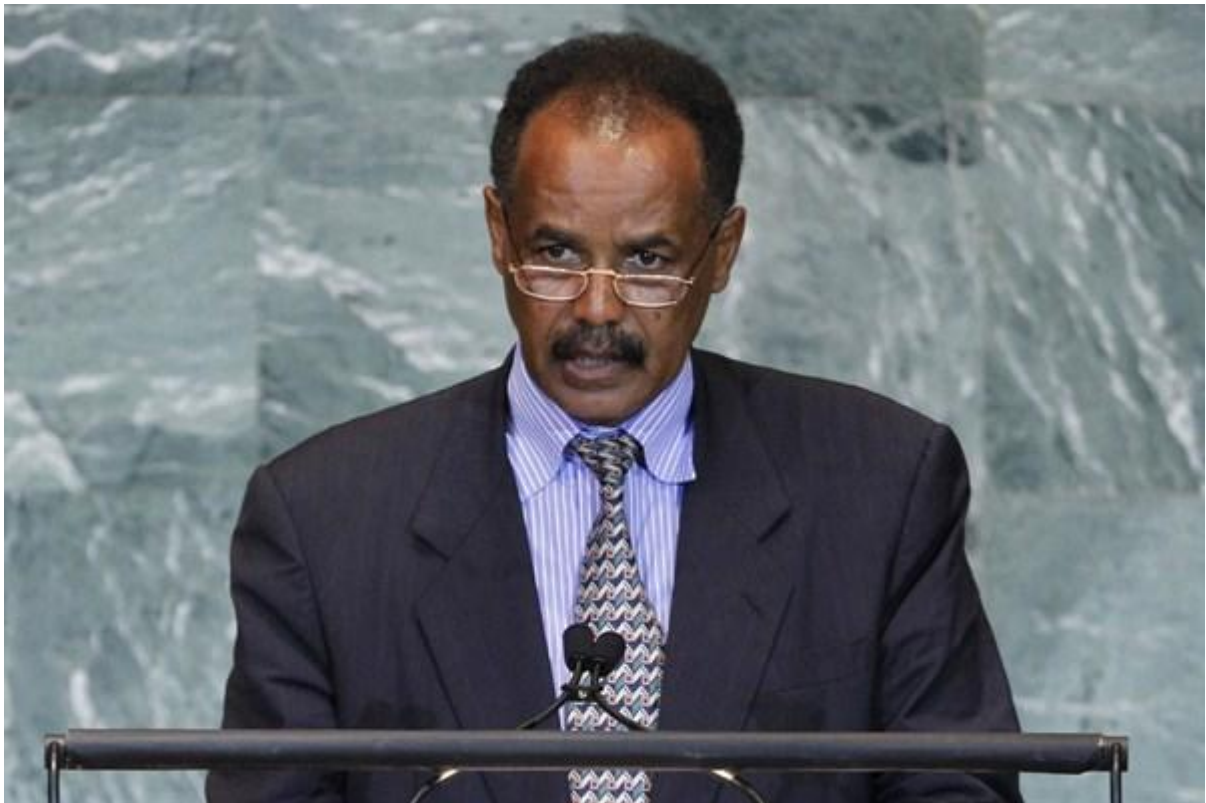


Singled Out? Eritrea and the Politics of the Horn of Africa

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President Isaias Afwerki of Eritrea addresses the 66th session of the United Nations General Assembly at U.N. headquarters, New York, NY, Sept. 23, 2011 (AP photo by Jason DeCrow).

On July 22, thousands of diaspora Eritreans from across Europe protested in front of the Palais des Nations, the United Nations' office in Geneva, against a [recently released report](#) by the U.N. Human Rights Commission (HRC). The report details grave human rights violations, including arbitrary arrest, torture and forced labor, which could represent crimes against humanity. If confirmed, this would result in Eritrea being referred to the International Criminal Court. In the view of the demonstrators

who protested against this characterization of their country, Eritrea is being demonized by an international system that never wanted Eritrea to be an independent state in the first place. The current government, as these protesters see it, is trying its best to develop the country with limited resources and under the constant threat of its biggest neighbor and former occupying power, Ethiopia.

