

## Eritrea's Relations with the Sudan since 1991

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### Abstract

Eritrea's relations with its neighbor on the west and north - the Sudan, have seen both ups and downs. Historically, many aspects of social, cultural and economic linkages have been the shared features of the people's of these two countries making them interdependent in many ways. Politically there was a time when the Sudan intensively supported Eritrea's liberation struggle and built cordial relations with post-independent Eritrea. However, a closer look at their bilateral relationship during the decade under study reveals a pattern that is not befitting what can be commonly expected of between countries with such historic ties; rather it has seen frequent clashes primarily at the political level preventing them from developing and consolidating their age-old historical and cultural relations. Of particular note is the triangular configuration of relationship between Eritrea on the one hand and Ethiopia and the Sudan on the other hand that has determined in a big way their bilateral relations that each of them had with the other. Analyzing the ups and downs in relationship could bring out the "strategic concerns" that defined their ties and therefore, to understand this, this article first gives a brief survey of the past relationship in order to highlight the role and impact it has on contemporary relationship between them. The post-independent cordiality and the period of irritant relationship are brought out next to describe and highlight the trend and finally, the normalization of relations is discussed and conclusions put forward.

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## Introduction

The relationship between Eritrea and the Sudan has been intense and complex due to a number of factors. The geographic proximity between the two countries is *one factor*, which cannot be ignored since it suited the Eritreans throughout the years of their struggle for independence that started since the early 1960s and ended in the early 1990s. With 605 km of common border between the two, the proximity enabled the Eritrean liberation fighters to launch their freedom struggle from the Sudan, which the then government of Sudan actively lent its support. The proximity has also added to *another related factor* which is the presence of similar ethnic groups along the common frontier and the historical relationship they were able to build with each other. This indeed bears testimony to the type of initial cordial relations that existed between the two. For example, it has been widely written by many<sup>2</sup> that the people of Eastern Sudan shared some common features with the people of Western lowlands of Eritrea. The common features that the two people share includes religion, language, ethnicity and geographical similarities. Culturally and socially, therefore, the two people share very much in common.

One pertinent observation that should be made at the outset as a *third factor* in Eritro-Sudanese relations is what can be termed as “politicization of religion” in bilateral relations. The Asmara Declaration signed in 1995 in Asmara, the capital of Eritrea, which tried to bring the warring parties in Sudan into some kind of political accommodation, and which stated among other things ‘non-use of religion in politics’ is just one example of the sensitivity of religion determining their bilateral relationship. The issue of religion therefore was and continues to be an influential factor in the relationship between Sudan and Eritrea not to say with other countries in the Horn as well.

The two major religions in both the countries viz. Christianity and Islam are not “politically situated” equally in the sense that while the Sudanese government has declared itself an Islamic state, Eritrea hosts a secular

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<sup>2</sup> For example, Dan Connell who argues that the Hedareb and Beni Amr ethnic groups in Sudan and Eritrea straddling the border have close historical alliances making the bulk of membership in the Eritrean Liberation forces and Sudanese opposition forces. See Dan Connell, *War and Peace in the Sudan: the Case of Bejas*, [www.hornofafrica.ssrc.org/Connell/index1.html](http://www.hornofafrica.ssrc.org/Connell/index1.html)

government with representation from both the Christian and the Islamic community - the majority being the Christian representation in the government. It is this strange combination that defined their path to follow. For example, the people of Western lowlands of Eritrea namely Tigre, Nara, Kunama, and Hedareb, who are some of the ethnic groups of Eritrea, are predominantly Sunni Muslims. The same is true for the people of Eastern Sudan who are predominantly Sunni Muslims. Religious affinity best explains the harmonious relationship between these people from ancient times to the present leading us to assert that religion links the two people at least near the Eritro-Sudan border more than any other factor. Be that as it may, it is precisely the *religious factor* that has become politically an irritant factor in their bilateral relationship especially since Eritrea's independence more so with a secular government in place in Asmara while an Islamic government in Khartoum that is bent on exporting its ideology into neighboring countries including Eritrea.

Similarities can be seen in language too where Tigre language is used as a means of communication by a number of Sudanese people who live in Agig, Morafit, and Sewakin, which are villages in the Sudan bordering Eritrea (Tigre is an Eritrean ethnic group as well as in Ethiopia).<sup>3</sup> Besides, Arabic language is also used in both countries with Arabic being one of the national languages of Eritrea. In fact, the religious and linguistic similarities should have laid the basis for prospective Eritro-Sudanese relations, but sadly could not be solidified for the betterment of the two people.

A general remark could be made here that forms the framework of analysis upon which this whole article is based. Domestic political and economic pressures in both countries have had serious impact on their bilateral relationship and it is due to this aspect that the above-mentioned commonalities have not been made use of positively. Both the countries have been experiencing series of trouble and unable to embark on developmental aspects. For example, Sudan has been under military rule on and off and has been devastated economically and politically due to the ongoing civil war in the South and the West while Eritrea, within a short period of its independence has chosen to solve problems with neighbouring countries through armed forces thereby devastating its economy and weakening the government's legitimacy. In other words, the present

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.joshuaproject.net/peopctry.php>

Eritrean government led by President Isaias Afewerki does not have mass support particularly among those people of Western lowlands who are predominantly Sunni Muslim. As will be seen later, this has implications for the type of relations that Eritrea has with the Sudan and vice-versa.

## The Past

Even before the coming of colonialism, the two regions were historically linked and economically interdependent. The existence of Kingdoms and the struggle for power between them shows the historical linkages. Writing on the topic, Bereket Habteselassie argues that there was struggle for dominance by both the people in the region. It is worth quoting him here.

