

# Foreign Policy In Focus



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## Eritrea

By Dan Connell

Eritrea's independence from Ethiopia became official in May 1993, through a United Nations-monitored referendum in which 99.8% of the voters opted for sovereignty. The former Italian colony had been linked to Ethiopia in 1952 when the U.S., looking for ways to strengthen its original African ally in Addis Ababa and determined to set up military bases in Eritrea, imposed a UN-sponsored federation. Ten years later, Ethiopia dissolved the pact (again with U.S. backing) and forcibly annexed the strategic Red Sea territory, prompting Eritrean nationalists to launch an armed struggle for independence. Over the next 30 years,

Eritrea became a cold war battlefield with dizzying political turnabouts.

Ethiopia was a linchpin of Washington's efforts to control sub-Saharan Africa starting in the 1940s when the rest of the continent was still under European rule. Following World War II, U.S. advisers designed Ethiopia's entire infrastructure, from the Western-style parliament and the education system to the armed forces. From 1952 to 1976, more than of all U.S. aid to Africa went to Ethiopia, including the first supersonic jet fighters on the continent. In

exchange, Ethiopia provided troops to U.S.-led military operations in Korea and the Congo. Ethiopia also granted basing rights for the U.S. navy in the Eritrean port of Massawa and for the National Security Agency in the Eritrean capital, Asmara, to establish the largest overseas spy facility in the world. When the Eritrea war heated up in the 1960s, the U.S. sent Special Forces units to train Ethiopians in the latest counterinsurgency techniques. Israel also sent advisers and arms.

In 1974, an Ethiopian military committee known as the Derg overthrew the 82-year-old, pro-Western Emperor

Haile Selassie. Two years later the Derg declared Ethiopia "socialist," broke relations with Washington, and realigned the country with Moscow. The Soviets promptly pumped in over \$11 billion in arms, along with high-level military advisers. The U.S. then shifted to a strategy of encirclement, arming Ethiopia's neighbors (Somalia, Sudan, and Kenya) and developing a new base on the Indian Ocean atoll of Diego Garcia. Soviet aid enabled Ethiopia to reoccupy Eritrea's major towns, but the war ground to a stalemate. It was punctuated by bloody battles in which tens of thousands perished on both sides until 1988, when the Eritreans, now led by the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), regained the offensive.

In May 1991 the EPLF routed the Ethiopian army near Asmara, winning the war with almost no outside help. Simultaneously it helped opposition forces in Ethiopia topple the regime there. After a two-year cooling-off period, the Eritreans voted to establish their own state. With the cold war over, the Horn of Africa lost much of its strategic significance, and the U.S. largely abandoned its one-time interests there. The war left Eritrea in ruins, however. Water and sewage systems in the towns barely functioned. The few asphalt roads were in shambles. Port facilities were badly damaged. The 220-mile rail system had been dismantled, its iron rails used to make bunkers. Upon independence in 1993, the country's per capita income was less than \$150, compared to \$330 for sub-Saharan Africa as a whole. Since then, with minimal foreign aid or influence, the Eritreans have been constructing the physical and political infrastructure of a new country. In 1998, under a newly adopted constitution, they will hold national elections and complete the postwar transition.

In some respects the Eritreans have an advantage by starting with so little: no capital (but no crime or corruption to speak of), no debts, and little ideological baggage. At independence, Ethiopia absorbed Eritrea's financial liabilities, and the new country carries no political obligations.

### Key Points

- The U.S.-sponsored federation between Ethiopia and Eritrea triggered a 30-year war when Ethiopia annexed the strategic Red Sea territory.
- Eritrean liberation forces, fighting with little outside help, defeated successive U.S.- and Soviet-backed Ethiopian regimes to win independence in 1993.
- Abandoned after the cold war, Eritrea was born in ruins, with almost 85% of its three million people surviving on donated relief.

The U.S., having orchestrated Eritrea's initial link to Ethiopia and then backing its annexation, bears major responsibility for the bitter war that followed. Once Moscow displaced Washington in Addis Ababa in 1977, the U.S., mistrusting the Eritrean movement's independent-left politics, shifted to a policy of Soviet containment. This involved arming pro-Western states surrounding Ethiopia while ignoring the continued heavy fighting in Eritrea—a policy described by then-Deputy Secretary of State for African Affairs Chester Crocker as the pursuit of “negative strategic interests.”