Four days later, on July 26, a rather different scene could be observed in Geneva, again in front of the Palais des Nations: Thousands of diaspora Eritreans from all over Europe [protested in favor of](#) the same U.N. HRC report. The report, the protesters at the second demonstration contended, would bring the details of grave human rights violations out into the open for everybody to see; some protesters mimicked positions in which prison inmates had been tortured in Eritrea. In the eyes of these demonstrators, Eritrea [was indeed Africa's North Korea](#), a hell on earth, and its dictator Isaias Afwerki and his regime needed to be toppled.

The two demonstrations, which might seem to refer to two different countries, symbolize the contrasting images and realities of Eritrea, a country that has [been dubbed Africa's most secretive state](#). More than two decades since its independence, Eritrea makes international headlines above all for the large number of refugees and migrants it produces. Eritreans have often been the largest group among those who die crossing the Mediterranean, and a [particularly deadly incident](#) off the coast of Lampedusa, Italy, in 2013 has become a powerful symbol of their plight.

The media, then, often depicts Eritrea through the narratives of those who have fled and who often have been granted political asylum. In addition, a powerful human rights lobby [dominates the wider discourse](#) on Eritrea. It is a discourse that is hard to

criticize: The human rights abuses in Eritrea are real. But this discourse [presents only one facet](#) of what is a much more complex picture.

Few are prepared to consider the other facets of this picture, a task not made any easier by a secretive government that until recently hardly issued visas to journalists or other foreign observers. Of late, a number of journalists, [including from the BBC](#), have gained access, often for the first time in decades. But their more balanced reports, which in addition to portraying human rights violations also outlined Eritrea's achievements in meeting the U.N. Millennium Development Goals, tend to be ignored in favor of the one-dimensional narrative of the government's [crushing repression](#).

At the same time, Eritrea has become a geopolitical pariah in the Horn of Africa, due to its alleged support of the Islamist insurgency Al-Shabaab and other unsavory movements in Somalia. This has resulted in [two rounds of U.N. Security Council sanctions](#) in 2009 and 2011, which include an arms embargo as well as a travel ban, asset freeze and other targeted sanctions against some of Eritrea's political and military leaders. But the representation of Eritrea as a rogue state, and how this representation fits into a particular geopolitical agenda in the wider Horn that is dominated by the fight against vaguely defined terrorist threats, both bear closer examination. A more accurate portrayal requires a more historically grounded understanding of contemporary Eritrea, in the context of both its emergence as an independent state and the patterns of statecraft in the Horn.

Independent Eritrea: From Rebel Governance to State Consolidation

Eritrea as an independent state formally arrived on the world stage in 1993, but had de facto emerged in 1991, after one of Africa's longest liberation wars against its occupying power, Ethiopia. The early 1990s were characterized by the post-Cold War "end of history" paradigm that predicted an inexorable global evolution from undemocratic regimes toward Western-style democracy. The governance philosophy and governing practices of the Eritrean political leadership, in contrast, were based on quite different parameters, namely top-down decision-making combined with political indoctrination and mobilization.

Those principles had been put into practice in the quasi-state that the liberation movement governed in areas of Eritrea under conditions of war. One could make the case that these practices were a prerequisite for eventually winning the war against a much more potent adversary. The dominant liberation movement, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), possessed few domestic material resources and could only sustain the costly war thanks to substantial financial contributions from the considerable Eritrean diaspora. In order to ensure this intimate bond between those on the battlefield and large sections of the diaspora, and to maintain recruitment and mobilization for the liberation army, the EPLF had to forge a sense of national belonging within a territory that was geographically diverse and equally divided between Christians and Muslims, and which comprised nine different ethnic groups. It did so by propagating an Eritrean identity with core values of unity despite past ethnic and religious divisions, sacrifice for the ultimate goal of national liberation and self-reliance. The latter, largely born out of necessity, remains a key

feature in Eritrean politics to this day, and has to be understood within the wider geopolitical context of postcolonial Africa in general and the politics of the Horn in particular.