Parts of Western Eritrea were the subject of invasion and conquests from neighboring nations throughout history. The reverse is also true, in that some of the north-western ethnic groups have crossed over to Sudan. (Habteselassie 1980:33)

Historical interaction could also be seen in many ways. For example, the Kingdom of Sennar, which existed between 540 and 1820 AD, was the dominant kingdom in Eastern Sudan. It expanded up to the Northern Eritrean Coasts of the Red Sea. Northern Barka, Sahil, and Semhar what is today called as Gash Barka, Anseba, and Semenawi Keih Bahri were all incorporated into this Kingdom. Also at the time of the Mahdi movement in Sudan when the British occupied the Sudanese port of Sewakin<sup>4</sup> the Mahdists were cut off from the outside world and the only way by which they could continue their economic activities with the outside world was through the small Eritrean port in Red Sea called Mersa Teklay.

Economically also there have been lots of interaction since ancient times. This cannot be ascertained in the period after Eritrea's independence owing to both lack of appropriate official data and the border between them closed on and off due to frequent clashes. However, it is believed that many

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<sup>4</sup> Interesting to note in the occupation of Sewakin, is the involvement of Indian army troops. See Helen Chapin Metz, ed. *Sudan: A Country Study*, Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1991.

of the economic activities have been informally carried out. Eritrea's major exports to Sudan include skins, meat, live sheep and cattle and it is estimated that in 2002 the majority of exports were to the Sudan.<sup>5</sup> Earlier, Eritreans were employed in many of the Sudanese agricultural projects; construction activities etc. On their part, Sudanese nationals also entered Eritrea with the coming of the British and the defeat of the Italians in World War II. In their effort to administer Eritrea, the British brought a number of civil servants, traders, teachers, police and other professionals from its colony – Sudan.<sup>6</sup> These people have now settled and have intermarried with the local people in Eritrea. They have become Eritreans now. The areas where they lived have been named after Sudan known as Hilat Al-Sudan, which means Sudanese settlement or home. Such places are still found in Keren, Agordat, and Barentu etc.<sup>7</sup> Import – export activities were actively carried out and this was the situation even when their relations were on the lowest ebb.<sup>8</sup> One can observe that many a time, irrespective of the type of political relations that existed between the capitals, economic relations continued without any hindrance at least in border areas and in this Eritrea and Sudan are no exceptions.

Even before Sudanese independence was achieved in 1956, there have been lots of political links as well between the two countries. It is important to note that Eritreans had participated in the political and administrative positions of the Sudan. Some were in police forces and others were mobilized in the Sudanese army. Consequently, they became advocates and strong supporters for the independence of the Sudan.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Country Profile-Eritrea: Library of Congress, Federal Research Division, September 2005, p. 10. It should be noted that this is no more the case now.

<sup>6</sup> Based on the interview conducted with Mohammed Seid Nawud, Research officer, Eritrean Center for Strategic Studies in Asmara, 14<sup>th</sup> February, 2002, Asmara.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Mohammed Seid Nawud

<sup>8</sup> These are basically informal economic exchanges as there are no official statistical figures to substantiate this.

<sup>9</sup> Mohammed Sied Nawud, who was a member of the Sudanese Communist Party, is an example. He is now working in the Eritrean Center for Strategic Studies, Asmara.

## **Relations during the Eritrean Liberation Struggle**

After Sudan achieved its independence, the government announced its intention that it will support the Eritreans in their cause against imperialism and domination of Ethiopia and its allies. General Abud declared this when he took over power in 1958:

The government of Sudan promises to honor the international commitments made by predecessors, promises to strengthen the relationships with the African and Arab states, putting special emphasis in the improvement of the relationships with Egypt and Ethiopia. (Holt 1988: 171)

As mentioned above, even before this declaration, the Sudanese government allowed the formation of a liberation movement in Sudan called the Eritrean Liberation Movement (ELM, which later became ELF) in 1958 probably due to the impact of Sudan's independence couple of years earlier. Eyasu Gaim succinctly points out the necessity with which Sudan was compelled to support the cause of Eritrean liberation movement. To quote him:

The government of Sudan had difficulties in distancing themselves from the crisis in Eritrea since Sudan was a vital transit route for channelling the Islamic support to the Eritrean Liberation Front.(Gaim 1993: 519)

It is worth adding that the ELM put special emphasis in the Arabic expression of the Eritrean movement, describing it as a movement of Arab liberation thus facilitating in achieving support of Arab governments. The Sudan supported the Eritrean cause openly and Ethiopia lent its support to the southern Sudanese guerrilla movement due to "Sudan's support for Eritrean secessionists" (Johnson 2003: 36) and especially after Sudan's strong support to the Arabs in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. Ethiopia got entangled, so to say, in the process. The support of Sudan – both moral and material to the ELF as well as to other opposition groups that emerged within Ethiopia such as the OLF a little later in 1975 angered Ethiopia and hence Ethiopia started retaliating by supporting the southern Sudanese opposition groups. In fact, when the then regional Minister for Information

of Sudan visited Ethiopia in 1976, the Ethiopian Foreign Minister told him “unless the Sudan ceased supplying the Eritrean rebels, Ethiopia would give active support to the Anyanya remnants in Ethiopia.” (Johnson 2003: 36)

The Eritrean independence cause was viewed as an Arab concern initially. Haggi Erlich notes “the struggle over Eritrea and the Horn of Africa should be viewed as an integral part of the Red Sea and Middle Eastern affairs rather than as an African conflict” (Erlich 1983: 48). During the time of Ethiopian action against the Eritrean liberation forces, Sudan served as the nearest refuge and the then government of Sudan helped the ELF in providing sanctuaries and military aid. This was done for several reasons. The involvement of the U.S. as part of the “Cold War” in the Horn in support of Ethiopia was one such cause for concern. It is more so due to the inimical relationship that the Arab countries had with Israel, which was considered as a threat to Arab security. The other important reason was the considered view among many Arab countries that the Eritrean Liberation Front could act as a bulwark towards the formation of an Arab state in the Red Sea coast. This view prevailed among many Arab countries so long as the ELF associated its cause as an Arab cause through its campaigns. This can be seen from the argument put forward by Bowyer Bell who also opines that the Eritrean revolution was increasingly seen to be associated with revolutionary Arab nationalism by which “under increasing Ethiopian pressure, the ELF began to associate their cause with the Arabs collecting support from conservative Imams for Islamic reasons, and from radical regimes for ideological ones” (Bell 1973: 13-28). The regime in Sudan due to its alignment with the Arabs as well as due to its Islamic notion therefore inevitably had to play a constructive role in its support to the ELF.

