



AFRICAN NARRATIVES

Ethiopia and Eritrea: A Volatile Peace and the Future of Regional Stability

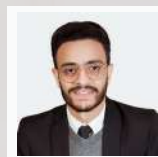


Author:



Ahmed Gamal El Sayad
Researcher in political science

Author:



Atef Mahmoud Dobal
Researcher in political science

Published by: African Narratives



Introduction

The relationship between Ethiopia and Eritrea is one of the most complex and consequential in the Horn of Africa. Historically fraught with conflict and tension, it has significantly contributed to regional instability. Since Eritrea's independence in 1993, relations have oscillated between periods of relative calm and renewed hostilities. While the 2018 peace agreement initially offered hope for improved relations, renewed tensions have emerged, particularly following the 2022

Pretoria Agreement between Ethiopia and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF).

This study analyzes the key factors driving tensions between Ethiopia and Eritrea, examining their impact on security and stability in the Horn of Africa. It also explores the potential future trajectory of Ethiopian-Eritrean relations and its implications for regional and continental stability.

Study Summary

This study examines the persistently strained relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea, focusing on the primary drivers of these tensions. The ongoing and escalating tensions between Asmara and Addis Ababa contribute to the instability of the Horn of Africa, a region already plagued by multiple conflicts, intertwined relationships, and competing interests. This situation poses a significant threat to the countries of the region and to peace and security across the African continent.



Key Findings:

- **Conflicting Political Ambitions:**

Ethiopia's desire for access to the Red Sea clashes directly with Eritrean interests and territorial integrity.

- **Humanitarian Crisis:**

Ongoing conflicts and tensions exacerbate the humanitarian situation in the Horn of Africa, exemplified by the impact of the Ethiopian-Eritrean conflict on the Tigray region, which suffers from insecurity and shortages of essential resources like medicine and food.

- **Regional Repercussions:**

The escalating tensions between the two countries could trigger a broader regional conflict, jeopardizing security and peace within the Horn of Africa and potentially impacting the entire African continent.



I. Drivers of Tension in Ethiopian-Eritrean Relations

The relationship between Ethiopia and Eritrea has been marked by periods of tension and hostility. While 2018 marked a turning point with the signing of a peace agreement to end the border dispute, ending two decades of a "no peace, no war" scenario, the 2022 Pretoria Agreement had a detrimental effect on relations. The increasing tension between Addis Ababa and Asmara raises concerns about a potential war that would destabilize the Horn of Africa and the broader continent. Several key factors contribute to this volatile situation:

1- Ethiopia's Pursuit of Red Sea Access

Eritrea's independence in 1993 left Ethiopia landlocked, depriving Addis Ababa of direct access to the Red Sea. Despite changes in government, access to these vital waterways remains a strategic priority for Addis Ababa, and has been a persistent source of tension with Asmara.

On October 23, 2023, Abiy Ahmed revealed the Ethiopian ambition to reach the waters of the Red Sea. For Addis Ababa, the historical ambition to reach the sea is linked to many economic, security and demographic necessities, necessities that conflict with the aspirations of Ethiopia, whose population is approximately 120 million, which makes this goal vital and extremely important for Addis Ababa. In November of the same year, Abiy Ahmed indicated before the Ethiopian parliament that Ethiopia's failure to achieve this goal would lead to a state of conflict in the Horn of Africa region, which is an indication of using a military solution, given that this goal represents

an existential issue. As for Ethiopia, the Ethiopian quest to reach the sea has in turn raised the concerns of more than one country in the Horn of Africa region, most notably Eritrea, because it is the most vulnerable to translating the Ethiopian ambition into reality in reaching the sea. Since Eritrea's independence was the event that deprived Ethiopia of its access to the sea. , Even with the achievement of this goal away from Eritrean ports, by Ethiopia signing an agreement with Somaliland, under which Somaliland is granted a port on the Red Sea, this creates a conflict between Ethiopian interests and the interests of some Horn of Africa countries, such as Djibouti, which will lose a large part of its revenue from Ethiopian trade in goods, which depended on Djibouti's ports, as well as Eritrea, for which Ethiopia's access to the sea and possession of an Ethiopian naval force represents an imbalance of power between them, which is considered a threat to Eritrean interests. .

