive moment meant that a further opportunity for swift resolution was missed. Toward the end of the following year, in November 2004, Ethiopia shifted its position slightly to declare that it accepted the ruling in principle, but on the ground there was no movement on Badme. Indeed there would be no further attempts to demarcate on the ground, which led to the somewhat abstract 'virtual demarcation' in 2007-8 – the dissolved Boundary Commission left behind geographical coordinates and a map to indicate where the boundary *should* be – which Eritrea accepted as legal fact, and which Ethiopia

¹⁰⁸ Plaut, 'The conflict', 101.

¹⁰⁹ Author's field notes, Asmara, 1999-2000. Rumour is extremely potent in any war, and this was certainly true in Eritrea in 1999 and 2000, when such stories would routinely do the rounds. Whether true or not – it is almost of secondary importance – the *perception* was that Eritrea was going to be hung out to dry by an international community which regarded Ethiopia as the region's natural leader and which privately wished Ethiopia would simply put Eritrea in its place. If they wanted Assab in the process, so be it.

¹¹⁰ See the full report at <http://www.haguejusticeportal.net/index.php?id=6162>.



dismissed as legal nonsense.¹¹¹ Meanwhile, although the Boundary Commission asserted that Badme lay in Eritrean territory, the separate Eritrea-Ethiopia Claims Commission at The Hague, ruling in 2005, held Eritrea responsible for the war and accused it of violating Article 2, Paragraph 4 of the UN Charter “by resorting to armed force to attack and occupy Badme, then under peaceful administration by Ethiopia”.¹¹²

At the same time, and in direct correlation, there were increasing tensions between Eritrea and UNMEE. Eritrea banned UN helicopter flights in its airspace in October 2005, and the following month the Security Council threatened both sides with sanction unless they returned to the peace plan encapsulated in the Algiers Agreement. In September 2006 Eritrea expelled five UN staff, accusing them of being spies, and weeks later the Eritrean government was ordered to withdraw soldiers who had moved into the demilitarized zone. Eritrea also imposed fuel restrictions on UN peacekeepers, rendering their operations all but impossible, and in July 2008 UNMEE was disbanded with immediate effect.¹¹³ There had been no *major* combat along the border since 2000, which might be counted something of a success, but otherwise UNMEE could be seen as an abject failure.

By this point, Eritrea’s wider international relations were coming under severe strain. There was nothing inevitable about this: immediately after the war, Eritrea demonstrated a desire to be close to the US, and was an early sign-up to the ‘coalition of the willing’ prior to the Iraq War.¹¹⁴ Isaias developed good relations with members of the Bush administration, including Donald Rumsfeld. But so did Ethiopia, which also supported the Iraq War, and which was much better positioned diplomatically and strategically. Ethiopia’s value to the US only increased in the new post-9/11 world of the 2000s. In 2006, when Ethiopia first sent troops into Somalia, the US had initially cautioned against it – Somalia would be ‘Ethiopia’s Iraq’, it was said¹¹⁵ – but once Meles’s determination was clear, the US supported it and provided various kinds of material assistance.¹¹⁶ In the years that followed, while Ethiopia’s approach to human rights and political opposition occasionally attracted criticism, Ethiopia became a stalwart ally to the US in the global war on terror and partner in international development initiatives.¹¹⁷

In the wake of the Boundary Commission’s findings, and ultimately the failure of the UN Security Council and other close allies of Ethiopia with some leverage over Meles to pressure Ethiopia to comply with the demarcation, Eritrea grew ever more frustrated. Isaias’s dealings with the UN, the US, the EU and other major actors deteriorated rapidly and at times were actively hostile.¹¹⁸ By 2009-10 those relations had reached a nadir, especially after the imposition of sanctions on Eritrea over its alleged involvement in Somalia, and the brief conflict with Djibouti. At the same time, the international focus on Eritrea was overwhelmingly concerned with its increasingly dire human rights record, including indefinite conscription, long-term detention of political dissidents and journalists,

¹¹¹ European Parliament, ‘Directorate-General for External Policies of the Union: The Ethiopia-Eritrea Conflict’, September 2008:

[http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/commissions/deve/document_travail/2008/414210/DEVE_DT\(2008\)414210_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/commissions/deve/document_travail/2008/414210/DEVE_DT(2008)414210_EN.pdf)

¹¹² See Michael J. Matheson, ‘Eritrea-Ethiopia Claims Commission: damage awards’, *American Society of International Law*, 13:13 (2009). The ruling attracted some criticism from legal scholars who questioned the legitimacy – and pointed to the unhelpful timing – of the ruling: Gray, ‘The Eritrea/Ethiopia Claims Commission’. In other spheres, the Commission also found against Ethiopia, and in 2009 both countries were ordered to pay one another compensation for the war. That remains purely academic.

