

The Eritrea-Ethiopia Conflict



Explained by Amb. Herman Cohen
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Colonialism

Until World War II, Eritrea had been a colony of Italy for a half-century.

During the war, Eritrea was liberated from Italian rule by the British army.

After the war, Eritrea was a ward of the United Nations

1888
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1952

Federation



The UN's initial solution for Eritrea was to bring it into a confederation with Ethiopia.

Within this arrangement, Eritrea was independent, with its own parliament and internal security, except for international relations and monetary affairs.

The Eritrean people were comfortable with this arrangement.

Annexed by Ethiopia

The Emperor of Ethiopia decided that it was untenable for Ethiopia to be in an equal relationship with Eritrea within a confederation. After all, Ethiopia was so much larger, both in population and landmass.

He decided to dissolve the confederation and force Eritrea to become a province of Ethiopia. The Eritrean people were not consulted before this momentous change was made.

1952

1962

1962
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1990

Guerrilla War



The Eritrean people were not happy with this change in their status, and started a guerrilla war against the Ethiopian government.

The military force that fought for Eritrean independence was known as the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front [EPLF]

The Emperor was overthrown by his military in 1972. However, the new regime, known as the "Dergue", saw no reason to change the status of Eritrea. On the contrary, the regime reflected the overwhelming desire of the Ethiopian people to maintain Eritrea as a province

Peace Talks & Liberation

While peace talks were going on between the EPLF and the Dergue under the auspices of the US State Department, the Ethiopian army began to weaken and lose ground. It was fighting a two-front war. Within Ethiopia itself, a guerilla movement known as the Tigrean Peoples Liberation Front [TPLF] was also fighting against the Dergue.

On May 24, the EPLF captured Asmara and proclaimed the liberation of Eritrea.

During the peace conference that followed in London on May 29, an agreement was reached that there would be a two-year cooling off period after which the people of Eritrea would hold a referendum to decide if they wanted independence or wanted to remain part of Ethiopia. Needless to say, they chose independence.

1991

1991
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1998

Independence

The first seven years of independence were good years for both Eritrea and Ethiopia. The latter had access to the Eritrean port of Aseb, with its own port and customs facility. Trade between the two was significant and growing.



1998

War Returns

in 1998, the Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawai decided to provoke hostilities with between Ethiopia and Eritrea over disputed border areas.

He wanted to demonstrate to the Ethiopian people that he shared their unhappiness over the loss of Eritrea. Unfortunately, the border dispute escalated and a full-scale war ensued. Casualties were heavy on both sides, but were especially abundant on the Ethiopian side because of their "human wave" attacks.

Harmful Tension

Since 1998, relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea have been bitter and non-existent. Cross border trade has stopped. Landlocked Ethiopia has no access to Eritrean ports. Eritrea has lost much of its GDP to the lack of cross border trade, as well as the lost revenues from greatly diminished port operations.

1998
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Today

What does the future hold?

What are the prospects for normalization between Ethiopia and Eritrea, an outcome that would be beneficial to both sides? So far, both sides are showing no interest in compromising between their respective demands.

Twenty-five years of independence for Eritrea has had both positive and negative impacts on both Eritrea and Ethiopia. Nevertheless, there is every indication that the people of Eritrea do not regret their decision to seize the opportunity for self-determination and to become an independent nation.

Hernan J. Cohen was the United States Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs from 1989 to 1993. He is the author of *The Mind of an African Strongman: Conversations with Dictators, Statesmen, and Father Figures*.