In line with the charter of the Organization of African Unity (OAU), the predecessor of today's African Union (AU), Eritrea's independence struggle was seen as illegitimate by all major powers and the U.N. Instead of being seen as a question of decolonization, as Eritrea—as a distinct former Italian colony—rightfully claimed, the war was characterized as one of secession and as such in violation of the OAU charter. In addition, Ethiopian territorial integrity was regarded as paramount in the Horn, an area of strategic importance to Cold War geopolitics, and it was feared that an independent Eritrea would allow Arab states to dominate the Red Sea. The general attitude toward the Eritrean cause was aptly summed up as early as 1952 in a statement by then-U.S. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, quoted by Eritrean politicians to this day. [Dulles argued](#) that while, from the perspective of justice, Eritrea should have the right to self-determination, Washington's strategic interests made it necessary for the country to remain linked with Ethiopia. Ethiopia's subsequent unlawful annexation of Eritrea and the silence of the U.N. and the wider international community that greeted it have become core foundations of the Eritrean national myth that the country has suffered a long history of betrayal by outside powers and can ultimately only rely on itself.

The EPLF in turn proved effective in both promoting this unifying national narrative and simultaneously engaging in state-building through war. The Front established central control over the material resources at its disposal and created effective structures of governance both inside the movement and in relation to the wider population. Major achievements in the administration of rebel-controlled territory included the

provision of services in areas such as health care, education and vocational training under conditions of considerable scarcity. These in turn formed the base of much of the EPLF's domestic legitimacy. In addition, parts of the EPLF's legitimacy, both domestically and among diaspora Eritreans, derived from the fact that its leading cadres not only promised the aspirational goal of a future state, but were also the ones actually fighting for it on the ground, instead of enjoying the distant comfort of exile. The EPLF's version of Eritrean nationalism was not shared by all sectors of society, nor did it entail the complete dissolution of other nationalist movements, but it became the national narrative commanding loyalty among the majority of Eritreans globally.

It is often forgotten that the EPLF was primarily established to liberate Eritrea through military means, making its narrative not merely an ideological phenomenon but a concrete tool in the struggle for state power. The EPLF was characterized by strict discipline and a centralized hierarchy of command. The group cracked down on dissent and strongly emphasized executive top-down decision-making combined with political indoctrination of its members. These features were necessary to succeed in a war of national liberation against a much more powerful enemy within the overall environment of the Horn, where mutual interference by regional states in each other's affairs is the norm, and hostile infiltrators could easily have had a devastating impact on the movement and its strategy. At the eve of independence, Eritrea had thus become a tight-knit nation that included its diaspora citizens, ruled by the EPLF in a system that combined centralized control, coercion and forced voluntarism.

Despite those dynamics, the fact that military success had indeed brought Eritrea the self-determination its people longed

for gave the government of independent Eritrea a high degree of legitimacy both domestically and internationally. Amid the general euphoria that accompanied the third wave of democracy in the early 1990s, it was widely ignored that the former liberation movement, which morphed into a mass party and renamed itself the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), had captured the state and governed according to similar principles of control and coercion as the pre-independence quasi-state. Instead, together with Ethiopia, Uganda and Rwanda, Eritrea was praised as a model for post conflict governance and developmental gains in Africa, not least by the Clinton administration.

This edifice crashed down only five years after Eritrean independence, when Eritrea and Ethiopia's unresolved conflicts from the past escalated into a full-scale war. While the 1998-2000 war is often referred to as a border war, causal factors also included disputes concerning the conditions of Ethiopian access to the sea, as well as divergent expectations regarding bilateral trade and currency arrangements. Above all, the conflict's underlying dynamics had much to do with Eritrean resistance to traditional Ethiopian hegemony. Once war had broken out, however, the border between both countries, which was never demarcated on the ground under Italian colonial rule, became the principal object of contestation and achieved undue symbolic importance.