In other words, Ethiopia’s abrogation of the federal status of Eritrea; the U.S. support to the Ethiopians in order to gain access to sea and its construction of radio and communication facilities in Dahlak Islands and Radio Marino in Asmara; and Israel’s close ties with Emperor Haile Sellassie – all were contributing factors towards Sudan’s (as well as other Arab nations) support for Eritrea’s liberation struggle.

Mention should be made of the split in the Eritrean Liberation Movement here for it encompasses a religious dimension. The ELF comprised mostly of Muslims while the Popular Front for the Eritrean Liberation otherwise called Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF), that was formed in 1970 comprised mostly of Christians (Young 1996: 107).

Infighting among these two fronts invited external manoeuvring thereby complicating the whole scenario. The uprising against the then Ethiopian regime of Mengistu Hailemariam (the Dergue) by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) coincided with the uprising by the EPLF. According to Tesfatsion Medhanie, the joint EPLF – TPLF offensive against the ELF, for all practical purposes, was seen by some Muslim groups as a unified action of Christians to dominate Eritrea thereby inspiring some Muslim Eritreans to form a religious movement to halt that domination (Medhanie 1994: 95). One can see the religious dimension coming into play here and which continued to play even today.

The political ideology of the EPLF in fact did not prove to be negative in terms of the support it received from the Arab states. It was possibly assumed that the EPLF could invite opposition from among the Arab states, as it was a Christian dominated front and having its ideology based on Marxism-Leninism. But the reverse was true. Surprisingly to many, Sudan and the Arabs did not oppose the emergence of the EPLF and later on its dominance (Legum and Lee 1979: 122).

Reasons for the above volte-face could be attributed to the intricate nature of Cold War politics and the political changes that took place in Ethiopia and the corresponding shift in support by the U.S. and the Soviet Union. With the coming of the Dergue to power in 1974 overthrowing the Haile Selassie regime, the Soviet Union saw it as an opportunity to get into the Horn in view of the region's geo-strategic importance then not to mention now. The Soviets made a swift move to get into Ethiopia at a time when the U.S. was getting outside of it. The ELF viewed the role of Soviet Union in the region as one of strategic ally and not an enemy because it thought that it was following a more practical Soviet style communist ideology.

One can see changes in Sudan's policy in later years particularly towards the second half of 1970s when Ethiopia threw a diplomatic offensive by attempting to improve its relationship with the government of General Jafaar al-Numeiry, declaring that Ethiopia recognized the unity and integrity of Sudan. This had implications in the sense that it meant in effect not supporting the Sudanese opposition forces. By this Ethiopia intended to take the wind out of the sails of the Eritrean Liberation forces operating from inside the Sudan. As was expected, corresponding to the new Ethiopian declaration, the Numeiry government expressed its support to the



unity and integrity of Ethiopia ignoring the Eritrean movement and thereby cutting of its main logistical base (Pateman 1998: 104). For Al-Numeiry, the reason for taking Ethiopia's gesture to the extent of cutting off ties with ELF was the split in the movement itself, which discouraged Sudan to continue any kind of support. Eyasu Gaim added another reason for that matter. According to him:

In July 1970 there was a coup attempt against Al-Numeiry believed to have been inspired by Iraq, and where the leaders of the ELF were implicated in the process and this became a factor for the Sudanese government to stop its support to the ELF. (Gaim 1993: 523)

More than anything else, Sudan's volte-face had other reasons as well. Firstly, the new Ethiopian regime gained an upper hand in its war with Somalia and Eritrea, which made Sudan uncertain as to whether the EPLF and other factions will exist or not in the long run so far as the Ethiopian offensive was huge and quick. The Soviet support to the Ethiopians played a major role in Ethiopia's initial success against the liberation movements. Secondly, Sudan desired to reduce tensions with Ethiopia because the latter's support to the Southern Sudanese opposition groups intensified the threat to its government. It feared an attack by the Soviet-led Ethiopian military.

In the war against Ethiopia, therefore, one can see two different liberation movements not just along different ideological lines but more importantly along religious lines too. It was the EPLF force, which was successful in overpowering the ELF. Contrary to the views of the ELF, which is to dominate Eritrea, the EPLF could not have had the objective of dominating the organization and turning it into Christian dominated one primarily because unity among liberation movements is a must to achieve success. Whatever the motivation of EPLF Vs ELF is, the fact remains that there emerged two opposing forces hostile to each other, the remnants being spread out into neighboring countries. Arguably though, external events, notably the 1979 Iranian revolution and the strengthening of Islamist political movements in the Middle-east not only acted as a source of inspiration but also provided an impetus to the Eritrean Muslims to organize a religious movement.

