

No Peace No War: The Ethiopian–Eritrean Conflict¹

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The aim of this article is designed to provide an overview of the historical relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea from pre-colonial times up until the break-out, the major causes of the war, as well as its course and to analyze the situation after the cease-fire including the failed UN peacekeeping and later the proxy war in Somalia. The paper is a desk study, mainly based on secondary data analysis of the available secondary information and documentary examinations; news materials, academic literature, books, and online articles were used. By giving insight into the history, the course war and dynamics of conflictual relations and the frozen war between these two states will help to understand the security dynamics of the region.

Keywords: conventional war, Ethiopia, Eritrea, proxy war

Introduction

The relationship between Eritrea and Ethiopia is arguably the most important and volatile and continues to serve as the main source of regional instability in the Horn of Africa. [1] The Horn of Africa is composed of Djibouti, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Kenya, Somalia,³ Sudan, South Sudan, and Uganda. In the 1890s, after the opening of the Suez Canal, the British, Italian and French were interested in the region because of their strategic location. After the end of World War II, the United States and in the 1960s, the Soviet Union were interested in the region, therefore at the time of the Cold War, it became the area of the rivalry of superpowers. [2] In 2015 China established its first overseas naval base in Djibouti adding the number of military bases in Djibouti to seven including France, US, Japan, Italy, Germany, and Spain. This shows that the region is still strategically important in military, economic and political terms despite the lack of natural resources comparing to other African regions. Most importantly, location lies on the crossroads between the indispensable Middle East oil and the economies of the industrialized countries.

Eritrea became an independent sovereign state on 24 May 1993 after a long civil war with Ethiopia. According to the Guardian's Neal Ascherson, "the African Vietnam" [3] which won

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³ Somaliland, *de jure* independent state since 1991.

a 30-year war of liberation against an Ethiopian army supported by the Americans and then by the Soviet Union. [4] In 1998 Eritrea and Ethiopia went into a full-scale war. And both countries have remained in a state of war since the 1998 border conflict. Eritrea maintains a large standing army (mostly conscripted), with a primary focus on the defence of the border with Ethiopia. [5] However, significant numbers of conscripts choose to flee the country rather than serve. This makes Eritrea one of the world's fastest emptying nations, a country of about 4.5 million, governed by a secretive dictatorship accused of human rights violations that are playing an outsize role in the biggest global migration crisis since World War II. [6] Eritrea⁴ is the second largest nation after Syria to resort to seaborne smugglers to cross the Mediterranean to Europe. [7] About 6% of the population has fled the country. [8]

On the other hand, Ethiopia is a key ally of the Western world, especially the US, which considers it an important regional security partner in the global war on terror. [9: 83] According to the Global Fire Power, Ethiopia is currently the strongest Sub-Saharan country in military terms and the third strongest country in Africa after Egypt and Algeria, ranking higher than Nigeria and South Africa. [10] Ethiopia is also the largest UN peacekeeping contributor in the World, [11] sending its troops to Abyei, South Sudan, Darfur and the African Union Mission in Somalia. The relations between these two states will help to understand the security dynamics of the horn of Africa “which is characterized by destabilization and cross border interventions”. [12]

Historical Background

Tigrinya-speaking people on both sides of the Mereb River in northern Ethiopia shared the same language, the same religion and the same basic social, cultural and economic institutions and structures. Undoubtedly, the Tigrinya-speakers of Tigray and Eritrea considered themselves at that time to be an integral part of the *Habesha* (northern Ethiopian) cultural, religious and political realm as embodied by the Orthodox Church and the Ethiopian Monarchy. [13: 258]

However, the Islamic areas north of the Mereb, which were spread out in a semi-circle north of the Tigrinya-speaking areas, had never really been completely integrated into the Empire on the other hand the governor of the northern province received the title of Baher Negash (Ruler of the Sea), whereas the governor of the southern province was given the title of Tigre Mekonen (Lord of Tigray), where both holders of office were given authority over the rulers of all other principalities within their province. [13: 258]

By the middle of the 18th century, local rulers north of the Mereb no longer sought approval by the distant Emperors for their assumption to power. However, while independent of imperial control, these petty rulers still considered themselves part of the Ethiopian polity and never declared their political independence from the Empire. However, it was at the time when Yohannes IV became the first Emperor of Ethiopia to place highland Eritrea under direct

⁴ Gérard Prunier, the French academic and historian refers to Eritrea as “the African equivalent of North Korea” for its highly centralized, militarized and authoritarian system of government on the African continent. Lectures given at the Association for Study of the Middle East and Africa.

rule. [13: 259] Under King Yohannes IV, in 1879 Alula became the Governor of the northern province under the title of *Ras* and established his headquarters in Asmara.

In 1882, Italy controlled the Red Sea coastal area of Assab then it expanded Massawa in 1885 with the support of the British. [14: 13] Italy used Assab and Massawa as a springboard to move into the interior of Ethiopia. However, they were defeated at the battle of Dogali in January 1887.