2- The Pretoria Agreement and Eritrean Exclusion

The Pretoria Agreement, signed in November 2022 between Ethiopia and the TPLF, aimed to end the war between the two parties. However, its exclusion of Eritrea, a key player in the conflict, negatively impacted Ethiopian-Eritrean relations. During the Tigray War, Addis Ababa and Asmara formed a strategic alliance to counter the TPLF, driven by shared concerns over the Front's separatist agenda and border disputes. The Pretoria Agreement undermined Eritrea's goal of eliminating the TPLF, which it views as a threat to its national security, thus fueling tension with Ethiopia.

1 Shaimaa Al-Baksh, The Return of Tensions: Dimensions and Determinants of Ethiopian-Eritrean Tensions, Egyptian Center for Thought and Strategic Studies, publication date 11/27/2024, access date 3/2/2025.
<https://shorturl.at/zpLxH>

2 Reasons, Ethiopia's strategy towards the Red Sea sparks the struggle for dominance in the Horn of Africa, publication date September 2024, access date 3/2/2025.
<https://shorturl.at/ELvoW>

3 Nigeria Gudeta, all Africa,Eritrea: Looming Ethiopia-Eritrea Tension: Is New Cycle of Armed Conflict Imminent?2025.
<https://rb.gy/tgb5ss>



3- Ethiopian support for the Eritrean opposition, and hostile Ethiopian statements.

Addis Ababa's support for the Eritrean opposition, along with its hostile rhetoric towards Asmara, is a major factor contributing to tensions between Ethiopia and Eritrea. One of the most prominent forms of Ethiopian support was holding a conference in Addis Ababa for one of the most prominent and violent political movements opposing the ruling regime in Eritrea, the "Bergid Nahmado" conference, which was the first conference of its kind for the movement, and which was held with the approval of the Addis Ababa government, which indicates the extent of the tension in relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea, and this matter will in turn lead to more tension between the two countries.

As for the hostile statements, the most prominent of them were the statements of the former

Ethiopian President Mulatu Chime, who stated that Eritrea is one of the biggest parties threatening peace and security in the Horn of Africa region, describing Eritrea as a participant in most of the region's conflicts. He also stated that "war is the main concern of the Eritrean state, and it seems that inciting conflicts, supporting rebels, or governments seeking war and division, is the main reason behind the existence of the Eritrean state."

Naturally, these statements, in addition to the support provided by Addis Ababa to the Eritrean opposition movements, will lead to further tension in relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea. This tension could lead to the outbreak of a conflict that threatens the Horn of Africa region in particular, and the African continent in general, given the history full of tension and conflicts between Addis Ababa and Asmara.

4 Mahmoud Abu Bakr, Independent Arabia, A conference for Eritrean opposition members in Ethiopia. Does it herald a new war? Publication date 2/2/2025, access date 3/3/2025. <https://shorturl.at/6LGU9>

5 Mulatu Teshome, To avoid another conflict in the horn of Africa now is the time to act, Aljazeera 17 feb 2025. <https://shorturl.at/P2V1g>

II. The Repercussions of the Tigray War on Ethiopian-Eritrean Relations

Eritrea's intervention in the Tigray conflict highlights the complex political and military dynamics in the region. This section examines the manifestations of Eritrean involvement, analyzing political developments, military confrontations, and the strategic motives behind this intervention, as well as reviewing the resulting economic and humanitarian impacts.

A. Background of the Conflict

The conflict in Tigray, which began in November 2020, escalated tensions between the Ethiopian federal government and the TPLF, resulting in significant human and material losses and reshaping the political landscape of the Horn of Africa. Despite the signing of the Pretoria Peace Agreement in November 2022, tensions persist, particularly due to the continued presence of Eritrean forces in the region, raising concerns about renewed conflict. Eritrea has been accused of supporting armed factions within Tigray, with some military leaders allegedly receiving direct Eritrean support. According to local sources, the Eritrean government has pledged to support these leaders in the event of a new military confrontation between the Ethiopian federal government and the TPLF. Some claim that Eritrea has exploited divisions within the TPLF to increase its political and military influence in the region, thus prolonging the conflict.