## Post-independence cordiality

The enthusiastic greeting of the May 1991 victory of the EPLF by the Sudanese government under General Omer Hassen el-Beshir, who took over power in June 1989 after the overthrow of Al-Numeiry government in 1985 through a military coup, was not surprising given the fact that the defeat of the Dergue regime in Ethiopia in effect meant the defeat of SPLA (Southern People's Liberation Army) due to the (on and off in fact) support that the latter received from the Dergue. This meant that establishing friendly relationship with the new government in Ethiopia as well as with Eritrea would take 'the wind off the sails' of SPLA and thereby contribute towards consolidating its rule. The SPLA could no longer continue its war efforts against the Sudanese government, as it was able to do before. In fact, Tesfatsion Medhanie notes "in 1990 the EPLF took part in the war between Sudanese regime and the SPIA...it attacked the SPLA inside Sudanese territory affecting the military balance in favour of the Sudanese regime" (Medhanie 1994: 95). This adds testimony to the initial cordiality in Eritro-Sudanese relations. It is worth noting here what the then Secretary General of the Peoples Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) Ato Alamin Mohammed Seid said on the situation. To quote him:

Our victory and achievement of peace and stability in our region is the result of the friendship of the Eritrean revolutionaries and the Sudan, and hence the victory of the Eritrean people is the victory of the peoples of the Horn of Africa and especially the people of Sudan.<sup>10</sup>

The early 1990s, therefore, was a period of friendship and cordiality for both Sudan and Eritrea. Official contacts between Asmara and Khartoum increased and higher officials of the National Islamic Front of the Sudan visited Asmara successively. Of particular importance was the visit in March 1992 by the Sudanese Head of State General Omar al-Bashir to Asmara. The joint communiqué released stated that "Eritro-Sudanese cooperation is not only important and determinant for the peoples of Eritrea and Sudan but for the benefit of all the peoples and governments of the

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<sup>10</sup> *Hadas Eritrea*, Asmara, Ministry of Information, 2, October, 1991, p.1

African Horn”.<sup>11</sup> The most important aspect of their initial action was focussed on issues relating to security, which is not surprising given the fact that both the governments were not well positioned and feared armed opposition. Political realism hence guided their bilateral relations.

As was feared, the independence of the State of Eritrea did not stop the ELF to continue its armed opposition from the Sudan and hence this became a thorny issue between the two countries. On the part of EPLF, the existence and operation of such groups or factions was considered irrelevant. It did not see any reason for their existence not only in Eritrean soil but also in the Sudan. Writing on this issue, Tesfatsion comments that:

Upon the liberation of Eritrea in May 1991, the EPLF demanded the closure of the offices of the Eritrean opposition forces in the Sudan. The NIF regime closed down the offices halted the political activities and confiscated the property of these forces. (Medhanie 1994: 93)

From the above, one can understand that the government in Sudan took practical steps to halt the activities of these forces in its soil, which otherwise could have been a challenge to the EPLF although the extent of such efforts to completely remove the ELF cadres from operating inside Sudan is questionable. This is so because, as will be seen below, the ELF cadres got fragmented than being completely stopped of its operation and this became a thorny issue in their relationship at a later stage. However, the fact remains that the effort was a good will gesture made in order to establish cordial relations with Eritrea, for which Sudan needed to clear EPLF's threat perceptions. This aspect defined their bilateral relations at least during the initial years and measures were taken to improve bilateral relationship. For example, in January 1992, when the EPLF attacked the opposition forces in Western Eritrea, Sudan participated in it. To quote Tesfatsion Medhanie again:

A contingent of the Sudanese government forces crossed the border, moved inside Eritrea, and attacked Eritrean opposition forces including the Jihad Islamic Movement. They captured some leaders of

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<sup>11</sup> *Hadas Eritrea*, no. 56, 11 March, 1992, p.1

the Islamic Jihad Movement and handed them over to the EPLF.  
(Medhanie 1994: 94)

This indicates that both countries worked closely to eliminate the Eritrean opposition forces. During the celebration of the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Eritrean armed struggle in September 1991, Col. Salahdin Mohammed Karar of Sudan attended the celebration on behalf of the government of Sudan. In an address to the public he said:

I wish to confirm before you all on this memorable day that Sudan makes to you a pledge of men to men, of revolutionaries to revolutionaries, to stand firmly and steadfastly in support to your cause and your right to self-determination in all regional forms as the OAU or in international forums such as the UN. We shall strive with you steadily and work with you continuously until we realize this as pride for dream. We confirm that with effect from today we shall share with our brothers in Eritrea every small morsel of food and every book and every dose of medicine and every thing our dear people in Eritrea need in material, human and moral support.<sup>12</sup>

When the Eritrean referendum was conducted in April 1993 and results announced a Sudanese delegation headed by the Chairman of the NIF regime visited Eritrea to congratulate the people and government.<sup>13</sup> When Eritrea was officially proclaimed as an independent and sovereign state on May 24, 1993 shortly after the referendum, Sudan was among the first country to recognize it. The Sudanese President who was present on the occasion expressed his strong support for Eritrea.<sup>14</sup>

In August 1994, before the growing interventions of both governments in the matters of each other, the Minister of External Affairs of Sudan Hussain Sulciman Abusalih, visited Asmara and declared to the press that "Eritrea and Sudan have renewed their commitment at the beginning to the principle of non-interference in internal matters and to the non-use of their territories for subversive elements."<sup>15</sup>

The active role played by Eritrea to resolve the long-standing civil war in Sudan, along with the heads of Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda to bring the

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<sup>12</sup> See Sudanese support, *Horn of Africa Bulletin*, vol.3, no.6, September - October 1991.

<sup>13</sup> *Hadas Eritrea*, no.70, May 1, 1993, p.9

<sup>14</sup> See speech made by the President of Sudan on 24 May 1993 in *Hadas Eritrea*, May 26, 1993, p.2

<sup>15</sup> *Eritrea Profile*, 13 August 1994, p. 1

different factions of SPLA into an agreement by establishing a committee in mid-1993 and which continued in the early years of 1994 and culminating in 1995 with a declaration in Asmara is a land mark development that exemplifies the extent of cordiality and mutual concern and cooperation between the Horn countries. Notably, this was done as part of Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD – earlier IGADD to include Drought) talks that was held in different places.

