



# Regional Geopolitics and the Securitisation of Eritrea

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*The Horn of Africa and Arabian Peninsula*

# Eritrea at the Nexus of the Arabian Peninsula and the HoA

- **Highly strategic region attracting interest/presence of major world powers**
  - **Economic:** Contains 53.4% of world's proven fossil fuel resources;  
**Conduit** for over US\$ 700 billion Europe-Asia maritime trade;  
**Lucrative market** for the global arms trade;  
**Water:** the Nile River Basin – the lifeline for the Lower Riparian States.
  - **Military:** multiple bases on both sides of the Red Sea Basin;  
Role of proximate **mini-powers:** Iran, Israel, Turkey in the regional conflict system;
- **Chronic conflicts:** interstate and intrastate (civil wars):
  - Eri-Eth, Isr-Pal; SS-S; GCC-Qatar; Saudi-led coalition-Iran/Houthi.
  - Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Yemen, Ethiopia (ONLF, OLF).
  - Conflict between Upper & Lower Riparian States.

# Geopolitics of the Region (i)

## Regional Conflict Matrix:

- **Sunni-Shia divide**, the 1400 years old rivalry between the two main branches of Islam, pitting Saudi Arabia and Iran for a dominant position in the region;
- **Muslim Brotherhood-Salafist (Jihadist) divide** within Sunni Islam;
- **External Actors** (US, Russia, China, UK, France) fuelling the conflict system thru arms supplies, political support and diplomatic protection;
- **Regional Conflict System and shifting alliances:** UAE military bases in Eritrea & Somaliland; Saudi led coalition vs the Houthis & Allies in the civil war in Yemen; Turkish base in Suakin;

**The conflict matrix and associated events in these highly volatile regions flanking the Red Sea Basin exert a powerful impact on the situation in and prospects for Eritrea.**

# Geopolitics of the Region (ii)

## **Horn of Africa Conflict Matrix:**

Interstate conflicts (territorial and boundary conflicts):

- Eritrea-Ethiopia; Eritrea-Djibouti; Kenya-Ethiopia; Ethiopia-Somalia; Kenya-Somalia; South Sudan-Sudan; Somalia-Somaliland; etc.

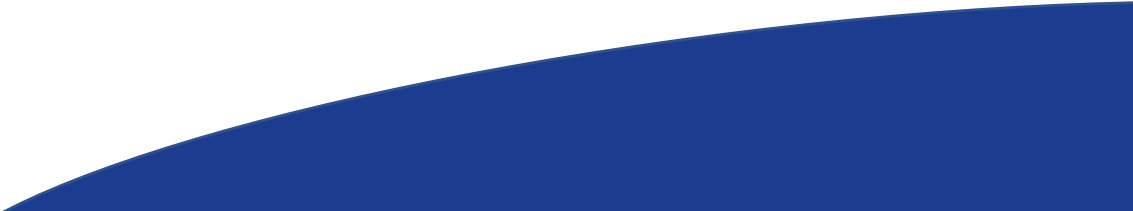
Intrastate conflicts (inter-ethnic):

- Anuak vs Nuer in Gambella; Dinka vs Nuer in South Sudan; Somali vs Afar in Ethiopia and Djibouti; Kemant vs Amhara, Welkait vs Tigray, Oromo vs Somali & Amhara/Oromo vs Tigray, Ogadeni Somalis vs Government in Ethiopia; Oromo (Borona) vs Somali in Kenya.

Regional power projection:

- Egypt, Ethiopia, UAE, Turkey in Djibouti, Eritrea, South Sudan, Somalia, Somaliland, Sudan, etc.

# What is Securitisation?

1. Identification and labelling by a State or political actor of...
  2. An issue that is perceived as a serious or imminent threat that...
  3. Requires extraordinary means to neutralise the threat and...
  4. Ensure survival.
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# Successful securitisation depends on 3 key factors:

1. The persuasive ability (narrative) to frame the situation and convince the audience (population) of an existential threat.
2. The acceptance by the population of the narrative irrespective of whether the threat is real or not.
3. The use of the state security apparatus and other government institutions to coerce general compliance with the narrative.

