African Diplomacy of Liberation. The Case of Eritrea's Search for an "African India"

Diplomatie africaine de la libération. Le cas de l'Érythrée en quête d'une « Inde africaine »

Awet T. Weldemichael

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African Diplomacy of Liberation The Case of Eritrea's Search for an "African India"

"My fellow *Islahiyeen* [*i.e.* ELF Reformers] were concerned about the leadership, which when in Saudi Arabia claimed to be Muslim, when in China to be communist"
Mohammed Osman Ezaz (8 January 1988, Kassala, Sudan)¹.

At the height of Indian-Pakistani tensions over the Indian-supported secession of Bangladesh in 1971, diplomats from the Eritrean independence movement approached the American Ambassador to the UN George Herbert Walker Bush. Cornering him in the corridors of the UN, they angled for American backing of Eritrean independence from Ethiopia. Then Ambassador Bush told the Foreign Mission of the nascent Eritrean People's Liberation Front that they needed an "African India" in order to find a listener and draw the attention of the international community². Thus failing to draw sufficient international backing to outweigh Ethiopia's international standing and effect resolution through diplomacy, Eritreans confronted the Ethiopian empire militarily³. In the all-out war that followed, Eritreans defeated Ethiopian government troops in Eritrea, and joint Eritrean-Ethiopian insurgents' advances inside Ethiopia dislodged the government in Addis Ababa. All this, with out giving up on diplomacy altogether.

Throughout the war years, Eritrean nationalist diplomats routinely visited many capitals and walked corridors of power worldwide, soliciting game-changing political backing and material support against Ethiopian

1. Available at Eritrea's Research and Documentation Center: ELF/UO, 0284, Gunter Shroder, "Interviews of ELF history" (This is a compilation of interviews conducted by German scholar of the Horn of Africa, Gunter Shroder, with veterans of the Eritrean independence war).
2. Interview with Taha Mohammed-Nur (17 September 2005, Asmara Eritrea).
3. Balancing between "external and diplomatic relationships on the one hand, and [...] internal military effectiveness on the other", is a classic binary shaping African insurgencies' external dynamics (CLAPHAM 1996: 213).

domination. Like shape-shifters, they adapted to ideologies and worldviews of potential supporters and often invoked international human rights law and humanitarian norms, with considerable yet unsung success. They exploited geostrategic, ideological, and religious collisions that played themselves out in the Red Sea Basin—the Cold War, Zionism and Pan-Arabism (both *Nasserite* and *Ba'athist*), as well as religious and secular ideologies—much as sweeping rival ideologies that converged and clashed in North and Northeast Africa and the Middle East sought Eritrea out as a pawn.

Nevertheless, robust militaristic grand strategy of Eritrean fighters and their clear-cut battlefield victory in 1991 engendered polarized discourse about an aspect of their quest for independence. On the one hand, Eritrean ranks and file are united in their belief that they fought for independence without outside help. Such conviction helped make possible Eritrean nationalists' single-minded pursuit of their independence. Local, regional, and global opposition to Eritrean independence lent credence to Eritrean nationalist rhetoric (and fledgling historiography) that independence was being fought for—and eventually won—in spite of the world's neglect and hostility. Recurrent antagonism with or “betrayal” by external actors, independence fighters' experiences of real and perceived solitude, and physical and emotional hardships of the thirty-year-war fortified an “against all odds” mentality. Eritrean scholars and long-time observers of the Eritrean independence struggle have echoed similar assertions⁴.

On the other hand, many scholars and observers blast Eritrean nationalists for their dogged militarism and lack of diplomatic skill. As late as 1991, Paul Henze concluded in an unfavourable observation of Eritrean leader: “Whatever natural talents [Isaias Afwerki] may have for diplomacy, his capacity for persuasion and compromise is underdeveloped”⁵. Independent Eritrea's becoming of an underdog or a pariah (depending on one's perspective) in regional and international relations only helped validate such critiques. Moreover, Asmara's policy challenges have served as springboard for an emerging cadre of writers who seek to glean from the history of armed struggle Eritrean government's performance of the past decade or so. Most recently and prominently, Richard Reid (2009: 16) traces purported Eritrean “belief in the primacy of violence as a means to achieve political change” through the independence movement, back to pre-colonial era. Placing Eritrea within a regional phenomenon of military gains translating “directly into muscularity in foreign relation, and military might [...] [being] a cause of aggressive diplomatic stances” Reid (*ibid.*: 10) sees in the 19th century “the roots of modern militarized nationalism” and attendant hubris or “armed adventurism”.

4. Dan CONNELL (1993) documents the saga of isolated Eritrean warriors; Michela WRONG's (2005) rather critical work falls broadly within this category.

5. “Memorandum for the Record from Paul B. Henze. Conversation with Isaias Afewerki”, 11 March 1991 (Thomas Kane Collection of the Library of Congress).

Nevertheless, popular assertions of Eritreans' solitary struggle against Ethiopia, and claims of their diplomatic ineptitude neglect significant aspects of the independence movement's grand strategy. Just as the former unjustly minimize the foreign assistance that Eritreans received, the latter elide their impressive diplomatic feats that dwarf Eritrea's diminutive size and population. This article challenges and builds on extant scholarship on the Eritrean independence movement to demonstrate that diplomacy and external assistance were indispensable to the Eritrean struggle for independence. It builds on Christopher Clapham's (1998: 15) assertion that "virtually all insurgencies depend to an appreciable extent on external support" because of African countries' dependence on foreign aid for rudimentary survival, their small size, and porous borders. And it goes further to argue that a level of diplomatic mastery was necessary to secure that outside support.

Diplomatic networks secured the independence movement multifaceted help from countries and actors around the world. Countries in the Horn of Africa and Middle East lent crucial assistance that enabled the start and growth of armed struggle. Diaspora grassroots mobilization, humanitarian diplomacy (directly and through sympathetic international agencies) and political compromises in their foreign relations, ensured continued external assistance—albeit intermittent and rarely altruistic—that enabled Eritreans to overcome the forces that had stacked up against them. Ironical as it may sound, the farthest-reaching external support Eritreans received came from Ethiopians themselves. Nationalists forged layered alliances with Ethiopian insurgents in a bid to tilt the balance of power in their favour. Its military advantages aside, Eritreans pursued cooperation with Ethiopian movements with an eye to long-term legal and diplomatic benefits. As Eritreans and their Ethiopian allies vanquished government forces in battle, Eritrean diplomatic-political strategies saw the replacement of the defeated Addis Ababa regime with allied rebels who recognized Eritreans' right to self-determination.

Navigating the geopolitical and ideological interests of regional and global powers in the Horn and the Middle East, this article revisits Eritrean diplomatic manoeuvrings, flaws and accomplishments—alliances and quarrels with governments and rebels in the region and the diplomatic tangle surrounding their military victory.

Diplomacy of Liberation

If war is the continuation of human interaction by other means, as von Clausewitz (1976: 99) famously stated⁶, diplomacy is one more item in the toolkit of that interaction for "the social character of all but the most brutal

6. John KEEGAN's (1993) rendition of what Michael Howard and Peter Paret (VON CLAUSEWITZ 1976: 99) translated as "the continuation of policy by other means", has war as a "continuation 'of political intercourse [...] with the intermixing of other means'".

and simple of relations between groups very quickly brings diplomacy, if not diplomats, into existence” (Sharp 2009: 11). While often concurrent, war and diplomacy fall on opposite ends of the same spectrum, *i.e.* human interaction; an entity’s performance in either has direct bearing for its position in the other (Smith 1915).

Repeatedly beaten by Ethiopian diplomacy, young Eritreans resorted to violence with the conviction that they could gain an upper hand over Ethiopia through protracted armed resistance⁷. This underlying reality determined the purpose and scope of Eritrean nationalists’ relations with the outside world, one that typically resonates with what has variously been called as “diplomacy of liberation” (Thomas 1996; Landsberg 2004) or “diplomacy of the oppressed” (Selassie 2007).