### **The Period of Irritant Relationship**

However, this initial cordiality did not continue for long. The continued presence of some of the remnants of ELF cadres inside Sudan and the resumption of the war against the regime of Omar al-Bashir by the Southern Sudanese (SPLA), which continued unabated, led to strains in their relationship. In other words, it only enticed both governments to involve in each other's affairs. In fact, it could be said that the NIF government in Sudan squandered the advantage of taking into its fold the political debt that both Eritrea and Ethiopia owed to the Sudan by its continued support of Islamic revolution to groups in Eritrea. The assassination attempt on the Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak during his visit to Addis Ababa in 1995 adds testimony and convinces the view of the danger posed by the Sudan in the form of export of Islamic revolution into neighboring Horn countries including those of the Lords Resistance Army of Uganda and the opposition forces in Ethiopia.

Talking about the crisis in the Sudan in April 1994 at the VII Pan African Congress in Kampala, Uganda, President Isaias Afewerki declared: "Although colonialism is the root of the crisis (in Sudan) later ...the regimes of the north of Sudan are mainly responsible for the conflict in the south of that country".<sup>16</sup>

Hence some of the irritant issues between them came to the fore and resulted in break up of diplomatic relations. In a statement issued by the Eritrean Foreign Ministry issued on 23 April 1994, the Eritrean government made it clear that the relations are not that cordial. It went on to accuse the NIF government in Khartoum saying that it wished to control a force in Eritrea and towards that end formed a group called the Islamic Jihad of

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<sup>16</sup> *Eritrea Profile*, 9 April 1994, p. 1

Eritrea and has continued to support this group leading to deterioration of relations.<sup>17</sup>

By December 1994 diplomatic relations between them broke down and Yemen tried to mediate the conflict without any result. On December 24 1994 the Eritrean press announced, “the government of Sudan is taking hostile measures against Eritrean nationals residing in that country, (refugees) ...tales like illegal detention, terrorism and looting of property.”<sup>18</sup>

The tense relationship can be gauged from a statement made by the Eritrean Minister for External Affairs who declared that:

the main cause for the deterioration of the relations is the government of the National Islamic Front that works actively to subvert the peace that Eritrea enjoys...has created obstacles to our diplomatic ties by carrying out such activities... and (therefore) starting from today (December 5) Eritrea declares diplomatic relations with the government of Sudan broken”.<sup>19</sup>

Given the above, it is not surprising that both entered into polemics accusing each other of harbouring hostile opposition forces. For example, in January 1995, addressing the Eritrean journalists, the Minister for External Affairs mentioned that: “the regime of Khartoum has once again revealed its intentions of extending its hegemonic ambitions in the region’s politics ...Sudan is the one undermining the peace and the stability of Eritrea and of the whole region”.<sup>20</sup>

The Eritrean President joined the accusations, which is revealed from an interview with Arab News Daily in which he mentioned that the main cause for the breakdown of diplomatic ties was created by Sudan. To quote him:

We know that the NIF was organizing the Jihad movement and other groups; we tried to solve it by dialogue. We told them: what is the logic of supporting these people, we are on the verge of achieving victory and if you want to support the independence of the country

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<sup>17</sup> *Horn of Africa Bulletin*, vol.6, no.3, May – June 1994. See also [www.europaworld.com](http://www.europaworld.com), p.7

<sup>18</sup> *Eritrea Profile*, 24 December 1994, p. 1

<sup>19</sup> *Eritrea Profile*, 10 December 1994, p. 1

<sup>20</sup> *Eritrea Profile*, 7 January 1995, p. 1

you have to support the population, don't meddle in our internal affairs.<sup>21</sup>

The support that the NIF regime was giving to the opposition groups of Eritrea, in short was the main obstacle to Eritro-Sudanese relations, though the latter denied this.<sup>22</sup> In other words, as rightly put by Ruth Iyob, "the emergence of the Eritrean Jihad Movement with overt support of the Sudan's ruling party, the NIF, led to strains in Eritro-Sudanese relations culminating in the severance of diplomatic ties" (Iyob 1997: 666).

Colin Legum reported President Isaias as saying "clandestine cells of fundamentalists continued to be formed; safe houses were sought by the Sudan Embassy in Asmara; and at least one group of ten young fundamentalists was shot trying to cross the border into Eritrea"<sup>23</sup>

Important to note here is that the stakes are much higher than what one would easily assume as mere deterioration of relations for it gave the opportunity to each of them to increase their support to opposition groups thereby aggravating the tense relationship to the extent of military confrontation and thereby threatening the fragile peace of the Horn region as such. In fact, this is exactly what can be discerned from how both the governments sought to tackle their relations. In retaliation to the NIF governments' increase in support to Eritrean opposition groups in Sudan, the former sought to coordinate and unite all Sudanese opposition groups in the form of a National Democratic Alliance (NDA) with its base in Asmara. The Economist underlined President Isaias as saying "we are out to see that this government is not there any more. We are not trying to pressure them to talk to us, or to behave in a more constructive way. We will give weapons

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<sup>21</sup> Quoted in *Eritrea Profile*, 17 June, 1995, p.4

<sup>22</sup> Although the Sudanese government denied the accusations of Eritrea, it had later on admitted its support to these groups. As was published in the Eritrean profile, the Sudanese President al-Bashir revealed that the "main reason for the breakdown in relations was not a result of Eritrean doing but of factionalism within the Khartoum government. The Sudanese policy towards Eritrea was not constructive. The Sudanese government was, because of serious internal rifts, saying one thing and doing another." *Eritrea Profile*, 25 December 1999, p. 1