B. Recent Political and Diplomatic Tensions

Political tensions between Ethiopia and Eritrea have increased after the Ethiopians accused their northern neighbor of supporting some armed factions in Tigray. A group of military leaders in Tigray, who recently expressed support for the

Tigray People's Liberation Front faction led by Debretsion Gebremichael, are working with the Eritrean government. According to Mulatu Teshome, the former Ethiopian president, "Eritrea is adopting a policy of interfering in the affairs of its neighbors to advance its geopolitical interests," and that "War is the business and preoccupation of the Eritrean state. Stirring up conflicts here and there, and supporting rebels or governments seeking war and division throughout the region seems to be the *raison d'être* of the Eritrean state."

Local Ethiopian sources reported that the Eritrean government pledged to support these leaders if the government of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed declared war against them. The Eritrean government denied these accusations, considering this publication constitutes "incitement to war", and it is part of a media campaign aimed at tarnishing its international image.

C. Economic Exploitation and Illegal Activities

Asmara is accused of interfering not only in the military dimension, but also in the economic dimensions. Eritrean interference in Tigray has been linked to illegal economic activities, such as smuggling gold extracted from the region across the border into Eritrea. Some military leaders took control of gold mining in Tigray during the war and continue to control illegal gold mining and smuggling. The amount of smuggled gold is estimated at about two tons annually, which represents a potential source of funding for armed factions, in addition to providing financial revenues to the Eritrean government in light of international sanctions imposed on it. Smuggling resources has also complicated economic development efforts in Tigray, increasing the suffering of the local population.

6 NOVA, UN: Eritrean troops should withdraw from Ethiopia's Tigray region, guilty of abuses, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/mwfwvmt>

7 Borkena, Eritrea-Ethiopia War Threat: Rising Tensions in the Horn of Africa, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/y2b8vhbc>

8 Al Jazeera, To avoid another conflict in the Horn of Africa, now is the time to act, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/38rjaemb>

9 DW, Is Ethiopia's Tigray on the brink of a fresh conflict?, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/y6xmp8bj>

D. Shortcomings of the 2018 Peace Agreement

Although a peace agreement was signed between Ethiopia and Eritrea in 2018, after Mr. Abiy Ahmed came to power in Ethiopia, who quickly traveled to Asmara to sign a peace agreement with Isaias, the TPLF was not interested in the peace agreement between Addis Ababa and Asmara, claiming that it was a trick against the people of Tigray and showed less enthusiasm for implementing it. This made the agreement insufficient to prevent the outbreak of conflict in Tigray. The first cracks in this new peace appeared in June 2021 when Abiy unilaterally withdrew Ethiopian forces from the region, leaving behind Eritrean forces that were helping to fight the TPLF. This decision escalated tensions between the two countries.

This is due to the lack of support from effective institutions. It was a personal agreement led by the leaders of the two countries, and many local stakeholders were marginalized, making it fragile and vulnerable to collapse. This is due to the shallowness of the agreement, which did not address basic issues such as border demarcation, trade coordination, and the use of ports, which contributed to the continued tension between the two countries. This vacuum provided an opportunity for mutual accusations of interference in Ethiopia's internal affairs and exploitation of existing conflicts to serve private interests. In November 2022, Ethiopia signed the Pretoria Peace Agreement, also known as the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement, with the Tigray People's Liberation Front, ending a two-year bloody conflict in northern Ethiopia. However, the key players—Eritrea and the Amhara Defense Forces—were excluded from the deal, leaving the door open to the possibility of future instability.

E. Military Mobilization and Regional Alert

Against the backdrop of current tensions, Eritrea has mobilized its forces in preparation for any possible military escalation, with all men under the age of 60 called up for military service. It has also imposed strict restrictions on the travel of individuals under the age of 50 outside the country, reflecting the country's level of military alert. This military mobilization comes amid concerns that Eritrean moves could reignite the conflict in Tigray, especially in light of the dissatisfaction of some factions with the peace agreement signed in Pretoria.