Belonging to the constellation of emerging alternative mechanisms of “dialogue” or hyphenated diplomacies, liberation diplomacy is one more testament to the fact that this non-violent aspect of human interaction is not an exclusive prerogative of sovereign territorial states and their officially accredited representatives (Langhorne 1997: 1-15). It involves at least one weak, non-state actor that endeavours to overcome a superior adversary. Unbound by deterrent conventions and laws that apply on sovereign states but also without the conveniences of immunity and privilege/luxury that are synonymous with its state-centric counterpart, liberation diplomacy is neither fully instrumentalist (implementing the wishes of the sovereign or conveying the use of other tools) nor entirely representational (whereby a cadre of groomed professionals represent their identities and interests overseas and carry the outside world back to the domestic actors). In liberation diplomacy only aspects of these two functions become cyclical binaries reinforcing each other.

Liberation diplomacies seek to rally support from as many sources as possible without necessarily being in a position to give back in return. In search of altruistic aid and to gain a moral upper hand, liberation movements articulate and play up their embedded sense of righteousness, and their humanitarian or legal claims in a bid to appeal to potential supporters’ ideals, conscience or legalistic outlook. They often receive ideologically motivated external support in solidarity with their stated political orientation or objectives. Governmental and nongovernmental organizations lend assistance on political or humanitarian grounds, often mixed with geo-strategic or economic considerations. Liberation diplomacy—like its conventional counterpart—also seeks alliances with external partners on the basis of religious or ethnic affinities, shared enmities, and actual or potential for shared long-term interests. And third party countries frequently support insurgent movements to either fight rivals through proxies or as an investment—albeit a risky one—for future payback.

7. ELF Constitution.

In Eritrea, and similar cases of liberation wars, less rigid institution of diplomacy served its purpose without having to conform to the aura of prestige and officialdom that its conventional counterpart is known for. Often times than not, it is carried out by frugal, scraggy independence fighters, volunteers and aid organizations as well as through grassroots mobilization and citizen driven (some times) person-to-person initiatives. As a practice, diplomacy of liberation can best be described as an instrument in so far as it procured material, moral and political support to the armed struggle. Representational only in a sense that it championed an ideal of liberation, a sovereign territorial entity in the waiting. This is particularly so because Eritreans did not believe "securing diplomatic recognition [...] preceded achieving political independence and goes a long way to constitute it" (Sharp 1999: 42) as other liberation movements like the PLO and to some extent the ANC did (Pfister 2003). All non-violent avenues of righting the wrong were shut as far as Eritrean nationalists were concerned. They were out to assert independence by force and their relationship with the rest of the world was geared to aiding the realization of that project and legitimizing its success.

Because Eritrea's "vigorous campaign for diplomatic recognition [...] depended much more on its strength on the ground than vice versa" (Clapham 1996: 215) its diplomatic gains have been overshadowed by the independence movement's military record. This article shows that diplomacy of the Eritrean struggle for independence is classic in its combination of all these features in post-WWII Africa. Eritrean diplomats manipulated ideological, religious and identity-based (African or Arab) positioning to win the endorsement of individuals, organizations and states, and to make overtures with powers experiencing conflicts of interest with Ethiopia or domestic opponents of the government.

Failed Diplomacy of the 1950s

Outperformed by Ethiopian diplomacy in the 1940s, Eritrean leaders in the 1950s did what they could in the diplomatic arena against Ethiopia's repeated violation of the UN-imposed Federal Act between the two. They appeared before and wrote depositions to the UN, and appealed to the imperial Ethiopian government. In November 1957, Weldeab Weldemariam and Omar Qadi—avid proponent of independence and prominent supporter of Eritrea's union with Ethiopia, respectively—pleaded at the UN for an end to Ethiopia's disregard for Eritrean autonomy. Weldeab and Omar did not call on Eritreans to rise up in arms, but ominously warned that failure to find a diplomatic solution would leave Eritreans with no alternative but war: "Frustration of the Eritrean people is pushing them to the verge of a revolution.

Their patience has reached its breaking point”⁸. Emperor Haile Selassie answered modest Eritrean demands for respect of the Federation with a hardening of his imperial position.

Eritreans continued to look for hard-hitting backers to rescue their autonomy from Ethiopian domination. Early on during this quest, African statesmen variously advised them to rely on themselves and become powerful. “*Theeru fi tariq al quwah*” (“march on the path toward power”), Jamal Abdel-Nasser counselled Eritrean nationalists in Cairo. Even more tellingly, Diallo Teli, first Secretary General of the Organization of African Unity (OAU), told Eritrean diplomats, “No one will listen to you unless you are powerful”⁹. Similarly, Abdelkerim El-Khattabi, the legendary Moroccan anti-colonial guerrilla leader living in exile in Cairo, advised them that they should not expect outside help before starting a struggle on their own (Markakis 1987: 111).

Plying Between War and Diplomacy

Without another recourse left to them, emergent Eritrean nationalists in Cairo and older, discontented politicians living in exile took African leaders’ advice to heart. They established in 1960 the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) to pursue independence through armed struggle¹⁰. This group quickly created an armed wing within Eritrea and, in September 1961, started the 30-year independence war (Said 1992: 17). After combative Eritrean nationalism took a violent turn, procurement of substantive help to aid the armed struggle remained a particularly salient preoccupation of Eritrean diplomacy of liberation. Exploiting the Ethiopian Empire’s external frailties, armed nationalists strove to build bridges with a diverse array of governments and movements that shared Eritrea’s strategic interests, had conflicts of interest with Ethiopia, or were susceptible to persuasion on religious, ideological, and humanitarian grounds. Eritreans thus became classic examples of “rebels without borders”, operating across international boundaries unhindered by territorial limits and sovereignty that constrain government actions (Salehyan 2009).

Early Nationalists Latch Onto Pan-Arabism and Islam for Support

Eritrean nationalists capitalized on unfurling ideological waves to garner some backers. In a region that is also home to Islam and co-habited by

8. Quoted in “Joint Declaration of the Eritrean Liberation Front and the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front”, *The Eritrean Case* (Rome: the Research and Information Center on Eritrea, 1982), p. 19.

9. Interview with Taha Mohammed-Nur (17 September 2005, Asmara Eritrea).

10. Taha Mohammed-Nur.

Arabs, they benefited from Ethiopia's expansionist policies, its self-image as a millennial Christian empire with Jewish roots, and its contemporaneous network of alliances with the US and Israel. Moreover, many Eritrean nationalists were drawn to the secular political activism sweeping the Middle East since the 1950s, when leaders and citizens alike were swept up in a heady whirlwind of anti-imperialism, Pan-Arab unity, freedom, and socialism. They framed the Eritrean question within this emergent idea of secular Pan-Arabism¹¹, and accordingly solicited for help.

Egypt became a particularly significant target for Eritrean diplomacy of securing regional allies who would lend material and political assistance. Many Eritreans had found refuge there, and Jamal Abdel-Nasser's radical, pan-Arabist government actively exhorted them to combat the Ethiopian Empire. In 1958, senior Egyptian government officials, including future President Anwar al-Sadat, encouraged Eritreans to be proactive in confronting Ethiopia, imperialism and Zionism¹². Nevertheless, eager to appease Ethiopia for its Nile waters and to enlist African support against Israel, Egypt (during and after Nasser) vacillated between lukewarm support for Eritreans and outright dismissal of their success as an undesirable regional development. Preeminent Egyptian scholar Iglal Raafat adds that fluctuating relationships with the superpowers dictated Cairo's incoherent policies toward the rest of Africa. Moreover, because Egypt pursued state-to-state relationship with African countries, it remained oblivious to changes occurring under façades of normalcy that African leaders flaunted. According to her, Dr. Boutros Boutros-Ghali's leadership at the Foreign Ministry did not change this as "Egypt declared its support for Ethiopia against Eritrean independence, and maintained this stance till only days before Eritrea achieved independence"¹³. Indeed, on the day that EPLF forces completed the liberation of Eritrea, BBC radio quoted Boutros-Ghali stating his country's opposition to Eritrea's independence from Ethiopia.