<sup>23</sup> Colin Legum, "Afeworki on the War Path," *New African*, February, 1996, no. 56, p.38.

to any one committed to over throwing them".<sup>24</sup> The publication in the Eritrean press on 17 June 1995 indicated further that:

A conference of Sudanese political forces will be inaugurated today. The participants are: The Democratic Unionist Party of Osman al-Mirghani, the Popular Liberation Movement of John Garang in the South, the Party Umma represented by Omar Nur al-Daim, the Sudanese Legal Command of the armed forces represented by the general Fathi Ahmed Ali, the Communist Party of Sudan represented by Dr. Al-Tijani al-Tayib, the Coalition Party of the South of Sudan of Al-Yaba Suror, the Bedja Conference of Al-Said Mohammed Tahir Abu-Beker and the Sudanese Alliance Forces represented by Brigadier General Abdal Aziz Khalid.<sup>25</sup>

The Eritrean support to the opposition forces of Sudan can be seen from another statement made by the Secretary of the ruling PFDJ, Amin Muhammed Sa'id, on 12<sup>th</sup> June 1995. He made a press statement to the Eritrean News Agency that:

The PFDJ would host (a meeting of) all Sudanese opposition forces in Asmara...these parties and organizations would be holding a meeting embracing all the forces struggling against the existing political regime in Sudan...the PFDJ had very strong ties and relations with all the Sudanese political parties during its 30 years of armed struggle. In the light of the request made by the Sudanese brothers to hold their meeting in Asmara, the PFDJ would do its best to give them excellent hospitality...<sup>26</sup>

On the same day when the above was published in the Eritrean Profile, an interview given by the Eritrean President Isaias appeared. Talking about the achievements and challenges of the country, the Eritrean President mentioned regarding the relationships with Sudan that:

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<sup>24</sup> *The Economist*, October, 14, 1995.

<sup>25</sup> *Eritrea Profile*, 17 June 1995, p. 1

<sup>26</sup> *Summary of World Broadcasts*, London, 15 June 1995, p.5



The National Islamic Front of Sudan, (NIF) is a minority group and it has been there for more than 40 years ...the NIF has organized this jihad and other groups ...and NIF says that it fights against imperialism. If they want to fight against America (USA) why don't they fight against them there instead of Eritrea, Ethiopia or Somalia....<sup>27</sup>

In fact until the breakdown of diplomatic relations, Eritrea pursued a two-track strategy one aimed at continuing the diplomatic dialogue with the government and the other supporting the opposition in the Sudan. It is the considered view of many that Eritrea started supporting the Sudanese opposition militarily since January 1996 soon after the breakdown of diplomatic relations.

It should be added that during this time Sudan was accused of giving refuge to many terrorists, including the now "in-famous" Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden. Douglas Johnson adds that Osama bin Laden had a number of construction and other projects in the Sudan and operated training camps for the militants of Lebanese Hizbullah and Palestine Hamas (see Johnson 2003: 137). And this should be viewed in terms of the Christian-Muslim dichotomy in Eritrea and how the portrayal of Sudan as one of exporting Islamic ideology coupled with its so-called support to "terrorists" can have its impact on the presumptions of the Eritrean government. Understandably, this would not be taken lightly by Asmara.

Whatever may be the case, the Sudanese government's complaints of interference in its internal affairs were rejected by the Eritrean president who declared at the end of 1995 that they were baseless allegations and that "the government of Sudan tries to mix these intrigues with the purpose of hiding their military setbacks (in the South)."<sup>28</sup>

In spite of the negative official reply by Eritrea, a statement in January 20 1996 published in *Eritrea Profile* read as follows:

The Council of the Leadership of the National Democratic Alliance (Sudan) concluded this week in Asmara, after designing in their meeting a political-military strategy to defeat the NIF regime making

<sup>27</sup> *Eritrea Profile*, 17 June 1995, p. 1

<sup>28</sup> *Eritrea Profile*, 2 December 1995, p. 1

a call to the Sudanese to increase their fight against the dictatorship of Bashir-Turabi ...the Council appreciates the support of the FPJD and to its excellency the President Isaias Afewerki.<sup>29</sup>

The offensive from the opposition forces against the government of Sudan was made during the same time when the meeting of the Council took place in Asmara in 1996, thereby leading to the accusation by Sudan that Eritrea carried out military operations in its territory. Asmara responded that they were groundless accusations. In an interview given to the daily *Sharq al-Awsat* in August 1996, President Isaias responded that Eritrea does not have the ability nor the resources or ambition to pursue expansionist policies in the Sudan. When asked about the Sudanese accusation of the existence of opposition groups in Asmara, the President answered that Eritrea has historical relationships (even before its independence) with different Sudanese groups but this does not mean to intervene in the internal matters of Sudan.<sup>30</sup> Although the President denied any involvement in the internal affairs of Sudan, it is quite evident from the above statements made by officials of the Eritrean government that Eritrea did support the opposition in Sudan. In fact, when the Sudanese Embassy was vacated in view of the breakdown in diplomatic relations, Eritrea allowed the opposition National Democratic Alliance (NDA) to occupy Sudanese embassy premises.

It is also evident that the Sudan also supported the Eritrean Jihad Movement ever since Eritrea formally became independent. For example, the NIF regime invited the Eritrean Jihad to the popular Arab and Islamic Conference in November 1993 in Khartoum. This is particularly disturbing since there were about 400,000 Eritrean refugees waiting to be repatriated to Eritrea until this day. The possibilities of these refugees coming into Eritrea with Sudan's ideological indoctrination as well as support from the Eritrean Jihad Movement is very much there. Berhane Woldegebriel writing in the *Review of African Political Economy* opined that "there are reliable reports that Sudanese security officers have been discouraging Eritrean refugees from returning home, but persuading them to join the Islamist Organization" (Woldegebriel 1996: 87-88).