Since Eritrea's hard-won independence, the U.S. has sent mixed signals. As the recent product of a successful liberation struggle with overwhelming popular support, the Eritrean government continues to take a leading role in economic construction and all other aspects of national life. So far there is only one political party (though it is organizationally and financially separate from the state), the media is government-controlled, and activities by both domestic and foreign NGOs are restricted. These policies conflict directly with Washington's agenda of unregulated markets and multi-party politics.

One of the first U.S. acts after Eritrea's independence was to deliver a list of businesses and government departments to be immediately privatized. When the Eritrean government rebuffed these demands, it received no development assistance in 1992. Later, however, the U.S. provided financial assistance for the constitution commission, for demobilization of former combatants, and for expansion of the health care system. Currently, the Pentagon provides various services to Eritrea, including de-mining assistance and support for professionalizing the armed forces. State Department officials, however, voice impatience with the pace of economic and political “liberalization.” Economic development assistance—averaging less than \$10 million per year—has been extremely modest.

For its part, the Eritrean government insists it must first resuscitate war-damaged industries in order to sell them at better-than-bargain-basement rates. It also cites the highly participatory process under way in villages and neighborhoods, where people are choosing leaders in fiercely contested local elections, as evidence of a long-range commitment to real democratization.

The Eritreans are constructing their state from scratch, doing it much as they won their sovereignty—through their own efforts and on their own terms. In 1995 the Asmara government nationalized urban and rural land, while guaranteeing “use rights” to all Eritreans, despite a strong U.S. preference for outright privatization. Next, it launched a National Service program requiring women and men over 18 to undergo six months of military training plus a year working on reconstruction

projects. This program aims to compensate for Eritrea's lack of capital and to reduce dependence on foreign aid, while welding together an ethnically diverse society, half Christian and half Muslim, representing nine ethnic groups. It also places women and men in conditions of relative gender equality for 18 months, like their experience on the liberation front during the war years.

Food aid has been a contentious issue. In 1996 the government ended all free distribution of food. Henceforth, it announced—over U.S. and European opposition—that it would sell donated grain on the domestic market at subsidized rates (rather than giving it away) and then use the proceeds to underwrite a public works campaign for poor people. Those unable to work—whether disabled, sick or elderly—would receive cash grants; all others would be paid in cash for working on projects like road repair, reforestation, or dambuilding. Thus, the government proposed to shift from a relief-based economy to one in which everyone who could work was guaranteed a job—by the state.

Washington and other food donors balked at losing control over the distribution of grain shipments within Eritrea. They also insisted that subsidies should be eliminated and that donated grain must be resold at world market prices. When the Asmara government refused, the U.S. withheld grain aid, forcing the cash-strapped Eritrean government to purchase food on the open market and to postpone its jobs program. Late in 1996, with Eritrean grain supplies running short, the U.S. agreed to permit the sale of donated grain as proposed by the Eritreans, rather than take the blame for renewed hunger, though European donors continued to oppose the program.

There has been some private foreign investment by both U.S. and other firms seeking joint ventures in oil and gold exploration, but Eritrea's weak infrastructure and its inadequate energy supplies are obstacles to growth. North American and European NGOs have also given modest assistance, but new restrictions limit their role to providing training and to funding Eritrean state-run operations or social movements like the national women's union, the trade unions, or the youth union. Some, like New York-based Catholic Relief Services, are closing programs rather than accept controls Eritrea deems necessary to protect its sovereignty; others, like Boston-based Grassroots International, which has always worked through local counterparts, are unaffected.

## Key Problems

- Despite professing to support self-reliance, the U.S. still resists Eritrea's efforts to define its own policies.
- The U.S. and its European allies are critical of a reform that nationalizes urban and rural land, while guaranteeing “use rights” to Eritreans, rather than privatizing it outright.
- Development capital and foreign investment are proving hard to attract, despite the almost complete absence of corruption or crime in the country.