This has led to the frozen conflict or, as Eritrea puts it, the ongoing state of "no war, no peace" that has since defined both the region's geopolitical dynamics and Eritrean politics. A peace agreement signed in Algiers in 2000, followed by the ruling of the Eritrea Ethiopia Boundary Commission in 2002, created the formal conditions for border demarcation and a subsequent peace treaty. Both parties agreed to accept the boundary commission's decision as final and binding before the

verdict was reached. Once the commission ruled that Badme, a symbolically important town that triggered the conflict, was Eritrean, however, Ethiopia refused to comply. To this day Ethiopia occupies territory legally awarded to Eritrea, substantiating Eritrea's claims that Ethiopia is violating its borders.

In parallel, the Eritrean leadership has used the stalemate to militarize society, governing through a top-down developmental approach based on self-reliance inside Eritrea combined with government claims on the diaspora. At the same time, and despite its own rhetoric, the Eritrean leadership has made numerous attempts to cultivate the U.S. as an ally, in part by offering support in the global fight against terrorism. The failure of these efforts has in turn re-enforced Eritrea's sense of isolation and betrayal by the international community. As a consequence Eritrea has strengthened the policies that fuel outward migration and refugee flows and feed the human rights-centered discourse on the country—with its discontents now highly visible to the outside world in occasional demonstrations like those in Geneva.

The 2001 Crackdown on Opposition and Media

Shortly before the 1998 war with Ethiopia, Eritrea had ratified a new constitution that would have paved the way for elections, established rules for the emergence of an independent media sector and more generally cemented other structures of democratic governance. Its implementation was suspended with the outbreak of the war and the general mobilization that followed. After Eritrea's defeat, 15 high-profile members of the ruling PFDJ, the so-called G-15, wrote a critical open letter to President Isaias Afwerki and demanded the constitution be implemented to facilitate a culture of free speech and debate.

The constitution had been showcased at the last International Eritrean Studies Conference to be held to date, in July 2001. The conference, which was characterized by open debate and presentations by high-profile Eritrean intellectuals critical of Eritrean policies, could have served as a platform to radically transform the political landscape of Eritrea.

Instead of engaging with those critical views and the issues raised by the G-15, however, the president responded with a brutal crackdown. Eleven of the 15 signatories of the open letter—that is, all of those still in the country at the time—were arrested in September 2001. Most journalists who worked for independent newspapers that had criticized the government’s wartime conduct were likewise arrested. Since then, Eritrea has had no private media—independent coverage is only available through foreign websites. To this day, the 11 G-15 members and, [according to a recent article](#) on their fate, an estimated 23 journalists are held in incommunicado detention and solitary confinement. In fact, most of the G-15 are thought to have died in detention due to chronic illnesses and inadequate medical care, even though this is hard to confirm. In any case, President Afwerki has accused them of betraying Eritrea during the war, arguing that, according to that logic, a trial is only possible once the conflict has come to a conclusion.

At the same time, the prospects for ending the stalemate in the conflict with Ethiopia are not promising. The U.N. Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea, the peacekeeping operation on the countries’ border that [aimed to ensure](#) that both parties observed their security commitments, was terminated in 2008 without much progress. And while Eritrea has used the stalemate as justification for its politics of internal regime stabilization, it suits Ethiopia equally well in its wider geopolitical strategy.

National Service Obligations and the Exodus

Even before the renewed war with Ethiopia, the Eritrean leadership's primary nation-building strategy was characterized by mobilization for national development. This included self-reliance through collective labor and sacrifice at home, combined with investment by the diaspora, including through remittances. An important pillar of this strategy was the establishment of national service as a core citizenship obligation. At its inauguration in 1994, national service lasted 18 months and usually consisted of six months of military training followed by 12 months of development-centered activities, in line with the policies of many post-liberation states. Part of the rationale behind national service was to cement a national identity that would transcend ethnic and religious ties, thus conscripts were often rotated and sent to different parts of the country.