Throughout the two decades of its existence, ELF proved to be diplomatically ambidextrous. Speaking a secular language and appealing to universal human rights norms when making its case elsewhere, its all-Muslim leadership conveniently presented the Eritrean case as a Muslim question in circles where invoking Islam looked expedient. Posing as an Islamist (and a *Wahhabist* at that), Idris Mohammed Adem secured and maintained personal access to successive Saudi kings. Committed to spreading *Wahhabi* Islam and its political influence in the region, the House of Saud for its part supported conservative Eritrean Muslims who had a firm grip on the ELF since its inception¹⁴. Several other Middle Eastern countries supported the

11. Interview with Mohammed-Berhan Hassan (13 September 2005, Asmara, Eritrea).

12. Interview with Mohammed-Berhan Hassan (13 September 2005, Asmara, Eritrea).

13. "Egypt's Relations with Africa: Past Experiences, Future Possibilities", *Al-Siyassa Al-Dawliya*, 168, July 2007, <<http://www.mafhoum.com/press10/309P51.htm>>.

14. RDC/Biography/01, 00355, Interview with Ibrahim Sultan Ali, December 1982.

Eritrean nationalist movement for similar reasons, and their assistance—of yet undisclosed amount and frequency—funnelled into Eritrean organizations until independence. Moreover, Eritrean Diasporas in Sudan and the Middle East sustained the early phase of the armed struggle through generous financial contributions made possible by their host countries' benevolent neglect or active encouragement.

In fora where participation required being a Muslim, their faith granted ELF leaders entry but they stirred clear from directly invoking Islam. For example, ELF's appeal of assistance to the sixth session of the World Islamic Conference in Mogadishu referred to Ethiopia as *al-Habasha* (harking back to historical Arab name for the Christian Abyssinian state), included a laundry list of Israeli (interchangeably called Jewish) economic, military and intelligence ventures in Eritrea, and referred to massive American presence. Having pushed all the "political Islam" buttons, the nationalists stopped short of framing a religious rallying cry for support or claiming they were a Muslim organization¹⁵. On the contrary, ELF leader Idris Mohammed Adem's writings to non-theocratic leaders and governments (Muslim and non-Muslim alike) is consistent: "We do not want separation from Ethiopia because it is a Christian country, but only because of her aggressive imperialist policy. It is unfair of any diplomat to suspect us of [Islamic] fanaticism simply because we refuse to enter the Emperor's prisons"¹⁶.

As the Arab-Israeli conflict intensified apace with American and Israeli support of Ethiopia, supporting Eritreans became geostrategically attractive for many Middle Eastern countries. Against this backdrop, Eritrean appeals for Arab support gained growing sympathy. Radical Pan-Arabists readily embraced Eritrean guerrillas on the basis of their real, imagined, or purported Arab-ness.

The splintering of the Pan-Arabist camp and emergence of competing Pan-Arabists in the region was a double-edged sword for Eritrean Middle Eastern diplomacy. The increasingly powerful *Ba'athists* in Syria, for example, championed Eritrea's cause to gain regional influence at the expense of Egypt (Markakis 1987: 111-112). And when Iraqi *Ba'athists* seized power and quickly fell out with their Syrian counterparts, championing the Eritrean cause became an arena, albeit a minor one, where Baghdad sought to outdo Damascus. The two countries enrolled growing numbers of Eritrean students in their schools and hosted some of the most vibrant diplomatic offices of their independence movement. As early as 1963, Syria trained and armed a growing number of Eritrean nationalists¹⁷. Syrian largess enabled the ELF to arm its fighters with the iconic AK 47 assault rifle, and lightweight,

15. ESFA, "Nida Sha'ab Irytriyah ila Jami'e al-Wefud al-Mushtarikah fi al-Mutamar al-Islami al-'Alemi", 26 December 1964.

16. Idris Mohammed Adem to the Prime Minister of the Republic of Somalia, Dr. Abdul Rashid Ali, 20 December 1960.

17. Interview with Romedan Mohammed-Nur (25 September 2005, Asmara).

highly mobile artillery pieces in 1965—a decade before the USSR did the same for the Ethiopian army. A year later, Iraqi *Ba'athists* started to give Eritreans enthusiastic material and political support. Like Syria, Iraq also trained and armed hundreds of Eritrean fighters (Denden 1996: 373-374)¹⁸. Conflicting interests of rival patrons, who sought Eritrea for an opportunity to overshadow one another, were to have devastating effect on the ELF.

Internal Cohesion and Self-Reliance Replace Lethal Internecine Squabbles

Rocked by internal fissures, the ELF imploded in 1969. Fiercely secular and ideologically charged young nationalists broke away in three groups. Merging in 1973 to form Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), the splinters vowed to end the cycles of internal squabbling and external dependence overmuch. The EPLF distinguished itself as a more cohesive alternative, involving ordinary Eritreans more thoroughly. Reflecting on ELF's shortcomings *vis-à-vis* the EPLF, former ELF Vice-Chairman for Political Affairs Herui Tedla Bairu alluded to EPLF's wisdom of shifting away from international diplomacy with whimsical backers to reliance on a strong Eritrean base: "Because the traditions of the ELF in the international arena were highly developed, we did not depend on our own Hafash [*i.e.* masses]. We did not collect money from our Eritrean communities. It was help that came from our friends in our region"¹⁹. EPLF's collection of financial contributions from Eritreans around the world were important for its autonomy and had immediate ripple effects on its external relations.

When pioneer Eritrean liberation diplomats joined the EPLF, not only did their previous diplomatic achievements earn the new organization the same progressive credentials as the ELF, but their skilful diplomacy secured the EPLF vibrant presence in ELF's Middle Eastern diplomatic homes-base. In Lebanon and South Yemen, and from there to the rest of the world, Eritreans and their friends raised funds and engaged in grassroots activism. Crucially, Eritreans in Europe and North America openly declared their "Eritreans for Liberation" groups as EPLF's mass organizations. Vast amounts of Diaspora cash flowed into EPLF coffers, as did individual goodwill of foreigners and organizational solidarity²⁰.

18. Several of this research's informants received months-long training in Syria and Iraq since the 1960s.

19. Interview with Herui Tedla Bairu (1 January 2001), <<http://www.awate.com/portal/content/view/352/11/>>.

20. So important were these financial contributions to the autonomy of EPLF commanders in the field that controlling the mass organizations that raised this cash became a bone of contention between them on the one hand and their roving ambassador Osman Saleh Sabbe on the other.

The ELF was not a static organization either; the emergence of an efficient rival expedited its periodic transformations that effected animated—albeit cacophonous—internal political dynamics and incremental diplomatic sophistication. Between 1971 and 1975, for example, ELF old guard Idris Mohammed Adem's chairmanship insured the continued flow of religiously inspired assistance, while ideological dynamism of emergent leaders retained ELF's secular backers²¹. Ironically, however, their successes became ELF's own undoing. Competing ELF potentates vied to insure their respective patrons' continued support while flirting with their rivals' patrons. For their part, the Syrian and Iraqi *Ba'athist* parties pitted one group against the other to establish the supremacy of their politics in Eritrea²². Moreover, several other Middle Eastern countries shifted their positions from one Eritrean organization to another or altogether dropped the Eritrean cause from their agendas. Fragmented and hamstrung by the whims of its international backers, the ELF eventually collapsed in the face of better-organized, more autonomous, and highly secretive, Maoist rival.

While no Middle Eastern country, thus, did for Eritreans what India did for Bangladesh in international diplomacy, material and political assistance that Eritreans received from that region was decisive for the growth of their armed struggle. Unfortunately for Eritreans, it also gave Ethiopia ammunition to pre-empt Eritrean diplomacy toward the OAU and its individual members.