F. Worsening Humanitarian Situation in Tigray

Insecurity in Ethiopia's northern Tigray region has increased markedly in recent days, with many residents saying they fear recent political tensions within the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) could lead to renewed violence — more than two years after one of Ethiopia's deadliest conflicts, which has killed nearly 600,000 people. Amid soaring prices, some Tigrayans have been storming banks to withdraw cash, stocking up on essential supplies.



10 msn, Looming Ethiopia-Eritrea Tension: Is New Cycle of Armed Conflict Imminent?, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/mr38spx6>

11 Eastleigh voice, Border clashes raise fears of renewed conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/mry9ut4m>

12 Borkena, Eritrea-Ethiopia War Threat: Rising Tensions in the Horn of Africa, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/y2b8vhbc>

The region is experiencing a severe humanitarian crisis, with people suffering from severe shortages of basic resources, including food and medicine, which has led to soaring prices that have exacerbated living conditions. Fuel has become a scarce commodity and is sold at exorbitant prices on the black market. A litre costs up to 300 birr (€2.26/\$2.36) – a 200% increase in price. The crisis has also led to massive internal displacement, with fears of renewed fighting in the region growing. The people of Tigray are living under enormous economic and social burdens as a result of the ongoing instability.

The entire region is largely politically unstable because Ethiopia has tense relations with almost all of its neighbors and surrounding countries: with Egypt and Sudan over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, with Somalia over the port deal with Somaliland, and with Eritrea over various decades-long conflicts.

G. The Broader Regional Context and Risks

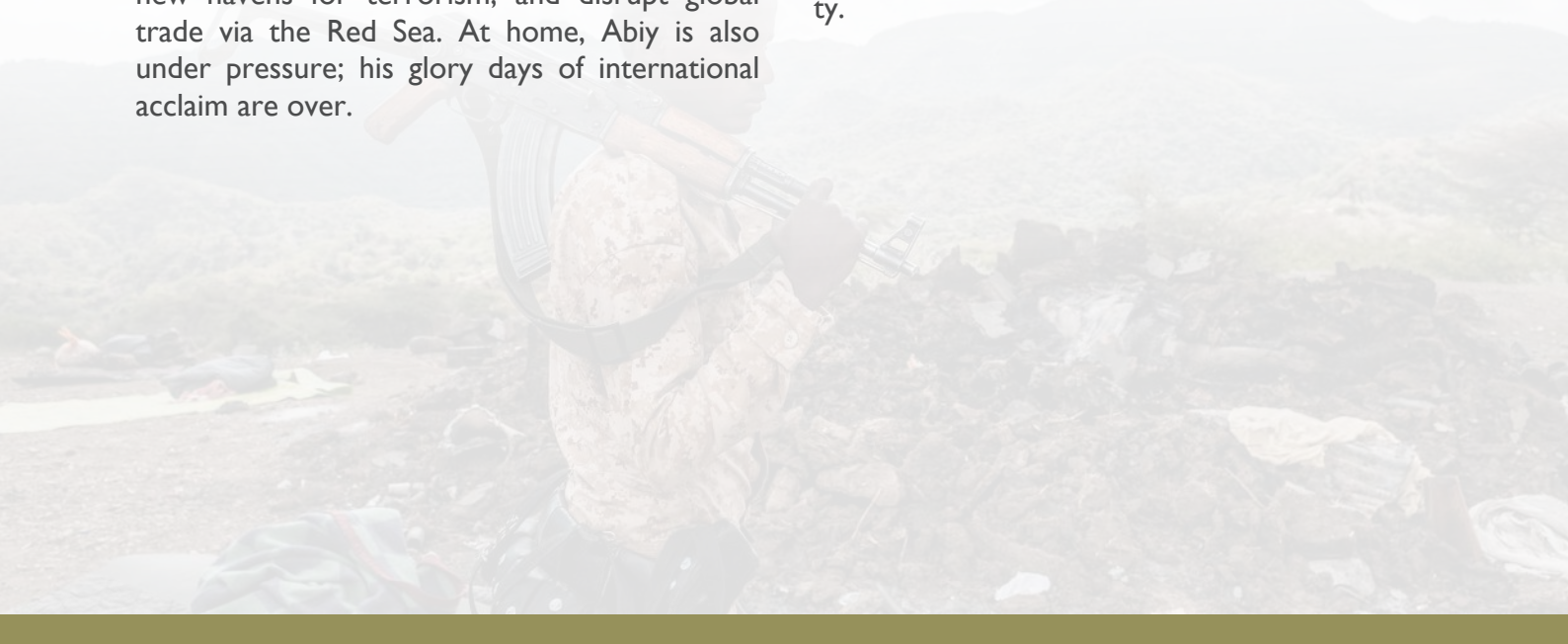
Overall, the stakes could not be higher. To the west of Ethiopia, civil war is consuming Sudan. To the east, Somalia is struggling to rebuild after decades of gradual collapse. Across the Sahel, extremist groups are gaining ground. The prospect of a return to conflict in the Tigray region must be assessed in this context. A belt of chaos stretching from the Sahel to the Horn of Africa would be disastrous. It would embolden groups like al-Shabaab and the Islamic State (ISIS), create new havens for terrorism, and disrupt global trade via the Red Sea. At home, Abiy is also under pressure; his glory days of international acclaim are over.

