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# Ethiopia's impact on security and peace in the horn of hope

## Framing six salient issues

*By Iqbal Jhazbhay*

Iqbal Jhazbhay is Professor of Arabic and Islamic Studies in the Department of Religious Studies and Arabic at the University of South Africa. Before that, from 2012 to 2016, he was South Africa's ambassador to the state of Eritrea<sup>1</sup>.

*Professor Iqbal Jhazbhay puts forward six key issues for consideration on Ethiopia's impact on security and peace in the Horn of Africa in its attempt to build development in the region. Here he considers each in turn.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

This concise article intends to frame, as critically as possible, six key issues on Ethiopia's impact on security and peace in the Horn of Africa. A sobering and compelling global analysis and effort is needed in the context of further promoting peace and security within the larger African Union goal of 'silencing the guns'. The urgency of together focusing on COVID-19 solutions provides further impetus for meaningful regional and global response to the development challenges in the Horn of Africa.

The Kenyan president has described the current situation in the Horn of Africa as "quite unstable" (Kenyatta, 2021). Newly appointed US Special Envoy to the Horn of Africa, Jeffrey Feltman, I believe overplayed the political crisis

in the Horn of Africa by asserting: "If the tensions in Ethiopia would result in a widespread civil conflict that goes beyond Tigray, Syria will look like child's play by comparison" (Gramer, 2021). What then are the possible options for policymakers to de-escalate the tensions in the area in the search for security, governance and development?²

### **1. ETHIOPIA'S ROLE IN THE HORN OF AFRICA**

Ethiopia, Africa's second most populous country, is a pivotal state in the Horn of Africa. Over the past few years, Ethiopia's economy, infrastructure, export free-trade zone markets and its national airline have shown healthy signs of robust emerging growth. Ethiopia's populace, its markets, will in future contribute to the newly structured African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA).

One of the key distinctions of Ethiopia remains the fact that it has the largest freshwater reserves in Africa. A dozen major rivers flow from Ethiopia's highland plateau. This gives Ethiopia a strategic leverage over its Nile River riparian neighbours, notably Egypt.

On the inter-regional front, it remains a member of the regional free

trade organisation of the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), comprising 21 African member states that came together with the aim of promoting regional integration through trade and development. COMESA, along with the East African Community (EAC) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC), have evolved free trade arrangements. There are green shoots of free trade movement of goods emerging, for example between Ethiopia, Eritrea and South Africa.

Critical within the matrix of Ethiopia's democratic development is its current political transition and its nascent trajectory for the upcoming June 2021 national elections. Sudan is one of Ethiopia's major neighbours and the largest African investor in the Ethiopian economy. Sudan is undergoing a civilian-military transitional arrangement and preparing the country for future democratic elections.

### **2. ETHIOPIAN-ERITREAN 2018 JOINT DECLARATION OF PEACE AND FRIENDSHIP**

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Peace and Friendship of 2018 (Shabait, 2018). Since the 2000 Algiers Peace Agreement between both countries, “the no-war, no-peace situation” stonewalled the full development of both countries. In this context, both the current president of Eritrea, President Isaias Afwerki, as well as the current Prime Minister of Ethiopia, Abiy Ahmed, invested intensely to put together this much-needed joint peace declaration. More efforts are underway at regional and international levels to implement this peace declaration.

South Africa hosted the BRICS 2018 Political Parties Plus Dialogue summit. Most members of the ANC’s BRICS preparatory committee were of the view that the Ethiopian ruling party, the then Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Party (EPRDF), as well as Eritrea’s ruling party, the People’s Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), should address the plenary of the BRICS Political Parties Plus Dialogue summit, hosted in Pretoria. This was a clear manifestation by the host of this BRICS summit, the ANC, to explore a way to give a firm global push to this important Ethiopian-Eritrean peace treaty (ANC Today, 2018).

Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy has mentioned that he was part of the Ethiopian National Defence Force war



machinery in the 1998-2000 war with Eritrea. He described the ravages of war (Abiy, 2019). Therefore, when he came to power, he gave all the required signals to Eritrea that he would like to go beyond this decimated stalemate. Mercifully, the Eritrean president was equally exhausted with this ten-year conundrum (1998-2018).

Within this context of the emergence of the difficult and tough home-grown Peace and Friendship Declaration, progressive friendly international partners need to be persuaded to support a joint regional and international security architecture to nourish this seminal Ethiopian-Eritrean peace treaty.

**3. THE CRISIS IN THE TIGRAY FEDERAL STATE OF ETHIOPIA**

Scholars and analysts have written extensively on the 2020 Ethiopian government’s military intervention in the northern Tigray state of Ethiopia. Political studies and literature confirm that there are no winners in any military mission (Mengiste, 2019). Much work will be needed in the coming post-war reconstruction and infrastructure development phases as well as the post-war healing process, given that all countries in the Horn of Africa (Egypt, Sudan, South Sudan, Somaliland and

Somalia) have experienced a great deal of war trauma.

It is important for the peace and security of the Horn of Africa to ask what type of mechanisms the Ethiopian government and some of its friends, including its neighbour Eritrea, along with the previous AU and current AU chair, will adopt to support Ethiopia in this important phase of its post-war development.

The Ethiopian human rights commission and its taskforce has responded to some of the key problems of trauma experienced in many of the Tigrayan towns such as Aksum and Adwa. The Ethiopian Human Rights Commission in conjunction with the UN Human Rights Commission have started an investigation into allegations of rape and sexual crimes in Tigray (Istratii, 2021).