Initially welcomed by many, national service mutated into the Warsay-Yikealo Development Campaign (WYDC) in the aftermath of the failed peace process with Ethiopia. The campaign's name points to its main objective: to generate solidarity and the propensity for self-sacrifice across different generations of soldiers in order to jointly rebuild the war-torn country. Warsay refers to the generation of national-service recruits, while Yikealo refers to fighters in Eritrea's war for independence. In line with these objectives, not only are most recruits to the WYDC not released after 18 months, but they can in theory stay in service indefinitely. In fact, no clear rules exist about who will be demobilized and who will stay on. While still formally under military command and without proper salaries, recruits are mostly given civilian labor tasks, often in army- or PFDJ-owned construction or agricultural projects, or even in [support activities](#) for the emerging mining sector. This practice has been [critiqued as forced labor](#).

The Eritrean government regards the WYDC as a vital tool to guarantee Eritrean independence and achieve developmental gains, objectives portrayed as more important than personal liberties or individual aspirations. In turn, those who flee the country, the majority of whom cite WYDC obligations as the cause, are regarded as traitors. At the same time, they are still connected to the government's development project through a 2 percent tax and other financial links imposed on diaspora Eritreans. Anybody of Eritrean nationality who wants to use consular or other state services must pay the tax, applied to any income incurred since having left the country. And while some Western governments have raised the issue of its legality and tried to limit the capacity of Eritrean embassies or other state agencies to collect it, payments are still made by many through underground or informal channels. Thus, the growing number of Eritrean refugees and migrants adds to the financial contributions of the diaspora and helps to ensure a steady flow of funding to the homeland.

The [current exodus](#) from Eritrea might not be sustainable in the long term, but it is unclear what Eritrea's large youth population would do otherwise. Economic opportunities are scant, partly due to the fact that the private sector has been [severely curtailed](#) by the PFDJ, but also strongly related to the lack of economic exchange with Eritrea's most important former trading partner, Ethiopia.

While the government has used the current stalemate as an excuse for a number of oppressive policies, it is also the case that Eritrea will never enjoy a prosperous economy as long as the border with Ethiopia remains closed. To overcome Eritrea's economic marginalization, wider dynamics in the Horn and in the global geopolitical environment need to change, and it is here that outside actors could play an important role.

Eritrea as the Main Cause of Instability in the Horn?

Eritrea was always regarded as somewhat prickly and difficult to deal with by the international community. This perception was not helped by the fact that Eritrea entered into violent conflicts with all of its neighbors, even when it subsequently agreed to and abided by international mediation. What was often overlooked here was the fact that Eritrea as an independent state had simply become a new actor in the patterns of international politics in the Horn. These patterns have over decades been characterized by contested borders between and within states, and dominated by mutual interference and proxy wars threatening not only governments but the survival of states themselves.

The 1998-2000 war with Ethiopia brought an additional dimension in Horn politics to the fore: the ill-conceived challenge by Eritrea to Ethiopian hegemony. Following the verdict of the Boundary Commission, Eritrea engaged in various efforts to reduce Ethiopia's importance as a key U.S. and Western ally, and sought to put itself into the frame as an alternative. In 2002, Eritrea offered the U.S. support in the war on terror, including access to its military bases. It even [hired a Washington lobbying firm](#) to push for being made the location of the permanent base of the Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA). Following the decision to base CJTF-HOA at Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti, which subsequently became the only permanent U.S. military facility on the African continent, Eritrea's progressive isolation began to take shape.