¹¹³ <http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/missions/past/unmee/resolutions.html>

¹¹⁴ Emma Brookes, ‘What can Eritrea possibly do to help the US in Iraq?’, *The Guardian*, 20 March 2003.

¹¹⁵ Martin Plaut, ‘Ethiopia in Somalia: one year on’, BBC News, 28 December 2007.

¹¹⁶ Xan Rice & Suzanne Goldenberg, ‘How US forged an alliance with Ethiopia over invasion’, *The Guardian*, 13 January 2007.

¹¹⁷ ICG, *Ethiopia After Meles*, 11-12.

¹¹⁸ ICG, *Siege State*, 23-5.



and harassment of a range of religious groups. There is no doubt that Eritrea's human rights record has long been one of the worst in the world. But in some respects, it served to distract from some equally important issues, namely Eritrea's sense that it could not rely on international support, that it believed (correctly) that it inhabited a deadly neighbourhood, and that its national security, necessarily underpinned by a stridently vigilant militarism, was paramount. In sum, the Eritrean government simply did not value human rights in the way that its external interlocutors did, and was routinely irritated by their insistence on talking about the issue rather than (for example) Ethiopia's continued illegal occupation of Badme.

Qatar sought the role of honest broker in the early 2010s, and was seen to be one of the few states in the wider region with any influence over Isaias.¹¹⁹ They urged re-engagement in the peace process and sought ways of reintegrating Eritrea into normal regional diplomatic channels. However, at various junctures it seems that Qatar grew impatient with Isaias's refusal to meaningfully engage with Ethiopia, and that the Eritrean President overplayed his hand in terms of Qatar's desire to position itself as a diplomatic channel. The Qataris also had commercial interests in Ethiopia, and were not solely dedicated to the reintegration of Eritrea into the diplomatic fold.

For the European Union, the biggest problem was the sharp increase in the movement of Eritrean refugees – often at the hands of traffickers – across the Mediterranean from 2012 onward. For the first time in many years, Eritrea became an issue of interest in mainstream European politics, and there was new interest in the conditions which were compelling thousands of predominantly young Eritreans to flee the country. It was clear that the main driver was sustained militarisation and indefinite national service as a result of the stalled peace 'process', and lack of economic opportunities owing to both an oppressive political culture and Eritrea's isolation. Notably, however, the EU's response was to reopen channels of aid, and to offer the Eritrean government a substantial package aimed at improving development initiatives within Eritrea and reducing the migrant flow.¹²⁰ In a striking irony, this policy may well lead to the bolstering of Eritrea's border security and thus of its military capacity – *not* to its reduction.¹²¹

Ethiopia had its fair share of domestic trouble, but as a global player the country went from strength to strength. It consolidated its position as a key partner of the West on a range of issues, including security and development. It was regarded as 'Africa's representative' at meetings of the G20 and other global arenas; Meles was especially adept at this, but even after he died in 2012 Ethiopia, under Hailemariam Desalegn, remained a foremost voice globally and was regarded by individual philanthropists and foreign governments alike as a vehicle for development and stability in a volatile neighbourhood.

Conclusion and Lessons Learned

The analysis points to a number of conclusions and lessons learned. First, Ethiopia and Eritrea were not treated equitably by the diplomatic community. Ethiopia should have been subject to much greater pressure by the UN Security Council and individual governments, as well as by financial institutions, to abide by the ruling of the Boundary Commission in 2002. Ethiopia's refusal to pull out of Badme according to the Commission's findings displayed a flagrant disregard for international law, and in the years that followed was a key factor in enabling Isaias Afewerki to consolidate and blame others for Eritrea's predicament. It fed the larger and popular perception in Eritrea that the UN and

¹¹⁹ 'Qatari diplomacy in the Horn of Africa', *The Economist Intelligence Unit*, 2 August 2013.

¹²⁰ 'EU considering working with Sudan and Eritrea to stem migration', *The Guardian*, 6 June 2016.