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<sup>29</sup> *Eritrea Profile*, 20 January 1996, p. 1

<sup>30</sup> *Eritrea Profile*, 7 September 1996, p. 6

The polemics continued in 1997 (and in fact even after diplomatic relations were restored) with Sudan accusing Eritrea of downing a helicopter in its territory. On January 18, 1997, Sudan repulsed an attack by Eritrea inside its territory killing 250 Eritrean soldiers.<sup>31</sup>

The crisis between the two governments increased in June 1997 when a plot to assassinate the Eritrean President was discovered. Agents of the Sudanese security infiltrated the headquarters of the Sudanese Democratic National Alliance in Asmara to carry out this attack. Following this development a letter was sent to the United Nations Security Council by Eritrea urging the Council to take appropriate actions against the NIF regime in Khartoum.<sup>32</sup> Nothing actually happened as far as the UN was concerned for the accusations were rejected as false.

What is notable during this crisis is the building of relations between Eritrea and the U.S. The following facts bear testimony to the extent of relations with the U.S. that Eritrea had been able to build. In December 1996 President Isaias visited the Center for Strategic Studies in Washington in addition to the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund; in February 1997 the Eritrean President received General J. H. Buinford Peay III Chief of the Central Command of the United States; in March 1997 Hillary Clinton visited Asmara; and in April the same year USAID granted a loan of 15 million dollars for rural development; in July the Eritrean president again met with the director of the American Central Command and in October 1997 the United States and Eritrea concluded an agreement to strengthen the cooperation between both countries.<sup>33</sup>

## **Towards Normalization**

The deterioration in relations with Ethiopia facilitated rapprochement with Sudan. In other words, so long as Ethio-Eritrean relations were normal, Eritro-Sudan relations suffered. But when Eritro-Ethiopian relations got worse, Eritrea's relations with Sudan got normalised. This was so because of the sympathy which the SPLA received from both Eritrea and Ethiopia, which Sudan wanted to remove. And the best opportunity came when

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<sup>31</sup> Official Press Release by the Ministry of External Affairs, *Eritrea Profile*, 18 January 1997, p. 1

<sup>32</sup> *Eritrea Profile*, 12 July 1997, p. 1

<sup>33</sup> *Eritrea Profile*, 4 October 1997, p. 1

Eritrea's relations with Ethiopia worsened to the extent of war. To Sudan, this was a blessing in disguise for it could now lure Eritrea to its side thereby breaking its support to the SPLA. On the part of Eritrea also, national interest considerations prompted the Eritrean government to make a move towards Sudan and normalize relations with it; for Asmara could not afford to devote hostility on both sides of its borders. As rightly pointed out by Dan Connell, one of the winners of the Eritrean war with Ethiopia is Sudan, which reached an agreement with Asmara.<sup>34</sup> Another possible winner was Libya since the growing isolation of Eritrea due to the conflict with Ethiopia in the region accelerated the relations between the two countries. As noted earlier, Libya has been one among those opposed to the U.S. right from the Lockerbie incident of the late-1980s and the consequent sanctions imposed by the U.S. Therefore, it was in Libya's interest to bring in Eritrea into its fold so as to get a foothold in the region. The cordial relationship that Libya built with Eritrea continues to this day and it is Libya, which is one among the close allies of Eritrea. In the second half of 1998 contacts between the two governments increased culminating in the signing of trade agreements, customs, investment, culture and education.<sup>35</sup> The agreements also provided for investments and establishment of a joint committee to monitor the implementation of the agreements of bilateral cooperation.

The whole normalization process took place in May 1999 at a tripartite meeting in Doha, Qatar, which was attended by the Heads of State of Eritrea, Sudan and Qatar where President Isaias and his Sudanese counterpart General Omar al-Bashir agreed to normalize their bilateral relations under which they agreed to resume diplomatic ties.<sup>36</sup>

The process towards normalization started in November 1998 when Qatar took the initiative of mediating the conflict between Eritrea and Sudan. The reason why Qatar took the initiative in bringing both to a settlement was because Qatar has a wide range of oil exploration interest in the Sudan. Political stability and security in the Sudan was sought as a pre-requisite for Qatar to explore its economic ties with the Sudan in a big way. Besides, Eritrea at that time was on the move to approach the Arab

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<sup>34</sup> Dan Connell, [www.hornofafrica.ssrc.org/Connell/index1.html](http://www.hornofafrica.ssrc.org/Connell/index1.html), p. 205

<sup>35</sup> *Eritrea Profile*, 8 August 1998, p. 1

<sup>36</sup> See [www.europaworld.com](http://www.europaworld.com) p. 7. See also, *Eritrea Profile*, 8 May 1999, p.1

countries to join the Arab League to which the Sudan voiced its opposition. The entry of Eritrea to the League could possibly guarantee a psychological rest at least since the League members fear the alliance of Israel and the U.S. with Eritrea and influence the Red Sea region.

The Libyan interest in this can best be answered by the way in which Libya under Col. Ghadaffi was increasingly becoming inclined to interfere in African affairs in order to project itself as the leader of the African countries. The recent initiatives by Libya for establishing an African Union at par with the European Union should be seen in these terms.