H. Human Rights Abuses and International Condemnation

International human rights organizations have accused Eritrean forces of committing serious abuses during the conflict, including killings, rape, and arbitrary arrests. The United Nations has called for the withdrawal of Eritrean forces from Tigray based on previous agreements. According to human rights reports, Eritrean forces have engaged in widespread looting, destroying local infrastructure and increasing the suffering of the civilian population. Reports also indicate that Eritrean forces continue to be present in some areas within Tigray despite international calls for their withdrawal.

I. The Need for a Comprehensive and Inclusive Approach

Eritrean interference in Tigray remains a destabilizing factor in the Horn of Africa region. While Ethiopia seeks to preserve its territorial integrity, security and political challenges remain that threaten any peace efforts. The ongoing conflict in Tigray reflects the complexities of the regional landscape, where political, economic, and military interests play a role in fueling the situation. Therefore, addressing the outstanding issues between Ethiopia and Eritrea requires a comprehensive approach that includes enhancing regional cooperation, respecting national sovereignty, and involving local parties in any future settlements. Without a lasting peace in the region, the risk of renewed conflict remains high, jeopardizing regional stability and human security.





III. The Future of Eritrean-Ethiopian Relations

The relationship between Ethiopia and Eritrea is highly complex, fluctuating between rapprochement and tension depending on regional and international variables. Despite the signing of the peace agreement in 2018, subsequent developments, such as the Pretoria Agreement of 2022 between the Ethiopian government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front, have revealed the fragility of this peace and the persistence of tensions between the two countries.

In the future, several key factors will play a crucial role in shaping relations between Addis Ababa and Asmara. First, Ethiopia's ambition to gain access to the Red Sea remains a fundamental driver that could lead to escalation, particularly as Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed continues to emphasize the importance of this issue for his country's economic and geopolitical security. On the other hand, Eritrea's concerns about any Ethiopian moves toward the sea may lead Asmara to reinforce its defensive policies, potentially resulting in new diplomatic and military tensions.

Secondly, regional and international influences will continue to shape these relations. Major powers seek to secure their interests in the Horn of Africa, whether by supporting stability or fueling conflicts to serve their strategic agendas. In this context, regional organizations such as the African Union could play a role in bridging the gap between the two nations, though success will depend on genuine political will from both sides.

Thirdly, Ethiopia's continued support for Eritrean opposition movements or Asmara's backing of certain Ethiopian factions could lead to further escalation and security tensions, undermining any efforts toward lasting stability.

Given these dynamics, the future of Ethiopian-Eritrean relations will depend on the extent to which both sides can overcome historical challenges and seek balanced cooperation mechanisms that enhance regional stability. Otherwise, the specter of conflict will remain, threatening not only the security of both nations but also that of the entire Horn of Africa region.



In conclusion

This study underscores the far-reaching and negative consequences of the Ethiopian-Eritrean conflict on the stability of the Horn of Africa. Conflicting regional ambitions, military interventions, and political agreements (like the Pretoria Agreement) that marginalize key stakeholders all contribute to heightened tensions. The international community must prioritize enhanced dialogue between Ethiopia and Eritrea to address outstanding issues and strive for a lasting state of peace and stability in the region.