# The Case of Eritrea

- Located in a volatile region and surrounded by “hostile” neighbours
- A larger neighbour with a history of aggression...
  - Engaged in a 30-year war of liberation until *de facto independence* in 1991.
  - Fought a border war (1998-2000) culminating in a state of ***no war no peace***, and the continued occupation of sovereign Eritrean territory.

**Providing the necessary pretext to introduce extraordinary measures...**



# Centralised Control and Concentrated Power (i)

## **Compulsory active national service**

- Original purpose vs current implementation
  - Without due remuneration
  - Youth disproportionately affected
- loss of legitimate right to education, family, employment

## **Coupon economy**

- Man-made chronic shortages
- Regimentation of society and societal surveillance (ΦΝΛ)
  - Caused by severe mismanagement
  - Blamed on external factors and hostilities

# Centralised Control and Concentrated Power (ii)

## Concentration of Power

- Systematic centralisation of chain of command at the highest level: the Presidency
  - Suspension of all on-going policy, legislative and institutional processes
    - Suspension of Eritrean National Assembly and PFDJ CC
  - Establishment of Special Court and emasculation of the High Court
    - Failure to Apply the ratified 1997 Constitution

## 2001 Crackdown

- Arbitrary arrest and indefinite detention on baseless allegations
  - Banning of the private press
  - State ownership and strict censorship of national media
- **Aim** of the **crackdown** is the removal and silencing of voices with:
  - Moral authority, and divergent views,
- Capacity to challenge decisions and the one-sided 'official' narrative

# Heavy Securitisation of Policies

- Engender extremely politicised perspectives (black and white).
- Deeply ingrained or internalised, esp. among certain regime supporters and sympathisers in the Diaspora.
- This mindset allows no room for open discussion and civil dialogue.
- Reduces complex situations into a binary view of survival, *them vs. us* (ቴሬዞንት).
- Encourages attitudes and an atmosphere of:
  - Aggression, hostility, suspicion & fear affecting Eritreans at home & in the Diaspora;
  - Evident in the form and content of interactions on social media...

# Anonymity and Hostility

Effective use of online anonymity & instant transmission of info to promote regime agenda.

- For instance:

Images and posts constantly shared on twitter and Facebook depicting:

- Black and white images of heroic deeds during the liberation struggle;
- Eritrea's beautiful landscape;
- Carefully manicured snapshots of urban scenes, esp. Asmera's *art deco* architecture;
- Captions exalting the regime's success and achievement in national development.

Aim: Cultivate and impose a fabricated reality: an image of a peaceful, stable and prosperous country, reflecting the 'official' narrative.

This is winning over Diaspora youth, esp. those feeling alienated in the host countries by presenting them a different narrative and reality, instilling pride and sense of belonging.

Orchestrated attacks on critical tweets and posts highlighting aspects of Eritrea's:

- Economic suffocation, political paralysis, societal disruption or dismal HR situation.

# Definitions are Important!

Key drivers of aggressive interaction:

(1) Inability to distinguish between

- the State of Eritrea (ሃገረ ኤርትራ),
- the People of Eritrea (ህዝቢ ኤርትራ), and
- the Government of Eritrea (መንግሥት ኤርትራ)

(2) What can and must be done pre- vs. post-change in Eritrea.

Result: misguided blind loyalty to PFDJ , because of the historical role of the EPLF.

- This stance is puzzling in the face of compelling evidence of abuses and violations.

Intrigue and complicity of senior officials stemming from impunity in return for loyalty.

Any criticism, divergent view or dissident opinion labelled 'Woyane or CIA' ('ሕንጉጉ መጻጅካ!').

# Blurring State and Regime Security

Reality in Eritrea is depicted by a single 'official' narrative, shaped by regime's own priorities, interests and perceived security threats.

- Any resistance, dissent or criticism labelled as treachery & ruthlessly suppressed.

Aim: Blend regime and State security & blur their distinction in the service of regime survival:

- Identify threats/risks to the regime as security concerns for the State of Eritrea.

Hence, the threats/risks must be dealt with swiftly and harshly, with impunity.