In parallel, it became obvious that while Eritrea might have international law on its side in relation to the border ruling with Ethiopia, the guarantors of the peace process—namely the U.N., the European Union, the AU and the U.S.—would not force Ethiopia to comply. And Eritrea’s position on the issue, resting on the refusal to consider alternative scenarios to a ruling that was meant to be final and binding, proved to be rather inept and counterproductive. As a consequence, Eritrea initially reverted to the Horn’s [tried and trusted methods of statecraft](#), seeking to undermine Ethiopia by providing support to its internal opposition—with Ethiopia doing the same in Eritrea. Both countries also stepped up their efforts to counter each other’s influence in the wider region.

One of the major regional clashes between them took place in Somalia, where a U.S.-backed Ethiopian military intervention in 2006 in support of the Transitional Federal Government against the Union of Islamic Courts left Eritrea on the wrong side of Western powers. Eritrea’s decision to maintain some ties with Somali Islamist insurgents, some of whom eventually emerged as Al-Shabaab, was meant to be a purely tactical move against Ethiopia, rather than the product of a shared political agenda. But the move subsequently resulted in sanctions against Eritrea following [extraordinarily detailed reports](#) by the U.N. Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea. As there is no equivalent U.N. body that equally investigates Ethiopian activities in regional destabilization, Eritrea can easily be painted as the major force behind instability in the Horn, a fact that Ethiopia’s diplomacy has amply promoted and capitalized upon—not least in providing evidence for Eritrea’s alleged misdeeds to the U.N. Monitoring Group. This in turn re-enforced the Eritrean leadership’s long-held belief, not least founded upon concrete experiences in the war for national independence and the role the U.N. and the U.S. played at that

time, that Eritreans can only rely on themselves and that outsiders cannot be trusted.

At the same time and away from the limelight, Eritrea did make various attempts to normalize relations with the U.S. after President Barack Obama came to power in January 2009. Documents released by WikiLeaks, including U.S. Embassy cables as well as protocols from meetings with U.S. officials, show the futility of such efforts. Eritrea's president is described in those communications as [an unhinged dictator](#) and Eritrean interlocutors as arrogant. Above all the prevailing view is that, in supporting extremists in Somalia, Eritrea has crossed a red line and must pay for it. These documents also confirm that Ethiopian actions in Somalia and the wider region had firm U.S. backing from the start. If anything, the U.S.-Ethiopian partnership has grown closer during the Obama presidency, with Ethiopia clearly the most strategically important regional partner and of late also a base for U.S. drone operations.

Taken together, few incentives exist for a shift from painting Eritrea as a bad neighbor toward a focus on the dynamics of a bad neighborhood, even if this seems a prerequisite to address the multiple economic, security and human rights issues that continue to haunt the Horn.

What Does the Future Hold?

This brings us back to the beginning of this report and suggests a clear link between the HRC report and Eritrea's wider geopolitical position in the Horn, tied in multiple ways to its relationship with Ethiopia. On the one hand, the state of "no war, no peace," which is not recognized under international law, has been used too conveniently by the Eritrean government to justify the abusive practice that national service has become, as well as denials of political, religious and personal freedoms.

On the other hand, it is hard to envisage how Eritrea could become a constructive partner and viable economy if the current stalemate, which Ethiopia has little incentive to alter, continues. Without economic prospects in addition to political rights and other freedoms, it is equally hard to imagine that the numbers of those now leaving Eritrea will be diminished, not least because those who leave follow well-trodden paths of Eritrean migration flows that date back to before independence. But with regard to the large number of refugees from Eritrea, a solution that gives many of those who leave incentives to stay is urgently needed.

It will require a pragmatic approach to engage afresh not only with Eritrea but also with the bad neighborhood of the Horn, and in particular with regard to Eritrean-Ethiopian relations. With U.S. interests too closely aligned with Ethiopia, and with Washington policymakers who, like former Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Herman Cohen, [advocate for bringing Eritrea](#) “in from the cold” in the minority, the EU could be an important interlocutor. Eritrea has, for example, actively engaged in the Khartoum process, a regional initiative aimed at curbing human trafficking, in itself a significant shift in Asmara’s foreign policy stance.