Impediments in the African Context

How African insurgencies were classified determined the kind of diplomatic reception they received from OAU member states. Independent African countries supported African liberation movements from colonial rule and white minority regimes through the Coordinating Freedom Council at first and through the OAU Liberation Committee after 1963. Because these movements “did indeed fit clearly into the conventions of African statehood, and consequently acquired a legitimate and even honoured place in the international relations of the continent”, as Clapham (1996: 209) put it. African positions on the Eritrean question stood in sharp contrast.

In 1964, the OAU consecrated inherited colonial boundaries as sacrosanct borders of African countries²³. It also sanctified the non-intervention of

21. See ELF correspondences like: “*Ila Maktab al-Alaqa al-Kharijiyah bil-Qiyadah al-Qawmiyah li-Hizb al-Ba'ath al-Arabi al-Ishtiraki*”, August 16, 1970 (unsorted ELF document at Eritrea's RDC in Asmara), while Idris Mohammed Adem shuttled between Middle Eastern conservative capitals.

22. Interviews with Ibrahim Idris Totil (22 and 27 September 2005, Asmara, Eritrea); Mohammed Osman Ezaz (3 September 2005, Tessenei, Eritrea).

23. OAU, “Cairo Declaration on Border Disputes among African States; Legitimising National Borders Inherited from Colonial Times”, 1964.

members in internal affairs of others. As far as the African legal system was concerned, Eritrea constituted an integral part of Ethiopia when the OAU—an embodiment of continental laws—was formed. Inscribed in high-stakes pan-African politics, Eritrea was lumped together with separatist African movements in Biafra (Nigeria) and Katanga (former Zaire), seeking to establish new states from pre-existing ones against fundamental basis of the continental international system. With the OAU steering clear from contemplating the Eritrean issue for fear of opening a Pandora's box—a cascade of dangerous secessions that could destroy the continent's existing states—Eritrean stood no chance of getting support from the Liberation Committee. Repeated Eritrean appeals to the OAU failed even to elicit acknowledgements of receipt of the missives.

Eritrean nationalists' diplomatic initiatives to impress upon African countries that Ethiopia's incorporation of Eritrea violated a pillar of the OAU—that Eritrea inherited colonial borders—went unheeded²⁴. The veracity of Eritrean claims that their predicament was unique had no place in a continental legal system founded to preserve its members' territorial *status quo*. Moreover, most OAU member states dismissed Eritreans' quest for self-determination as undermining African unity.

Idris Mohammed Adem had long responded to accusations that Eritreans were against African unity. He, reportedly, told African and Asian officials "we earnestly believe in African unity which springs out of sincere desire [and free will] of the African people [...]". But he also went on to draw the line between continental unity and national freedom: "We will never accept to be colonized by the Emperor of Ethiopia under the mask of African Unity"²⁵. Directly confronting the *raisons d'être* of a continental body that was averse to any tampering with existing national boundaries was the weakest point of Eritrean diplomacy of liberation throughout the 30-year war.

Penetrating through African legalistic quibbling, obscurantism, and excuses, Ruth Iyob examines the "Ethiopianism" of early Pan-Africanism' to explain Eritreans' inability to counter Ethiopian hegemony in the OAU. Ethiopia's mythical millennial history and its military victory against Italy in 1896 set it on a pedestal as a symbol of African freedom. For many Pan-Africanists, Ethiopia represented the driving spirit behind the ideals that later crystallized as OAU's pillars. When Eritreans insisted that they were in essence a colony of Ethiopia—a country that Africans regarded as arch-enemy of colonialism—the independence activists met with disbelief and angry scepticism. Eritrean solicitation for aid from the Arab world played conveniently into the hands of the Ethiopian Empire, which portrayed Eritrean independence as an Arab encroachment at the expense of African unity.

24. Idris Mohammed Adem to the Somali PM; Tedla Bairu to President of the United Arab Republic Gamal Abdel Nasser, April 5, 1967.

25. Idris Mohammed Adem to the Somali PM.

Eritrean military gains fortified OAU objections as prospects of Eritrean victory brought closer African fears of surging secessionism (Iyob 1995: 50 ff).

Meanwhile, Ethiopian aggressive advocacy in defence of existing African states' territorial integrity and non-interference in each other's internal affairs, and its readiness to retaliate against offending states, chilled some countries' official support for Eritreans. Initial Nigerian sympathy quickly fizzled when Ethiopia evoked Nigeria's own Biafran separatism of 1967-1970. The Republic of Guinea's assurances did not go beyond a single televised interview of Eritrean diplomats²⁶. Far off countries that sympathized with Eritrean insurgents were castigated until they hid or altogether halted their support.

Eritrean nationalists proved unable to challenge Ethiopia's place in the master-narrative of a proud, free Africa. Nor could any Eritrean rival Emperor Haile Selassie's status as a preeminent African statesman and formidable American client in Africa. Ethiopia's housing of the OAU Headquarters and the UN Economic Commission for Africa reflected and reinforced the Ethiopian Emperor's public relations successes. Both gave and continue to give Ethiopia enormous diplomatic and moral leverage over other African countries.

Some small rays of light seemed to pierce this diplomatic darkness. In 1979 the government-run Mozambican daily newspaper *Notícias* editorialized on the history and justice of the Eritrean war²⁷. During a 1986 summit of world NGOs at the UN headquarters, a Senegalese NGO representative said "Eritrea is an African problem; so we Africans must help provide an answer to the problem [...] Eritrea must be free and shall be free" (Selassie 2007: 345-346). Although, beyond transient enthusiasm, such declarations did not translate into meaningful advocacy on behalf of Eritreans, they reflected the changing mood in African public opinion that was to receive Eritrea upon independence.

Eritrea's African Backers—Ethiopia's Enemy Neighbours

More directly, classic conflicts of interest between Ethiopia and its immediate neighbours and the allure of proxy fighting granted Eritreans cross-border sanctuaries and access to supplies. Ethiopia's inability to control its own and Eritrea's overland and maritime borders provided insurgents unhampered access to third party countries. Eritrean insurgency thus became transnational, whereas international law and sovereignty of third party states restricted Ethiopian counterinsurgency to its territory (Salehyan 2009: 26 ff, 82 ff).

26. Taha Mohammed-Nur.

27. *Notícias*, 20 May and 19 July 1979.

Because of its strategic conflict of interest with Ethiopia, Somalia constituted the most notable exception to OAU rejection of Eritrean independence. Ethiopia's 19th century expansion into the Ogaden, a vast swath of Somali-inhabited territory, and the independent Mogadishu's desire to unite all the Somali-speaking peoples of the Horn of Africa, put the two countries at loggerheads. It did not take much pleading for Somalia to recognize the Eritrean struggle for independence as legitimate. The ELF did not take chances either.

Idris Mohammed Adem made the case why Somalia should support Eritrean nationalists in a letter to Somali Premier dated 20 December 1960. He also presented their six-point request for assistance: opening an Eritrean political office in Mogadishu; espousing the Eritrean case in international forums; allowing Eritreans to broadcast from Somali radio; coordinating simultaneous start of the Eritrean armed struggle with an Ogadeni rebellion; training a division of Eritrean youth "so that they can be ready for the struggle in Eritrea at the proper time"; and issuing Eritrean nationalists Somali passports²⁸.

Somali response was swift. Led by Idris Mohammed Adem and Osman Saleh Sabbe, a Mogadishu-based Eritreo-Somalia Friendship Association (ESFA) emerged in 1961 to funnelled Somalia's multifaceted assistance to the Eritrean struggle. As early as November 1961, on Sabbe's request, the Somali Foreign Ministry issued passports to Eritrean activists in Saudi Arabia after Ethiopia revoked their passports²⁹. Ever since then and throughout the war, almost all independence fighters trotted the globe on Somali diplomatic or regular passports³⁰.