¹²¹ 'Europe contemplates funding Eritrean security forces', *taz.archiv*, 28 January 2017, available at <https://martinplaut.wordpress.com/2017/02/03/europe-contemplates-funding-eritrean-security-forces/>



international community were fundamentally against Eritrea and favoured Ethiopia. The perception of injustice was critical to the strengthening of Isaias's regime, and served to facilitate long-term militarisation and indefinite national service. Therefore, while tacit support for Ethiopia may have been the easiest and most comfortable approach on the part of external actors, it served to prolong the afterlife of a brutal war. More broadly, there was clear bias in various external actors' dealings with the two states, whether consciously or not, especially when it came to two markedly charismatic elites with long-standing external cohorts of followers and sympathisers.

Lesson: Recognition of potential bias, and the need to make all possible efforts to treat parties equitably, and to be seen to do so.

Second, internal national dynamics are vital. Both Eritrea and Ethiopia saw the post-war situation differently from external actors, and particularly the UN Security Council. In large part this was related to the collapse of the pre-1998 elite bargain between the two governments, and also to the nature of the subsequent internal political settlements with both Eritrea and Ethiopia. While Eritrea was ostensibly committed to the 'peace process', in reality the government benefited from the 'no war/no peace' scenario, which enabled it to postpone any serious discussion about internal reform until such time as the existential threat to the nation was removed. The common refrain from government circles was 'this is not the time'. The situation with Ethiopia also legitimised (again in the government's view) tightened internal military and political control: in sum, the Eritrean political and military elite benefited from the perpetuation of the idea that 'war might come again at any time'. For Ethiopia, the central strategy from 2001 onwards was the penning off of Eritrea militarily and diplomatically, and its slow strangulation. And so, the Ethiopian government was clearly not fully committed to a 'peace process'.

Interestingly a strong argument might be made that fuller engagement with the Algiers process and acceptance of the subsequent Boundary Commission on the part of Ethiopia would have undermined Isaias Afewerki much more effectively, stripping him of his military *raison d'être*, and thus intrinsically strengthening the forces for internal reform in Eritrea. Ironically, Ethiopia had much more to gain from genuine peace than the Eritrean government did. It is clear, however, that political elites, whether consciously or otherwise, make either short- or long-term calculations based on a range of factors and current interpretations of available information. In Ethiopia's case, a relatively *short-term* approach toward Eritrea was adopted, although the government was also constrained by immediate domestic considerations – for example, it could not be seen to surrender Badme to Eritrea after two-and-a-half years of bloody conflict. Eritrea's calculation was arguably more *long-term*, albeit one based on an outdated and increasingly dubious frame of reference: i.e., that, as during the long years of armed struggle, the Eritrean government would dig in stoically and await the truth to surface, with government and people united in their determination to face down the enemy, whenever the moment of battle should come.

Lesson: Elites are not always as committed to peace processes as external actors might assume them to be, and will often act according to divergent domestic and regional imperatives.

Third, at the regional level, there were clear difficulties in relation to IGAD and the AU. Ethiopia evidently had much greater residual influence in both organisations, and was able to freeze Eritrea out as the main organs were in Addis Ababa, a major international diplomatic and strategic hub. This was clearly to Eritrea's serious detriment, in terms of diplomatic realities and its virtual marginalisation. However, it could have been addressed – admittedly with some effort – by taking the conflict out of the hands of those organisations and removing what was a clear conflict of interests. For example, the temporary relocation of Ethiopia-Eritrea business at the level of IGAD and the AU to Nairobi would have addressed the issue, and provided a more neutral setting.



Lesson: The need for pragmatism and flexibility in the practice of regional diplomacy, and the recognition of potential conflicts of interest.

Fourth, one of the key lessons undoubtedly relates to the early weeks of the war, when there were manifest failures in US mediation efforts. Despite the high emotion coming off the back of the fighting at Badme, for much of May 1998 there was a window of opportunity for a speedy ceasefire before the conflict became too embedded. What was required was demonstrably equitable treatment of the two parties, and manifold reassurances that their respective positions would be heard and respected in the event of an agreed ceasefire. But Susan Rice and Gayle Smith, the envoys dispatched by US President Bill Clinton, singularly failed to reach agreement with the Eritreans and appeared to believe that Ethiopia, as the ostensibly strongest power in the Horn, was more deserving of close attention. They both had close ties with the EPRDF government, moreover, and the perception quickly grew in Asmara that they were untrustworthy and were not prepared to respect Eritrea's version of events. Moreover, Susan Rice's premature announcement that a peace deal had been accepted before receiving any such notification from Eritrea was a colossal failure of mediation, spurred a massive escalation in the fighting in the days that followed, and arguably set back US-Eritrean relations significantly. In some respects, those relations have never recovered.

