

Horn of Africa: Conflict and Consequences

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Summary

The Horn of Africa- Ethiopia, Somalia, Eritrea, and Djibouti-, located in the strategic Northeastern part of the continent, has a combined area of more than 1.9 million square kilometers; a coastline of over 4000 kilometers, the longest in Africa; and a combined population of approximately 93 million. One of the primary obstacles to development in the region has been perennial conflict within and between countries. The consequences of these perennial conflicts have been very costly for the region in both human and economic terms. Even though endowed with great natural resources, the region is one of the poorest in the world. Where does the region go from here? The region needs a complete paradigm shift; for the people of the region to have a realistic shot at a prosperous future, the countries of the region must commit themselves to a few basic tenets in their relationship: mutual respect for one another; renunciation of war as a tool to resolve disputes; and acceptance of arbitration decisions on disputed boundaries as demarcated and/or recognized by the United Nations. This would create a stable environment that would open up opportunities for economic cooperation- and ultimately economic integration- that the region desperately needs. A Horn of Africa at Peace with itself and its neighbors will be able to exploit its rich natural and complimentary resources for the benefit of its entire people and lift all boats from the abject poverty, disease and despair that currently characterize the region.

A History of Conflict

For decades, the region has been embroiled in conflict. The 30-year Eritrean-Ethiopian war cost tens of thousands of lives and devastated the economic infrastructure of both countries. After Eritrean independence in 1993, it appeared that peace had at last been achieved and there appeared to be hope for a brighter future for the people of both countries. But that was not to be. War started between the two countries again in May 1998. It was one of the most destructive wars in the region with combined casualties estimated at 80,000-100,000¹. The economic devastation was enormous, not to mention the internal displacement of over 100,000 people². Demarcation of the border between the two countries by the Eritrea-Ethiopia Border Commission (EEBC) under the auspices of the United Nations has been completed, but neither country has shown any interest to implement it. Even though UN peacekeepers remain on duty at the border, recent reports indicate the likelihood of further hostilities to be very real.

The history of relations between Somalia and Ethiopia has not been that much different. In 1960, when Somalia became independent, one of its declared primary goals was to

¹ The Eritrean government announced on the BBC on June 20, 2001 that it suffered 19,000 dead in the war. The Ethiopian government never verified casualties on its side, but estimates range from 60,000-80,000.

² The Ethiopian Government expelled 77,000 Eritrean and people of Eritrean origin who it deemed to be a security threat. Another 45,000 were internally displaced in the central border area between the two countries.

bring all Somali speaking territories under one flag. A symbol of that determination was represented by the five pointed star in the Somali flag- each point representing one of the five Somali speaking territories of South Somalia, Somaliland in the north, French Somaliland (now the Republic of Djibouti), the Ogaden region of Ethiopia, and the Northern Frontier District (NFD) of Kenya. The first post-independence government of Somalia made the realization of that dream one of its top priorities. They vowed never to allow any Somali population anywhere to be living under the rule of anyone other than their own independent Somali nation. So the call went out to all Somalis everywhere that this was the patriotic duty of every Somali, male-female, young and old. Successive Somali governments embarked on a shopping spree for arms for the liberation wars to come.

On the other side, Ethiopia and Kenya saw the territorial claims of Somalia as unfounded and unacceptable. Ethiopia saw the Ogaden as part and parcel of Ethiopia- arguing that not only the Ogaden but also the entire Horn, for that matter, had at some time in the first millennium been united under an Ethiopian empire that stretched from the coast of Eritrea all the way to Yemen and beyond. No Ethiopian government worth its salt was willing to give an inch on this issue. And the incessant territorial claims of Somalia fell on deaf ears.

And thus started the clash of egos, not of ideas. The die was cast. The first major war between the two countries started on the morning of June 24, 1964. Patriotic songs to fight for the motherland were sung on both sides. Thousands heeded the call of their nation on both sides and perished in the process. Thousands more were wounded. In the end, both countries went back to where they started- no change of boundaries.

In 1974, Ethiopia began to catch that African flu of the 1970's- the military junta. After Emperor Haile Selassie was deposed, new groups and individuals vied for supremacy in the new dispensation in Ethiopia, and the country seemed to be falling apart at the seams. Military dictator Siad Barre of Somalia, in power since 1969, saw this as the opening he had been waiting for to "liberate" the Ogaden.³ In 1977, Siad Barre, with the best-trained and best-equipped army in Africa at the time, thanks to the Soviet Union, invaded Ethiopia. At the time, Siad Barre was a client of the Soviet Union, which had provided him arms, military advisors and training. The United States was supporting Ethiopia, as it had done for many years during Emperor Haille Selassie's reign. During the 1977 Somali-Ethiopian war, a swapping of super power support took place in what might be called the cycle of cold war divorces and remarriages. After the Ethiopian military regime declared itself Socialist, the Soviet Union switched its support to Ethiopia, and the United States began to support Somalia.⁴ An estimated 15,000-20,000 lost their lives on each side. When the war ended in defeat for Siad Barre, the two countries went back to square one again- no change in boundaries.

³ Ogaden is the name of a Somali sub clan that is related by blood to Siad Barre's Marehan sub clan. Both belong to the Darod clan.