Sudan, like Somalia, constituted a vital exception to OAU indifference. After the removal of the anti-Eritrean Sudanese leader General Ibrahim Abboud in October 1964, the ELF dispatched members of its underground Eritrean cells to various Sudanese towns to organize Eritrean residents there and form friendship associations modelled on ESFA³¹. Through these grass-roots networks and ELF leaders' high-level dealings with Khartoum, the Eritreans procured invaluable assistance. Most importantly, for Eritreans, Sudan provided what any rebellion needs for survival and success: cross-border sanctuaries, secure and reliable supply routes beyond Ethiopian reach, and shelter to waves of Eritrean refugees who, among other things, replenished the guerrillas' ranks.

However, official support remained hostage to the instability of successive governments in Khartoum and their fluctuating relations with Ethiopia.

28. Idris Mohammed Adem to the Somali PM.

29. Osman Saleh Sabbe to Minister of Foreign Affairs Abdullah Isa Mahmoud, 17 November 1961.

30. One of these was my eldest sister who was based in the Middle East.

31. Ibrahim Idris Totil.

As the first Sudanese civil war in the South raged, John Markakis aptly argues, the “Eritrean issue had become a card the Sudan could use to counter Ethiopia’s links to the *Anyanya* [the Southern Sudanese rebels], and was bound to want to keep it in play while southern nationalism remained a problem” (Markakis 1987: 112)³². That analogy applies equally for the period after 1983, when the second round of Sudanese civil war broke out under John Garang’s Sudan People’s Liberation Movement (SPLM). Eritrean insurgents were used as a negotiating chip against Ethiopia’s support for the SPLM. Eritrean political strategist Alamin Mohammed Said thus characterized Sudanese President Numeiri’s policy as “*mesket al ‘asa fil-wasat*” (“holding the stick in the middle”) to hit either side, depending on the circumstances (Kibreab 2009: 71 ff)³³. Nevertheless, the same corruption and frailty of successive governments in Khartoum, which worked against Eritrean nationalists at numerous junctures (Markakis 1987: 112), also frequently enabled Eritrean guerrillas to get in and out with supplies, fighters, and weapons even in the face of official Sudanese opposition.

Sudanese and Somali commitment and crucial support notwithstanding, vacillating and disorganized Khartoum and Mogadishu lacked Addis Ababa’s clout within the continent and in the international arena. Ethiopia’s widespread networks of influence precluded international diplomatic wheedling on behalf of Eritreans, who, even in the best of times, could not count on Sudan and Somalia as their African India. Moreover, like other countries, Sudanese and Somali positions were not immune to superpowers influences. A thumbnail sketch of American and Soviet Eritrea policies must inform our understanding of Eritrea’s search for consequential diplomatic support.

The Cold War and Eritrean Quest for Great Power Backing

A few enduring factors determined superpower interest in Eritrea. Among them: Eritrea’s geostrategic location on the Red Sea (the shortest route between the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean) facing the oil-rich Middle East; its capital Asmara’s odd but valuable asset as a platform to eavesdrop on rivals and allies alike; Ethiopia’s geopolitical and diplomatic significance in the continent; and early Eritrean leaders’ lack of sufficient understanding of shifting alignments of post-WWII world to either capitalize on initial Soviet endorsement or allay lasting American fears. Armed nationalists of the 1960s (and after) recognized the diplomatic importance of great powers and their allies, and unceasingly tried to enlist their support. However, at no point did Eritrean insurgents match Ethiopia’s masterful state-level diplomatic manipulation.

32. Haile Selassie’s mediation of the first Sudanese civil war earned him Khartoum’s official renunciation of its ties with the Eritrean independence movement.

33. Interview with Alamin Mohammed Said (28 September 2005, Asmara, Eritrea).

Competing to add Ethiopia to their portfolio of African client states, the superpowers shunned Eritrean independence fighters, enabling Ethiopia to secure American backing before jumping onto the Soviet bandwagon. As early as 1948, American Joint Chief of Staff ruled that "United States rights in Eritrea should not be compromised" (Marcus 1983: 84; Tesfai 2001: 57-61, 323) and successive foreign policy architects were convinced that Ethiopia was crucial to their long-term interests. Ethiopia secured such unflinching support of the US on the Eritrean question after incessant and creative overtures to become an American ally³⁴. Moreover, Ethiopian rulers' claim to offer an island of Christianity in a turbulent Muslim/Arab sea was enticing, in and of itself. Presuming that Eritrean Muslims would naturally align themselves with the other Muslims of the region, Ethiopia trumpeted its fears that an independent Eritrea would suffocate it by an Arab/Islamic encirclement that would dominate the Red Sea basin.

The long-term significance of such claims did not escape America's principal ally in the Middle East, Israel. They nicely fit Israel's security grand strategy since the 1950s called the "Middle Eastern periphery" that included the quest to ensure that the Red Sea remain a contested and contestable space. Even at the height of Soviet intervention in Ethiopia, Israeli strategists sought to offer Ethiopia a "Western option" by interceding with Washington and providing it with military and medical assistance (Ledeen 1978: 46-49). Western perception of Eritreans as a potential pan-Islamist bottleneck, turning the Red Sea into an Islamic, Pan-Arab zone of influence, thus damned them with the US and its Israeli ally.

In its inchoate responses to American early Cold War initiatives, the Soviet Union first supported Eritrean self-determination. During an Eritrea-related debate at the UN in the late 1940s, for example, the Soviet representative thus rejected US-supported Ethiopian claim: "[It was] inadmissible that Eritreans be taken away from one state and subjected to the control of another [...]" (Yohannes 1991: 106). But when junior army officers overthrew aging Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie in 1974 and jumped off the capitalist bandwagon, the Soviets rushed in to fill the vacuum. Rescuing Addis Ababa's beleaguered military government, Moscow shored up Ethiopia's war efforts for a decade and half, between 1976 and 1991, and spared no effort to crush the Eritrean nationalists³⁵. As communist bloc countries

34. Ethiopian diplomats brilliantly used Secretary of State John Foster Dulles's concept of the Northern Tier, to propose a Southern Tier as a backup American cordon against Soviet influence in the Horn of Africa and the Middle East. That meant that if Eritrea were not secured, it would risk being a hole in America's chain of defence (SPENCER 2006: 267; SELASSIE 1989: 35).

35. Eritrean nationalists had long articulated American interests and policies that culminated in Eritrea's merger with Ethiopia but faced a quandary when the Soviet Union displaced the US and geared up to annihilate their independence struggle. The ELF was quick to welcome the USSR's intervention. The EPLF came under considerable heat for failing to denounce Soviet actions; its own mass organization, Eritreans for Liberation in North America, led the charge in 1978 with its publication of *Eritrea, Revolution or Recapitulation*.

quickly fell into lockstep with their mighty Soviet backer, South Yemen and Libya, among others, ejected Eritreans as counter revolutionaries and actively supported Ethiopian military campaigns to crush the Eritrean independence movement.

Ethiopia also superbly played an intricate political-diplomatic game with lesser powers to dampen prospects of Eritreans gaining continued meaningful assistance (Yohannes 1987). The appeal of secular, leftist ideologies and efforts to win the support of progressive countries had taken Eritrean nationalists farther afield. Having introduced the Eritrean question among non-African Third World countries³⁶, at the zenith of their diplomatic successes in the mid-1960s, Cuba strove for Eritrean membership in the Non-Aligned Movement and “helped Eritreans obtain their anti-imperialist credentials in otherwise hostile international political environment” (Yohannes 1991: 254). Cuba and China also offered ELF fighters consequential political and military training³⁷. Nevertheless, while intra-Eritrean rivalry and splintering hamstrung Cuban support (before it reversed its position in 1977 along with other Soviet bloc countries), Ethiopia in 1972 embraced Beijing’s “One China” policy in return for the latter’s stoppage of its assistance to Eritrean insurgents (Korn 1986: 3).