U.S. policy in the Horn of Africa was driven for decades by cold war imperatives. As superpower allegiances shifted, billions of dollars in heavy arms flowed to corrupt autocrats like Haile Selassie in Ethiopia, Siad Barre in Somalia, and Jaafar el-Nimeiri in Sudan. This helped to sink the resource-rich region into a morass of war, migration, poverty, and horrific famine.

After decades of pouring arms into the region, future U.S. policy toward Eritrea should be based upon a sustained commitment to reconstruction. During their liberation struggle, the Eritreans demonstrated the capacity to design and implement their own relief and development programs, and the country has the potential to become a model of efficient, self-reliant development. Washington should facilitate Asmara's efforts through direct, bilateral government-to-government assistance to rebuild and develop the country's roads, bridges, railroads, communications, and power-generation capacity.

The U.S. practice of channeling a high proportion of its aid through private U.S. organizations is not appropriate in Eritrea at this time. Instead, the U.S. should consider providing grants to key ministries responsible for agriculture, industry, mines, and marine resources and should support promising government initiatives in such areas as education and public health.

The U.S. often tends to identify democracy with simply holding multiparty elections. The recent record of such elections in African countries is decidedly mixed, and, in any case, such processes do not address the questions of how to avoid ethnic fragmentation and

how to foster democratic participation by rural Africans. The key challenge is to bring nonliterate, rural majorities from diverse communities into a national political process. Eritrea is one of several African states experimenting with building new forms of bottom-up

democracy. Its leaders argue that the development of a national political culture including formerly disenfranchised citizens—peasant farmers, women, ethnic minorities—is a precondition for the creation of a stable political system that does not simply pit the urban leaderships of competing ethnic factions against each other in a battle for control of the spoils of office.

Although there are areas of concern in Eritrea that should not be ignored—controls the state still maintains on the media, continuing restrictions on independent political activity, and constraints on the establishment of nongovernmental organizations, for example—this new nation is clearly a work-in-progress that needs time to mature. The U.S. should back off from pressuring Eritrea to impose a pluralistic political model drawn up in Washington and should instead support Asmara's plan to build such a system in stages, rooted within its own history and culture. The U.S. could, for example, provide funds for Eritrea's remarkable multilingual education system and its homegrown adult literacy campaign.

Today, Eritrea maintains particularly close relations with Ethiopia. The two erstwhile enemies have open borders and are engaged in numerous joint economic projects. Together with Uganda, they have taken the lead in expanding the function of the Inter-Governmental Authority for Development (IGAD) from drought relief toward resolving crises such as that in Sudan and generating joint infrastructure projects to promote regional integration. The U.S. should support these initiatives.

The post-independence experience of other liberation movements raises questions as to whether the Eritrean government's highly centralized structures and controls can assure democracy in the long run. Nevertheless, the Eritrean government enjoys wide internal popularity, and its commitments to economic and political self-development and regional stabilization deserve respect and support from Washington.

*Dan Connell is an independent research journalist and development consultant based in Gloucester, MA.*

## Key Recommendations

- U.S. policy in the Horn of Africa has been inconsistent for more than two decades; it needs to be clarified and rearticulated to reflect the new realities in the region.
- The U.S. should support Eritrea's bottom-up economic and political development strategy without trying to control it.
- Washington should give material and political support to the new regional initiatives aimed at stabilizing the strife-torn region.



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## Publications

Dan Connell, *Against All Odds: A Chronicle of the Eritrean Revolution* (Lawrenceville, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1993, revised 1997).

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*Middle East Report*, 1500 Massachusetts Ave. NW, Ste. 119, Washington, DC 20005.

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### Africa News On-Line

<http://www.africanews.org>

### Africa Policy Information Center

<http://www.igc.org/apic/index.shtml>

### Eritrea on the Net

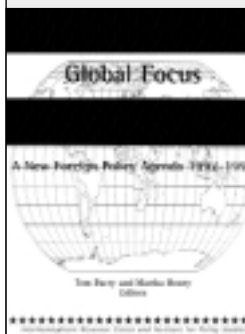
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