⁴ Initially, the Soviet Union was supplying both sides to keep the war at a stalemate, urging both sides to make up, hoping to win Ethiopia over without losing Somalia in the cold war struggle for influence between the Super Powers.

Even tiny Djibouti, with a population of less than 500,000 and an area of less than 9000 square miles⁵, did not escape the scourge of war characteristic of the region. In 1991, a civil war broke out between the Somali dominated government and the Front for the Restoration of Unity and Democracy (FRUD). The FRUD rebel group had been formed by the Afar community in Djibouti who, even though they represented 35-40% of the population, had no representation in the government. The Djibouti civil war lasted until 1994 when the two sides signed an agreement after the government agreed to allow more Afar representation in the government.

The current Somali civil war has taken the region's conflict to another level. After three decades of brutal, clan-based repression under Siad Barre, Somalia became a broken country both socially and economically. In 1991, when the military junta was finally ousted, there was not much of a country left but hungry people and plenty of weapons. In the power vacuum created after Siad Barre fled Mogadishu, Somalis in the capital turned their venom on each other. The involvement of other countries in the Somali civil war did not help matters.

For the past 16 years, Somalia has become the poster child for a "failed state". With no unity government in place to exercise control over the entire country, the rest of the world has largely written off Somalia. However, the reality is a little different from what has been widely portrayed in the West. In reality, more than two-thirds of the country has been stable and peaceful for the past 16 years. The regional administrations of Somaliland and Puntland have actually been more democratic and more stable than many African countries. But the turmoil in Mogadishu and the South has continuously overshadowed them.

U.S. policy in Somalia has been incoherent and counterproductive in the past 15 years. While the U.S. government, through public pronouncements, recognized the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) formed in Nairobi, Kenya, in 2004, in reality it has done things that undermined it. Chief among U.S. activities that undermined the TFG was its support for a group of renegade warlords in Mogadishu who had terrorized residents for 15 years.⁶ One of the unintended consequences of this U.S. action was the popular support it generated for the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC). As the UIC swept into power in Mogadishu and other towns, the United States suddenly reversed position and openly supported a frontal attack by the TFG and Ethiopia. Granted that the UIC overplayed its hand by advancing toward Baidoa, the seat of the weak TFG, and declaring Jihad on Ethiopia.

⁵ The Republic of Djibouti has an area of 8,958 square miles.

⁶ Initially, the United States appeared to be rallying support for the weak TFG; later, CIA operatives organized a group of ant-TFG warlords in Mogadishu in an attempt to nab three Al-Qaeda suspects believed to be hiding in Somalia. This was the catalyst for the uprising in Mogadishu that helped the Union of Islamic Courts rest control of Mogadishu, and most of South Central Somalia, from the warlords in June 2006.

The occupation of Ethiopian troops in Mogadishu has created a new dynamic in the conflict that might have its own unintended consequences. In all the wars that the countries of the region have fought against each other, never before has the army of one side enter the capital city of another and engage in urban warfare, kicking down doors in the middle of the night to round up suspected insurgents. For the young men and women of the TFG and the Ethiopian army, it is difficult to tell who is an insurgent and who is not. So, to be on the safe side, they round up everyone of military age, and by doing so may be sowing the seeds of further hate, making a down payment on future wars. As the battle for Mogadishu rages on, the region finds itself caught between two powers vying for influence- Al Qaeda and the U.S. Global War on Terror, the same way that it was caught between the super powers during the cold war. The proliferation of recruitment videos for the war in Somalia by Jihadist Websites indicates that the region is now in the cross hairs of Al Qaeda and its global terror network in a way it has not been before. And so the trajectory for the Global War on Terror now passes directly through the region. If not carefully managed, this could engulf the region in a wider sectarian and ethnic conflict for years to come. There is no military solution for the Somali conflict. The past fifteen years have made that clear. The building block method has worked in Somaliland and Puntland and offers the best solution for Mogadishu and the South.

These perennial conflicts have had devastating effects on the people of the region. Governments of the region squandered their meager resources on unnecessary arms and neglected economic development. In what has been a zero-sum game, successive governments in the region have been literally taking food from the mouths of their people to buy arms for the next war. And so it goes.

Where Does the Region Go From Here?

An important question the people of the region must collectively ask themselves today is this: where do we go from here? The countries of the region need a complete paradigm shift in their relationships with each other. More than an accident of geography unites the people of the Horn; they are all closely related by culture and custom, if not by blood; they share a common destiny and a yearning for a better future. If nothing else, their common suffering from abject poverty, hunger, and disease must form the basis for the obvious imperative of economic unity that would allow the region to reap the benefits of economies of scale in resources, markets and capital. The region needs the leadership that would take them to the Promised Land: a region at peace with itself and with others; a region that is united by cause and common interest; a region that is economically integrated. Following are some basic requisites for peace and economic development:

- Relationships based on mutual respect.
- Acceptance of United Nations decisions on demarcation of boundaries.
- Renunciation of conflict in all its forms as a tool to resolve disputes.
- Democracy and respect for human rights.
- Free access of the region's people to each other to allow free movement of goods and services.
- Creation of a supranational institution to lay the groundwork for an integrated economy and the mechanisms to manage it- determining how to share the benefits

for the common good, resolve disputes, and ensure continuity under all circumstances.

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