As the US refused to alter its position on Eritrea even after Ethiopia’s realignment with the USSR, Eritrea became an exception to the tacit Cold War rule: that rival superpowers supported belligerents in Third World conflicts in order to accrue proxies³⁸. Shunned by the superpowers and without powerful diplomatic backing that could challenge Ethiopia’s place in the international state system, Eritrean military machine revved up to assert independence in the field of battle. Without breaking the war-diplomacy binary that runs through the Eritrean story, international diplomacy took a backseat and armed resistance remained the mainstay of the movement for independence and the driving force behind its new, locally-focused diplomacy.

To Asmara via Addis. Insurgency-Centric Diplomacy

With no African India or diplomatic resolution on the horizon, nationalists aimed to irreversibly change the balance of power in the Eritrean battlefield and simultaneously bring about regime change in Addis Ababa. Only then, EPLF leaders believed, would Ethiopia allow for an internationally certified

36. Taha Mohammed Nur published in their periodicals, among them “Eritrea: Significance of its Struggle against Feudalism” in *Tricontinental*, Issue 39, June 1969.

37. Interview with Romedan Mohammed-Nur (25 September 2005, Asmara, Eritrea); CONNELL (2005).

38. During the Reaganite anti-communist rhetoric and support for anti-Soviet proxies in the 1980s, the White House briefly considered backing Eritrean insurgents but powerful American intelligence circles held it back (HENZE 1986).

referendum of Eritrean wishes³⁹. Determined to turn the tide on the ground in its favour, EPLF set out to exploit domestic structural weaknesses of the Ethiopian Empire and cultivate like-minded allies within Ethiopia, who would help expedite the downfall of the government.

Accessible records on diplomatic intercourse between Eritrean nationalists and insurgent groups inside Ethiopia are too scant to fully reconstruct their wheeling and dealing. However, their military collaboration speaks to Eritrean diplomatic successes—in the short and long term. From the Eritrean standpoint, EPLF cooperation with Ethiopian rebels served two crucial and mutually reinforcing objectives. First, working in concert with dissidents in Ethiopia proper increased Eritrean chances of prevailing militarily against a common foe. At the very least, these allies distracted the government's attention and provided Eritreans with a buffer against the enemy's full force. Second, beyond being a diversionary exercise, allying with Ethiopian opposition to Addis Ababa turned out to be strategic investment toward overcoming diplomatic challenges that the nationalists anticipated *after* military victory.

Defeating the Ethiopian military in Eritrea was not enough. The end-game had to be mapped out for Eritrean military victory would be less consequential without Ethiopia's willingness to let go and without international recognition. Eritreans worked to replace the Addis Ababa government with one that would uphold Eritrean rights to self-determination and independence. In EPLF's words, Eritrea needed a "democratic alternative" at the helm in Ethiopia. Summing up these interrelated factors, EPLF's military architect Sebhat Efreem is believed to have said famously, "the road to Asmara lies through Addis Ababa".

Embarking on that road, Eritrean nationalists forged alliances with Ethiopian insurgents. The EPLF sought out what it deemed would become an amenable government after filling in the vacuum left behind by the defeated Addis Ababa regime. Widespread resentment about historic oppression in the Ethiopian heartland furnished a fertile ground for EPLF's localized diplomatic overtures.

The Empire, Its Abuses and Dissenters

Violently founded and held together by force, the Ethiopian state remained an imperial entity, with its diverse peoples in the peripheries rising up

39. This view stood in sharp contrast to other nationalist leaders' belief that declaring unilateral independence and forming government in exile would improve Eritrean diplomatic standing and defeat the Ethiopian government. For such views of three Eritrean leaders, see Herui Tedla's "Nab Ghedlawi Bayto Zeqerebe Tsebsab", RDC/Hist.Ar.St./ELF/06, 02460 (an undated, possibly from 1977/1978); Ahmed Nasser's interview in *New African*, December 1977; and Sabbe's *Jusur al-Khilafat al-Irytriyah wa Mualejetaha*, (undated), 1.

against the centre, especially when the latter was or seemed weakened (Clapham 1988: 207). Rampant injustice—land alienation, extreme poverty, corruption, political oppression and overall decay of the state—as well as abusive and often condescending authority of an Amhara elite who saw themselves as born to rule (Greenfield 1965: 96, 107), fed a growing ideological militancy and popular unrest that made possible the overthrow of Emperor Haile Selassie (Tareke 2009). Bent on preserving the imperial state that it inherited from the Emperor, the post-1974 military junta also remained true to its persistent declarations that it would fight Eritrean independence by every means available.

Defeating the forces of this government in battle and living peaceably with Ethiopia after victory required Eritrean nationalists to work in concert with Ethiopians of different backgrounds and worldviews. As the EPLF put it, so long as a government that “does not recognize Eritrea’s especial identity and its people’s right to independence is in Addis Ababa, there would be no guarantee for the peace, stability and independence of Eritrea even after Eritrean forces defeat the Ethiopian in the battlefield”⁴⁰. Therefore, the Addis Ababa government had “to be replaced by a popular and democratic one” which was why the EPLF “had been collaborating with Ethiopians capable of establishing a democratic alternative to the government in Addis Ababa”⁴¹. Ethiopians who seized the opportunity and rose up against the decaying imperial state played conveniently into Eritrean insurgents’ hands.

The Rise of a “Democratic Alternative”

After the 1974 *coup d’État* in Addis Ababa, anti-military elements of the Ethiopian Student Movement looked northward for inspiration and assistance; self-interest compelled Eritreans to court them. According to its July 1980 radio broadcast, the EPLF maintained “principled relations” with Ethiopian “progressive forces and democratic movements of the oppressed nationalities, which [...] as part of their democratic platform, support the unconditional rights of the Eritrean people to self-determination and independence”⁴². But its assistance hinged strictly on Ethiopian insurgents’ unconditional recognition of Eritrean right to self-determination (Young 1996; Negash & Tronvoll 2000).

The EPLF forged alliances with and trained and armed ethnic rebels—the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) in northern Ethiopia and the Oromo

40. Voice of the Broad Masses, “The EPLF and its Relationship with the Democratic Movements in Ethiopia”, 31 January-2 February 1985, reproduced in *Adulis*, 1 (11) (May 1985).

41. *Ibid.*

42. “EPLF’s Principled Relations with the Democratic Forces in Ethiopia” in *Selected Articles from EPLF Publications (1973-1980)*, (Rome, 1982), pp. 195-196.

Liberation Front (OLF) in the southwest. But in contrast to the remote and less effective OLF, TPLF's "progressive line [...] and geographical factors have made EPLF-TPLF collaboration particularly close", declared the EPLF⁴³. Tigrayans thus became the Eritrean nationalists' preferred democratic alternative to overthrow the Derg and take over the government in Ethiopia. And Eritrean assistance flowed in earnest. Besides military, propaganda and logistical support, leading Tigrayan diplomat Seyum Mesfin acknowledges EPLF's diplomatic aid in introducing the TPLF to friendly countries of the region and making EPLF offices overseas available to TPLF diplomats⁴⁴.

Nevertheless, TPLF's initial program of seeking independence for the northern Ethiopian province of Tigray did not augur well for Eritreans' long-term interest. An independent Tigray would deprive them of a friendly regime in Addis Ababa and weaken Eritrean legalistic claims to separate statehood based on Africa's colonial legacy⁴⁵. Tigrayans had to be lured, according to EPLF's popular pronouncements, into embracing a pan-Ethiopian mandate, seeing themselves as potential rulers of a multiethnic Ethiopia—without reneging on Eritrean right to independence. Ensuring this led to an EPLF-TPLF relationship filled with "tensions and pragmatism" (Young 1996).