Whatever the different motivations might be the fact remains that Eritro-Sudanese relation once again underwent changes and this time for the better. A six-point agreement was signed in Doha, which were as follows:

- 1) Restoring diplomatic relations between the two countries
- 2) Respecting international laws and customs regulating peaceful co-existence and good neighbourly relations among countries and peoples
- 3) Respecting the political choices of both countries and peoples and refraining from adopting a policy of exporting ideologies and seeking to impose them on others
- 4) Refraining from hosting or organising regional or international conferences that aim to adopt policies or coordinate tasks posing a threat to the security and stability of neighbouring countries
- 5) Working to resolve the remaining differences between the two countries through peaceful means
- 6) Establishing joint committees of the two countries to examine the remaining issues, especially those related to security, and implement what has been agreed upon in this agreement.<sup>37</sup>

As can be seen from the above six points, the third, fourth and sixth points of the agreement were the most important and determinant in the relations of the two states. This is because the main cause for the problem between them was harbouring hostile elements.

Speaking about the agreement, President Issaias Afeworki was optimistic about the implementation of the proposal they agreed and the relations of the two countries so long as both of them worked together. He

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<sup>37</sup> *Eritrea Profile*, May 8, 1999, p.1

said, "This agreement is aimed at gaining not a short-term tactical interest, but takes the long-term strategic interest into consideration."<sup>38</sup>

After the agreement, air communication resumed between the two capitals and diverse committees were created to watch over the bilateral relationship, and on 3 January 2000 the embassies in both capitals were reopened. As mentioned earlier, the visit by the Sudanese President General Omar el-Bashir to Asmara on 18 January for the purpose of consolidating the friendly ties was the highlight of the bilateral relations. This visit was reciprocated by the Eritrean President in the following month of February the same year and announced that he would take measures to repatriate about a million Eritrean refugees in Sudan. Since Eritrea's independence, about 197, 000 Eritrean refugees have been repatriated and re-settled. The relations have improved to a great extent after the Doha Agreement, which was implemented. Diplomatic relations were quickly resumed to the Ambassadorial level by April 2000.

On its part, the Sudanese President Omer Al-Bashir declared a state of emergency that lasted for three months by dissolving parliament. Hassan Al-Turabi, the most influential person in the Sudanese government was removed from power and imprisoned for his role in supporting the Sudanese opposition forces.

## **Some Recent Trends**

The intentions of the Eritrean president to mediate between the opposition and the government of Khartoum have not given positive results to date. The relationship between the two countries, though normalized, yet presents tensions from time to time due to the possibility of interference upon each other's internal affairs getting revoked. The presence and consequent support of opposition forces of both the countries invariably has been the cause of such tensions particularly whenever political power was questioned and became shaky in the respective capitals. For example, accusations of external interference in internal affairs rose again when a string of territorial gains was achieved by the rebel forces in Sudan in late 2002, the Sudanese government considered it as an Eritrean military invasion of its eastern

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<sup>38</sup> *Eritrea Profile*, May 8, 1999, p.2

border region.<sup>39</sup> The Sudanese Foreign Minister, while rejecting the mediatory role of Egypt at a press conference in Cairo, went on to accuse that “Eritrea opened training camps for the opposition and rebel movements, supported them with tanks and artillery, gave them a radio station, passports and our embassy”.<sup>40</sup> As has been the case, these were rejected as lacking foundation by the Eritrean government.<sup>41</sup>

A new development took place towards the end of 2002 that has once again contributed towards deterioration in bilateral relations. On 14<sup>th</sup> October 2002, leaders of Ethiopia, Sudan and Yemen met in Sanaa for a summit. The summit meeting although had its agenda to discuss the situation in Somalia, the crisis in the Middle East and the Southern Red Sea security, nevertheless, was called as an alliance of convenience aimed against Eritrea. It was in other words called the mini-axis of belligerency against Eritrea.<sup>42</sup> This development gave rise to new tensions between the two governments, as can be seen from the measures taken by the authorities of Kassala in Sudan to move Eritrean refugees far from its camps, and the accusations against the illegal detention of innocent Eritreans in Sudan.

## Conclusions

The governments in both the countries have not changed and so are the possibilities of renewed tensions cropping up once again. As mentioned above, as and when the opposition forces gains ground in its fight with the government in Sudan, tensions between them increase for each of them blame the other of supporting their respective opposition with arms. In other words, domestic problems have external links, which invariably get politicised/externalised. Eritrea, being a newly independent and small country, is concerned with the policies of big neighbours’ however well intentioned particularly those that are ‘touchy’ ones like religious issues combined with political stability. Likewise, Sudan as a big country but subjected to intense domestic problems is obviously concerned about neighbouring countries’ involvement.

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<sup>39</sup> See *UNMEE Media Monitoring Report*, 12 November 2002, p. 5

<sup>40</sup> Ibid

<sup>41</sup> [www.irinnews.org/report.aspx?reportid=3495](http://www.irinnews.org/report.aspx?reportid=3495)

<sup>42</sup> For more reasons on this see [www.shaebia.com](http://www.shaebia.com), 30<sup>th</sup> October 2002

The above analysis therefore brings us to the conclusion that there are strategic concerns exhibited in both the capitals borne out factors such as domestic political pressure and regime stability. It is the presence of this and absence of a strong and popular government that has contributed for such a state of affairs that exists between them today. Politically, hence, element of mutual trust in bilateral relationship is important, which goes with the establishment of a stable government and attempts to bring economic development for the people. It was noted in the above paragraphs that the villages that border Sudan and Eritrea share a lot of similarities and commercial exchanges between both sides have been intense in the past. It is this aspect of "economic need" that should percolate down to all levels in both countries. Such a possibility, although a distant reality given the present state of affairs, nevertheless should be the wishful thinking of peoples of both the countries. With strong historic bond tying each of these two countries, it is indeed sad that they have not been able to utilize them for the benefit of both the peoples. Much depends on the political will of the countries. As the saying goes: "where there is a will, there is a way". When is this going to be a reality and how this is to be done remains to be seen.



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