**4. ERITREA’S SHUTTLE DIPLOMACY IN THE HORN OF AFRICA**

Eritrea, as a peace partner of Ethiopia, has been engaged in extensive shuttle peace diplomacy in the Horn of Africa. Eritrea has cordial relations with the Egyptian head of state, President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. The Eritrean leadership has a healthy relationship with the current Sudanese prime >>

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minister, Abdallah Hamdok, and the current head of the military council in Sudan, Lieutenant-General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan. In addition, the Sudanese leadership appreciates the healthy relations with Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed so the Eritrean role is to try to de-escalate tensions between Egypt and Ethiopia and between Sudan and Ethiopia on some of the complex border agricultural matters.

There is evidence of a number of trips made by the Eritrean foreign minister plus the presidential advisor, Yemane Gebreab, to Egypt as well as Sudan and Addis Ababa (Shabait, 2019). This demonstrates the increasing post-war diplomatic role Eritrea is trying to play. The 2021 media interview with President Isaias provides insights into managing the former minority Ethiopian ruling party's Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) (Shabait, 2021). The Eritrean leadership has experienced war. They have seen how it has set back the development agenda for Eritrea and the entire region. I believe Eritrea really wants to avoid any future setbacks to the peace and development agenda of Eritrea and the region.



## 5. ETHIOPIA'S ROLE IN SOMALIA & SOMALILAND

The fifth critical geo-political matter I explore briefly is to examine the implications of Ethiopia's role in the Somali territories, including Mogadishu, and towards Somalia's north, the town of Hargeisa, now known as Somaliland (Lujiza, 2003). Somaliland is due to hold democratic parliamentary and local elections on 30 May 2021 (African Union Commission, 2005). Mogadishu has a constitutional crisis now and it will be interesting to see given that Ethiopia and many of the other neighbouring countries have tried to play a role in stabilising Somalia (African Union, 2021). Ethiopia has a diplomatic consul-general in stable Hargeisa and an ambassador in unstable Mogadishu.

Ethiopia is acutely aware that it cannot rely solely on the port of Djibouti, so it is diversifying the possibilities of using other ports. Currently, the road between the port of Berbera in Somaliland leading to Addis Ababa is being developed. It is now at a very advanced stage of expansion. The United Arab Emirates's BP World has invested \$450 million for the Berbera port expansion project and the UAE has opened a diplomatic consulate in Hargeisa with ambassadorial

representation.

One of the earlier achievements of the Ethiopian-Eritrean Joint Declaration of Peace and Friendship of 2018 was the development of border roads from northern Ethiopia passing through the north-eastern Afar region to the Eritrean Red Sea port of Assab. Ethiopia is looking at its own options in terms of peace and security, and its own port trading arrangements as one of the world's largest landlocked countries.

Ethiopia's north-eastern neighbour, Djibouti, has a majority Somali population. Ethiopia maintains cordial relations with Djibouti. Often Djibouti flouts AU continental consensus positions. As a member of the Arab League as well as the Organisation of Islamic Countries, it often takes political positions reflecting its own parochial national interests. Djibouti as a rent-seeking survival state hosts several foreign military bases for France, USA, China and Japan.

## 6. NATIONAL INTERESTS OF THE INTERNATIONAL PARTNERS

A notable strategic point of particular interest is the approach of the Horn of Africa states on how to engage more robustly with international

partners and their interests in the Horn of Africa.

I have observed the following during my four-and-a-half-year tenure that I spent in the state of Eritrea and beyond. I do not believe that the international community quite understands the historic and current political nuances in the Horn of Africa as accurately as I would like to see them understand it. So often they take positions on states like Ethiopia, Sudan or Eritrea which calls into question the integrity of their positions. I shall give you a few examples.

We all know there was the Algiers peace agreement on the matter of the border of Ethiopia and Eritrea. The then Ethiopian ruling party led by Tigray's TPLF at that time did not want to implement the Algiers peace agreement. It is rather unfortunate that the international community did not do what it was supposed to do as a guarantor and much of this aspect of history and the way they dealt with the Algiers peace agreement has now been made known in public in the memoirs of the former US ambassador to the UN, John Bolton (Bolton, 2008).

Ambassador Bolton was given deliberate instructions not to implement the Algiers peace agreement and we all know that the delay in implementing the Algiers peace agreement on the issue of the border between Ethiopia and Eritrea delayed the peace and security project in the Horn of Africa by 10 years. You are looking at 1998 to the year 2018 and so the whole post-war, post-reconstruction or reconstruction project of Ethiopia and Eritrea was delayed. So what you see happening is that Ethiopia was fortunate that Prime Minister Meles navigating within the then ruling party's EPRDF and working within the then TPLF at least succeeded in convincing his comrades in the ruling party to set a firm footing for the infrastructure project for Ethiopia

and to make it a reasonably stable middle-income country. Much of the development we know was primarily in cities. We know in the rural areas the deficit of development is huge. We can see now movement in that direction to develop the rural outlying areas.

I believe if we focus on these six areas as outlined, it will give us a better sense of what should be the possible future policy recommendations to develop more security and peace not only in the Horn of Africa.

The prime issue of our engagement with our international partners within this larger regional context remains an existential challenge (FitzGerald & Segal, 2021).

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#### ENDNOTES

- 1 This article is based on a presentation to a panel discussion entitled 'Ethiopia at the Crossroad: Implications for Peace and Security in Africa', which was hosted by the Africa Institute of South Africa (AISA) in the Human Sciences Research Council, Pretoria. 26 February 2021.
- 2 I explored in detail earlier the inter-connected link between security, governance and development with the late former Deputy Chair of the African Union Commission. (See Mazimhaka & Jhazbhay, 2006). 