Eritrean gains speak to their *savoir-faire* in nurturing this relationship and making it work in their favour. The EPLF facilitated TPLF's supremacy in northern Ethiopia through continued assistance to the latter (Gebreab 1997: 49, 108; Selassie 1980) while quietly and gently pressuring the Tigrayans into reforming their stand⁴⁶. Eritrean fighters called on Ethiopian opposition forces to join arms in an all-inclusive, united front against the Addis Ababa government⁴⁷. In 1989, TPLF-dominated broad coalition called Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) emerged.

Because war and diplomacy fall on a spectrum of options that belligerents pursue (states and non-state actors alike)⁴⁸, and because performance in one directly affects one's disposition in the other (Smith 1915), an analysis of Eritrean military victories and Ethiopia's extreme predicament will highlight the lasting diplomatic significance of Eritrean-Tigrayan collaboration.

43. "EPLF's Principled Relations", *op. cit.*

44. *Asser*, 3, 9, December 1997-February 1998, p. 25.

45. RDC/TPLF/2226, TPLF, "Program and Principle of the TPLF", November 1976.

46. For Tigrayan and Eritrean leaders' squeamishness about the role of the other party in their history, see YOUNG (1996: 14-15).

47. Voice of the Broad Masses, "The EPLF calls upon all the democratic movements in Ethiopia for the establishment of Neighborliness Democratic Front", 7 October 1985.

48. If war is the continuation of human interaction by other means, as Clausewitz famously stated, diplomacy is one more item in the toolkit of that interaction for "the social character of all but the most brutal and simple of relations between groups very quickly brings diplomacy, if not diplomats, into existence" (SHARP 2009: 11).

Imposing a Military Solution

A number of factors helped establish Eritrean strength on the ground from which momentous diplomatic gains proceeded. Besides facing drastic cuts in foreign aid in the Gorbachev era (Cohen 2000: 4-5, 24, 230), Addis Ababa sustained heavy blows from within its innermost circle of power when it eliminated several of its senior officers who scrutinized their government's conduct of the war in Eritrea. Perhaps without the knowledge that the government had executed the capable General Tariku Ayne and his subordinates at Nadew Command, Eritreans snatched victory at the gates of Nakfa in 1988. In a historic three-day battle that Basil Davidson famously compared to Dien Bien Phu, Eritreans trounced Ethiopia's ten-year-old *Nadew* Command and irreversibly turned the tide⁴⁹.

The EPLF capitalized on military achievements to make diplomatic gains by revitalizing its regional network of alliances with the Ethiopian rebel movements, although the TPLF beat the EPLF to it. Congratulating Eritreans for their victory at *Nadew*, TPLF's pragmatism helped overcome EPLF-TPLF discord of the mid-1980s. Tigrayan leaders made a dramatic policy reversal by embracing EPLF's long-held conviction that peace and democracy in Ethiopia was necessary for an act of self-determination in Eritrea: "As long as Ethiopia is under a chauvinistic ruling class, it is impossible for the Eritrean people to live peacefully." The Tigrayans acknowledged "undeniable natural connection" between the Eritrean and Ethiopian insurgencies; and stressed the importance of regime change in Ethiopia for peace in the Horn of Africa⁵⁰.

In April 1988, EPLF and TPLF leaders decided to resume full cooperation⁵¹. That coincided with the sudden stalemating of TPLF military gains. During the yearlong Battle of Shire (March 1988 to February 1989), government forces seemed poised to reverse their losses. To mitigate the impact of Tigrayan setbacks and deprive the government of breathing space, Eritreans deployed mechanized and infantry units in the northern Ethiopian province of Tigray alongside the TPLF (Melake 1994). To further distract the government, in 1989 the EPLF also opened a new front in southwestern Ethiopia by sending an entire division, including several commando units, to revitalize the Oromo insurgency. In 1990, the EPLF dispatched two additional expeditionary missions to rescue Oromo rebels sandwiched between Ethiopian troops and their allied SPLM rebels⁵².

49. "Be-Nadew Ez Ghinbar Seletekesetew Huneta Tetarto Yeqerebe Riport", *Miaziya* 1980 EC (April 1988, Classified Ethiopian document available at Eritrea's RDC); Gebru, *The Ethiopian Revolution*, pp. 247 ff.

50. RDC/TPLF/6/2499, TPLF, "Organizational Statement on the Occasion of the Victory on the Naqfa-Afabet Front" (Tigrigna), ND, p. 2.

51. RDC/TPLF/5/2284, TPLF, "EPLF-TPLF Joint Statement", April 1988.

52. Interview with Alamin Mohammed Said (28 September 2005, Asmara, Eritrea).

Convergence of Military and Diplomatic Gains

As EPLF military gains on the ground made it clear that Ethiopian defeat was inevitable, the world's attention turned toward Eritrea. Taking centre stage, the EPLF launched a new charm campaign in the international arena to challenge the master-narrative of Ethiopia as a guarantor of regional stability and to debunk anti-Eritrean propaganda about the independence struggle as an Islamist movement or anti-Israel regional spoiler. Transformative measures of its 1987 Congress backstopped EPLF's diplomatic initiative.

First, it toned down its ideologised foreign relations rhetoric in favour of "pursuing peaceful and nonaligned foreign policy". More specifically, it stipulated that independent Eritrea would seek cordial neighbourly relations with countries of the region and establish diplomatic ties with all countries "regardless of their economic and political systems". Second, the EPLF Congress resolved to launch a multi-party political system after independence⁵³. Armed with this revised program, EPLF Secretary General Isaias Afwerki toured the West ostensibly to assure the world that the nationalist movement had moderated its radical leftist orientation. The EPLF reasserted its readiness to reach a negotiated solution that does not compromise Eritrean right to self-determination.

Many regional and global powers offered to mediate. Nevertheless the Carter-mediated negotiations stumbled over technical sticking points (Said 2002) while successful military operations by Eritrean and Ethiopian insurgents continued to tighten the noose on government forces. In February 1990, the EPLF took the port city of Massawa and soon afterwards, most of southern Eritrea fell to the independence fighters. EPLF forces blockaded the Ethiopian army in Eritrea, while deploying more and more fighters inside Ethiopia alongside Tigrayan and Oromo insurgents. Addis Ababa saw its position deteriorate as insurgents drove government forces from one stronghold to another.

Globally, the US and the Soviet Union sought a nebulous "peace without losers" in Eritrea. Nevertheless, an American initiative led by Assistant Secretary of State Herman Cohen failed through two rounds of talks in 1990 and 1991 (*ibid.*: 209; Cohen 2000: 40-41). During the 1990 round of talks, EPLF negotiators reiterated their decade-old call for an internationally monitored referendum to establish the wishes of the Eritrean people. EPLF negotiators made unprecedented concession: ending military operations in return for the replacement of Ethiopian troop in Eritrea with UN peacekeepers. Ethiopian government negotiators returned in February 1991 with promises of internal autonomy to parts of Eritrea (Said 2002: 209; Cohen 2000: 40-41). Alarmed at how the negotiations failed to take note of Eritrean military upper hand and seemed designed to give the weakening Ethiopian

53. EPLF, *National Democratic Program*, 1987.

government breathing space⁵⁴, the EPLF calculated that achieving an irreversible victory in the battlefield would come faster and avoid compromising its successes in a third round of talks planned for May 1991⁵⁵.

Before departing from Washington, Eritrean negotiators continued their charm campaign to challenge the master-narrative that their independence would lead to Ethiopia's fragmentation and compromise regional stability. In March 1991, for example, Isaias Afwerki met the American intelligence expert for the Horn of Africa, Paul Henze. According to the latter's memorandum, the Eritrean leader expressed his desire and commitment for Ethiopia's stability and convincingly stated that they had no immediate plans to launch major offensives even though they were capable of it. Noting Isaias' indecision about EPLF strategy, Henze then surmised that the EPLF "does not believe in making sacrifices to gain what is likely soon to fall into its hands in any case". In reality, EPLF commanders were coordinating with the TPLF-led coalition of Ethiopian rebels, and elite EPLF units were spearheading most rebel advances inside Ethiopia (Berhe 1995). Finally, the Eritrean leader assured Henze, "of course we are going to go on talking"⁵⁶.