# External Threats

## Eritrea is:

- Located at the **geopolitical centre** of the **HoA** and the **Arabian Peninsula**, surrounded by neighbours deemed or rendered hostile: Djibouti, Ethiopia, Sudan and Yemen.
- Facing international isolation:
  - Parallels are drawn with isolation during the struggle for self-determination.
  - Current isolation is self-inflicted: **domestic** and **foreign policy praxis**.
  - Consequence of a '**fit for purpose**' strategic decision.
  - Narrative spun and sold to the people ignores the regime's own implicit role.

The regime portrays sanctions as unprovoked and unwarranted acts of aggression. This is a **half-truth**, not entirely true.

- In terms of justice & fairness, the UN Charter and Int'l Customary Law, sanctions against Eritrea are **singular, unjustified and unwarranted, but not *unprovoked***.

Unwarranted because they are **discriminatory** and **smack of double standards**:

- (1) Impose sanctions on one country for refusing to acknowledge and address a border dispute with a neighbour & unsubstantiated accusations of supporting a terrorist group;
- (2) While failing to apply commensurate measures on another country that continues to occupy the sovereign territory of a neighbour in defiance of international law.

Studies have repeatedly proven that international sanctions are ineffective in achieving their stated purpose, often counter-productive, & harmful to the affected population.

*Qui pro quo* of neighbours in mutual hostility, pursuing a misguided and myopic policy of “*the enemy of my enemy is my friend*”, detrimental to regional stability.

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Sanctions serve a useful **alibi** for the regime:

(1) Blames sanctions for the *consequences of its mismanagement*:

- Chronic shortages of basic necessities and essential goods and services; and
- Lack of capital & FDI that have stunted economic development & social progress.

(2) Sells sanctions as *a threat to Eritrea's national security and prosperity*; and

(3) Uses sanctions, via a repetitive narrative, to exhort Eritreans to, once again, 'unite', pursue 'self-reliance', and make evermore sacrifices.

# Self-Reliance and Nation-Building

The **principle of self-reliance** was effectively applied during the armed struggle.

Current exhortation to self-reliance is misguided and a deliberate distortion:

(1) In the name of duty to country, national service recruits are deployed in public works, infrastructure or the extractive industry for stipends less than the cost of coupon rations.

(2) In an age of advanced industrial technology, the recruits are made to toil in never-ending and back-breaking manual jobs, that create no transferable skills.

- This, instead of being enrolled in higher education, science and technology programmes, vital in an ever more **globalised knowledge-based** and **competitive** world economy.

The mining sector is very lucrative:

- No transparency or accountability in the country's public finances,
  - Mining revenues **neither accounted for nor used for the benefit** of the **country or people**.
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# Externalising Blame

The harsh reality of this bleak system has spurred exodus of youth out of Eritrea.

So many falling victim to:

- Human trafficking and slavery in North Africa; organ harvesting in the Sinai; death in the Sahara Desert; or drowning in the Mediterranean and Red Seas.
  - Substantial reports and mounting evidence from the sheer number of people fleeing Eritrea for reasons, such as *persecution, torture and detention*, are met with the *denial, dismissal or shifting of blame* to “others” by the regime and its supporters.
  - Regime’s ‘official’ narrative consistently assigns blame for the lack of progress or the reality of immense suffering affecting Eritrea and its people to **hostile external actors**, such as the US, the UN or Woyane, that threaten Eritrea’s security.
  - As of January 2018, the regime has extended the net of blame to mothers and immediate family members, accusing them of encouraging youth to flee.
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# Conclusion


Combination of **persistent externalisation** and **extreme politicisation** of Eritrea's problems festered over decades, fed by the unrelenting regime narrative has produced:

- A **divided, fragmented** and **polarised Diaspora**, unable to **coalesce** and undertake **concerted action**, to the delight of the incumbent regime

We Eritreans, esp. in the Diaspora, need to find a way towards **reconciliation** and **unity of action** through **inclusive dialogue**.

Even modest steps, taken through respectful interaction and civil dialogue, can help **offload historical baggage**, **let go of grudges** and **heal old wounds**.

It is high time that we, as a people, recognise and begin taking **ownership of our situation** to **seize our future** by building **bridges and solidarity** as a community based on **common values** and a **shared vision**.





Thank you!