Whether these initiatives will result in more sustained EU engagement, the prospect of [deeper development cooperation](#) and ultimately some form of opening, or whether those EU members who propagate a hard line of unspecified intervention against Eritrea gain the upper hand, remains to be seen.

In the near future, Eritrea will be singled out for more HCR scrutiny and faces the prospect of being referred to the International Criminal Court. Upon the request of Somalia and backed by Djibouti, both Eritrean adversaries, the HRC’s mandate of investigation has been extended for another year in

order to decide whether crimes against humanity have indeed been committed—in other words, politics in the Horn as usual. Djibouti, in particular, has gained considerably not only in its international standing but also economically from Eritrea's isolation.

One can only hope that any future approach toward Eritrea mirrors the more pragmatic engagement with Ethiopia and moves beyond the almost exclusive focus on a narrowly defined human rights agenda. After all, Ethiopia has in the past been accused of crimes against humanity in its Somali region without much international censorship, and more generally the countries of the Horn are [not far apart](#) in indices of human rights, political freedoms and democratization. While this might not always be easy to stomach, there is no justification to treat Eritrea differently and ignore the country's valid fears for its own security, [nor its developmental achievements](#).

Seen from this angle, Obama's July 2015 visit to Ethiopia was a missed opportunity, though consistent with a wider U.S. policy approach that, for example, excluded Eritrea from the U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit in Washington in August 2014. That exclusion may come to be regarded as a Pyrrhic victory for the human rights lobby, as continued isolation of Eritrea does little to help the aspirations of those who suffer inside the country or on their journeys toward an imagined better future. During his visit to Ethiopia, Obama [referred to the Ethiopian government](#) as democratically elected—despite a May 2015 election in which the ruling party won every seat, [receiving condemnation](#) from outside observers. His most critical comments were not aimed specifically at the Ethiopian government but [came in a speech at the AU](#) in which he more generally, albeit strongly, critiqued those leaders who held on to power indefinitely. Ethiopia is on safe territory here. Its

rebel-movement leader turned president, Meles Zenawi, did not step down but died of cancer at the age of 57 in 2012. But it is as hard to imagine that Zenawi would have stepped aside voluntarily as it is for Eritrean President Afwerki. The most glaring omission in Obama's speech, however, was the failure to engage with Eritrean isolation and Ethiopia's role in it, despite the fact that the stalemate between Ethiopia and Eritrea underpins most current conflicts in the Horn.

Ultimately, for a more stable Horn of Africa to emerge, the pattern of mutual interference in each other's internal affairs needs to be broken. This occurred briefly in the early 1990s, when the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) was strengthened as an important regional organization. The then-new leaders of Eritrea and Ethiopia were key protagonists in pushing an agenda for peace, development and the coordination of regional security policies. Without a more regional approach that aims to deliver benefits to all countries of the Horn, the future looks rather grim, even if an overthrow of the current Eritrean leadership—the central focus of human rights advocates—should come about.

Eritrea suspended its membership in IGAD in 2006 as a reaction to the Ethiopian intervention in Somalia. It applied to rejoin the organization in 2011, but a decision on its readmission is still pending. The delay is in part due to failed conflict resolution with Ethiopia, compounded by the fact that the IGAD headquarters are located in Djibouti, one of the countries that has most benefitted from the fallout of the Eritrean-Ethiopian dispute. A more active role for the AU, which is headquartered in Addis Ababa, is equally unrealistic, as Eritrea would consider any initiative coming out of Ethiopia as suspicious and close to a conspiracy.

Normalizing relations between Eritrea and Ethiopia still holds the key to a more viable future for the region. Here, the international community—most likely the EU or other actors in the region and beyond—could assume a more active role. Any progress, however, will ultimately depend on a more balanced and creative policy approach that moves beyond the vilification and isolation of Eritrea and acknowledges the region’s deeper fault lines.

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