Lesson: The need to become engaged in mediation early, with energy and commitment, to show goodwill and good faith toward each party, and to ensure that the mediators themselves have impeccable credentials.

Fifth, and related to this, critical windows of opportunity were missed. Two such moments were May 1998 after the initial eruption of fighting, and late February/early March 1999, when Ethiopia recaptured Badme and Eritrea abruptly accepted the original peace proposals. These were pivotal moments during which the war could either be constrained or would escalate. The appropriate pressure and recognition of the importance of the opportunity would have achieved the former, but in the event the failure to intervene decisively and equitably meant a rapid escalation of the violence.

Lesson: Identify the tipping points and pivotal moments.

Sixth, history matters, and a greater sensitivity to this would have enabled external mediators to gain better traction in ending the conflict. There was a lack of historical and cultural awareness in dealing with Eritrea in particular, though the peculiar resonance of the war for both countries was largely missed. A greater awareness of the respective domestic constituencies and audiences in both Eritrea and Ethiopia would have enabled a more sensitive, qualitative approach to understanding how the war had started over the long term, rather than simply focusing on where the border lay, who fired first, and who did the most damage during the conflict. There were particular perceptions of the war, which were loaded with layers of meaning, in both countries, and an appreciation of this would have facilitated a more 'soft-power' approach to understanding the conflict. Eritrea, for example, did not respond well to normative diplomatic pressure, and this did it no favours, but it also had a long, problematic history of external intervention which was evident in the EPLF's deepest political structures and values. An appreciation of this fact would have gone some way to assuaging the Eritrean leadership and reassuring it that an international community did in fact 'care' and was open to Eritrea's arguments.

More generally, there was a failure of imagination within the international community, and an emphasis on quantitative methods of resolution above qualitative assessments of both internal politics and historical relations between the two countries. Ultimately, history haunted this conflict: this was not simply a matter of 'two bald men fighting over a comb', which was how it was characterised in the media, and which is how many diplomats privately saw the conflict. Africa is too often approached in a shallow, presentist manner, which ignores the reality that most conflicts have



deep roots and represent deep fissures between communities. In the Horn, it might be said that each generation fights the wars of its ancestors; certainly, it is true that governments of various hues have long deliberately mobilised the past for political ends, periodically bringing up great causes and grievances from the cellars of public memory. This is not simply a matter of political cynicism, moreover; political actors often sincerely 'adhere' to a particular view of the past, often because, again, of their lived experience and that of those they purport to represent. The Eritrea-Ethiopia war, in other words, had deep emotional resonance for citizens of both countries, and historical issues had real contemporary relevance.

Lesson: The need for greater awareness of and sensitivity to local historical imaginaries and political cultures.

Finally, external engagement was aimed at first, stopping the fighting, and second, resolving the supposed immediate causes of the conflict – namely the border itself. This approach was understandable and logical, and was certainly consistent with internationally-sponsored peace processes the world over. But it was also insufficient in this case as with many others. This war was not about the border: it reflected fundamental rivalries between two countries, and more specifically two highly successful political movements, which had a long and tortured relationship history. The fixation on demarcation was in many ways a distraction. Similarly, the Claims Commission was ineffectual for both sides and only served to enflame the situation. Indeed, it could be argued that the process of 'resolving' the war was unhelpfully legalistic and overly focused on apportioning blame and judging recompense. This was never going to end to the satisfaction of all parties, not least because of what were in many ways the conflicting natures of the commissions themselves. Eritrea was determined to use legal process as a means of demonstrating its faith in the international system, and it is understandable that both Eritrea and Ethiopia should have recourse to courts to argue their respective cases. But these legalistic approaches disguised deeper-rooted, even 'emotional' responses to the war in both countries, and a soft-power approach to the politics of affect and historical resonance within Eritrea and Ethiopia would have likely borne greater fruit than the contestations of lawyers in The Hague and elsewhere. If anything, these legal mechanisms drove the two countries further apart during the early and mid-2000s at a time when targeted diplomatic efforts might have eased relations.

Lesson: Qualitative as well as quantitative methods of conflict resolution have the potential to deliver much more meaningful and sustainable outcomes.



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