Back in Eritrea, however, EPLF negotiators suddenly disappeared. They fell off the mediators' radar to quietly plan a final military showdown. They decided not to avail themselves of the negotiations until they were certain that their scheme would prevail⁵⁷. Their grand strategy was to ensure military victory first and leave Ethiopia and international mediators no room to continue to dodge Eritreans' right to self-determination.

Between February and May, coordinated Eritrean and Ethiopian insurgents exerted maximum pressure on government forces. The Ethiopian military dictator fled to Zimbabwe on May 21. On May 24, the EPLF captured Eritrea's capital, Asmara; remaining Ethiopian forces in Eritrea fled toward Sudan in complete disarray. The liberation of Eritrea thus became a *fait accompli* while preparations for the second round of negotiations were still underway in London. Such a clear-cut military victory was unprecedented in Africa, and the immediate stability in its wake rare. In light of that, Assistant Secretary of State Cohen scrapped earlier plans to postpone the resolution of the Eritrean question, and instead "decided to endorse the referendum because Eritrea was historically a 'special case'" (Cohen 2000: 50). In another display of diplomatic dexterity, Eritreans committed themselves to minimizing negative effects of Eritrea's separation from Ethiopia by

54. "Chronology of Conflict Resolution Initiatives in Eritrea", Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution, George Mason University, 1991, pp. 145 ff.

55. The lead Eritrean negotiator told Lindon McIntire on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation-TV on February 25, 1991, "We can not pay more in this war [...] and the time frame for the military process seems to be much more shorter than the one that works for the peace process".

56. "Memorandum for the Record from Paul B. Henze."

57. Former Eritrean Foreign Minister Haile Weldetinsae's talk to Eritreans in Los Angeles, March 2000; conversations with Zemhret Yohannes.

allowing Ethiopia unfettered access to the Red Sea, not declaring unilateral independence, and delaying an agreed upon referendum by two years until the post-Derg environment is fully stabilized. After Cohen lifted American ban on the rebels from marching into Addis Ababa, the Derg government collapsed on 27 May 1991 in the hands of EPRDF coalition spearheaded by elite Eritrean units.

Having turned itself into Provisional Government of Eritrea (PGE), EPLF started preparing for the internationally monitored referendum. In 1992, it filed request with the World Bank for a loan in the amount of \$25 million in order to run the popular vote. Since Eritrea was not a member, "the Bank determined it could participate if the loan were technically made to Ethiopia and passed on to the autonomous region of Eritrea, with Eritrea's agreement to assume full responsibility for the liability upon independence"⁵⁸.

Neither Eritrea's military victory nor its readiness to finance the referendum moved the UN and the OAU. They refused to witness the process or approve its outcome without Ethiopia's green light. The PGE appealed to then President Meles Zenawi in Addis Ababa, who readily granted Ethiopia's approval. Only then did the UN dispatch an Observer Mission to Verify the Eritrean Referendum, as did the OAU⁵⁹. Eritrea's ascent to internationally recognized independence was assured. Destabilization of the Horn of Africa that many apologists of empire feared would follow did not materialize. All that because of Eritrean diplomatic and military alliances with Ethiopian rebels, who—upon dislodging of the Derg—served as the democratic alternative that Eritreans needed.

Acutely aware that the odds against them were too great to overcome through diplomatic means alone, Eritrean nationalists grew ever more determined to fight the Ethiopian forces on the ground and assert their cause in the battlefield without abandoning parallel diplomatic initiatives. Far from being the inept blunderers they are sometimes portrayed as, Eritrea's liberation diplomats adapted to the various identities of their audiences and appealed to their potential backers' humanitarian, political and legal sensibilities as well as ideological orientations. For three decades, Eritrean representatives walked different corridors of power while incrementally perfecting military, political and diplomatic strategies to legitimize the changes in the balance of power that they were bent on achieving.

Just as regional and global powers sought to use Eritrea as a pawn, so did Eritreans exploit sweeping ideological and geopolitical rivalries that played

58. The World Bank-Operations Evaluation Department, "Eritrea: Country Assistance Evaluation" (Report No. 28778, April 2004), p. 29.

59. Haile Weldetinsa'e; conversations with Zemhret Yohannes.

themselves out in the region. They manipulated to their advantage historic oppression in and contemporaneous political ferment among Ethiopians. They forged multifaceted diplomatic-military alliances with neighbouring governments, especially Sudan and Somalia, and like-minded partners inside Ethiopia. Material, moral, and political support that their flexible, multifaceted diplomacy accumulated contributed toward Eritrean nationalists' military gains. Where it accrued few immediate results, Eritrean liberation diplomacy softened international reluctance to recognize their military victory. The independence movement demonstrated superb diplomatic finesse in anticipating and managing conflicts that attended Eritrea's birth as a sovereign territorial state—feats of diplomatic accomplishments not borne out by the country's present realities.

If UN Security Council resolutions are any measure of a country's diplomatic performance, Resolution 1907 (that in December 2009 imposed economic sanctions and arms embargo on Eritrea) speaks unfavourably to independent Eritrea's handling of its new statehood like an "old power" in the Bismarckian sense (Smith 1915: 48-49). Tension-fraught relations with some of its neighbours in the Horn of Africa and, across the Red Sea, in the Middle East are unpleasant comparisons that come to the fore when discussing pre-independence successes. Eritrea's diplomatic standing today, however, should not prejudice analysis of the independence movement or preclude recognition of its accomplishments. On the contrary, they can inform and inspire leaders and the public into finding a diplomatic way out of the current impasse in the region.

Department of History, Lexington, University of Kentucky.

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ABSTRACT

Conflicting views of the Eritrean independence war as a solitary, single-handed struggle against the Ethiopian Empire on the one hand and assertions about Eritrean diplomatic ineptitude on the other abound in the discourse on Northeast Africa. Both positions defy the age-old adage that war and diplomacy are enduring features of human interaction, and overlook African experiences with liberation diplomacy. This article revisits Eritrean nationalists' hydra-like diplomatic dealings with an array of forces in the region and beyond to show that their diplomacy of liberation was indispensable to the heated battles (1961-1991), and that, as a result, they received materiel, political and humanitarian assistance without which their movement would have been hard pressed to succeed. They particularly forged political-military alliances with Ethiopian insurgents to clinch the all-important but elusive international recognition after military victory in Asmara and parallel regime change in Addis Ababa.

RÉSUMÉ

Diplomatie africaine de la libération. Le cas de l'Érythrée en quête d'une « Inde africaine ». — Dans le discours sur l'Afrique du Nord-Est abondent des points de vue contradictoires concernant la guerre d'indépendance de l'Érythrée. Elle est vue soit comme une lutte solitaire contre l'Empire éthiopien, soit elle est associée à l'incompétence de la diplomatie érythréenne. Les deux positions défient le vieil adage selon lequel la guerre et la diplomatie sont des caractéristiques centrales de l'interaction humaine, et ignorent les expériences africaines de diplomatie de la libération. Cet article revient sur les relations diplomatiques des nationalistes érythréens disposant d'un éventail de forces dans la région et au-delà, pour montrer que leur diplomatie de la libération était indispensable aux importantes batailles (1961-1991), et que sans le matériel et l'assistance humanitaire et politique qu'ils ont reçus en conséquence, leur mouvement aurait sans doute échoué. Ils ont en particulier noué des alliances politico-militaires avec les insurgés éthiopiens afin d'obtenir l'indispensable reconnaissance internationale. Cette dernière a été difficile à atteindre après la victoire militaire d'Asmara et un changement de régime parallèle à Addis-Abeba.

Keywords/Mots-clés : Eritrea, Ethiopia, diplomacy of liberation, independence war, insurgency, political parties/*Érythrée, Éthiopie, diplomatie de la libération, guerre d'indépendance, insurrection, partis politiques.*