Italy manipulated Ethiopia into signing the Treaty of Wuchale in 1889. The treaty granted the Italians the right to full control over Eritrea and a protectorate role over Ethiopia. However, the interpretation of the treaty became controversial, which culminated in the battle of Adwa in 1896 and the subsequent defeat of Italy. Nevertheless, Italy had managed to establish Eritrea as a separate colonial entity in 1890. [15: 62] A number of treaties (1900, 1902, 1906) were concluded to demarcate this boundary, but for most of its length, the boundary agreed upon in the treaties was not demarcated on the ground. [13: 264]

After the Italians were defeated in World War II, they were evicted from their colonies in the Horn of Africa by the British in 1941. During the following decade, Eritrea remained under British administration. In 1950, the United Nations proposed that a federation would provide Eritrea with autonomy under its own constitution and elected government. In 1952 the act of federation was ratified by Emperor Haile Selassie I and British authorities officially give up their control.

In 1960, leaders of a movement, all Muslims, who were entertaining the idea of an independent Eritrean state, then living in exile, announced the formation of the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) in Egypt. By the mid-1960s the ELF was able to field a small guerrilla force in the western plain of Eritrea, and thus it began a war that was to last nearly three decades. Ethiopian authorities portrayed the movement as an Arab tool and sought to rally Eritrean Christians to oppose it; however, deteriorating economic and political conditions produced the opposite result. [16] Moreover, in 1962, the Ethiopian Parliament and Eritrean Assembly voted unanimously for the abolition of Eritrea's federal status, making Eritrea a simple province of the Ethiopian empire. Soon afterward, Tigrinya was banned in education; it was replaced by Amharic, which at the time was the official language of Ethiopia. This turned an entire generation of Eritrean Christian students toward nationalism and the Christians began to join the ELF in significant numbers at the end of the 1960s. [16]

As more and more Christians joined the ELF, it attempted to exclude Christian participation which led them to establish their own organization, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), a secular and Marxist organization. ELF and EPLF were fighting each other, as well as the Ethiopian Government. The latter EPLF dominated the war of independence. [14: 161]

Meanwhile, the Tigray Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF) was founded in 1975 by a group of Tigrayan university students most of whom were active participants in the Ethiopian Student Movement, who revolted against Emperor Haile Selassie I's regime in the 1960s. The front fought with the military government, *Derg* which came to power in 1974 after the Ethiopian Revolution and toppled the emperor from power and forged alliance with other

ethnic groups in Ethiopia to create the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), which came to power in 1991 after the demise of the *Derg*.⁵

TPLF made cooperation with EPLF while it fought the *Derg* and the collaboration would remain tactical and mostly characterized by non-strategic short-termism. [17: 269] EPLF also entered into alliances with TPLF mainly for opportunistic reasons. Militarily pressed by the Ethiopian government forces, mostly in 1974 and 1975 it saw the emerging movements in Tigray as useful tools to dissipate the military strength of the Ethiopian Government. [13: 269] Most importantly, it was already clear to the leadership of the EPLF before the end of the war that only the consent of the TPLF led the Ethiopian authorities to the independence of Eritrea which would guarantee rapid international recognition of Eritrea’s independence. [13: 276] Medhane Tadesse described the relations as follows: “The EPLF and TPLF carried forward their differences and the resultant mutual suspicion even while they worked to maintain a shaky military alliance to overthrow the *Derg*. Historical animosity and mutual suspicions, different, if not opposing, political trajectories, and prevalent economic and border issues might be considered as major factors in the conflict.” [17: 277]

Post-1991 Ethio–Eritrean Relations and Causes of the Conflict

The governments of both states maintained seemingly good relations. The Tigray People’s Liberation (TPLF) which dominates the Ethiopian Government through the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) on the one hand, and the People’s Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), the former Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF), ruling Eritrea on the other hand, reflect a political marriage of convenience based on temporarily shared political and economic interests rather than a genuine alliance based on mutual acceptance and deep-rooted friendship between their leaders. [13: 257]

After the 1993 referendum, by signing a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation on 13th July 1993, the two states formalized their relations. It was agreed that Eritreans would continue to use the Ethiopian Birr as their currency, which was to be provided by Ethiopia. Ethiopia would return Eritrean bank deposits that had been transferred to Ethiopian banks in the final period of the *Derg* rule. The Ethiopian Government also assumed responsibility to pay pensions to Eritrean pensioned ex-civil servants. [18]

Assab was turned into a free port for Ethiopia. Under the terms of the agreement, Ethiopia would pay for the use of the harbor facilities but no duties would be levied on goods arriving at Assab in transit to Ethiopia. Ethiopia consented to buy raw petrol to be refined at Assab and to turn over 30% of the refinery’s output to the Eritreans as rent payment. As both countries were using the same currency, it was also agreed upon that trade between Eritrea and Ethiopia would be duty-free. They also adopted the policy that Eritreans within Ethiopia would continue to be treated as Ethiopian citizens.

The various agreements between the two countries were very advantageous for the Eritrean side. They allowed Eritrea to import a wide range of goods for *Birr* from Ethiopia,

⁵ This front consists of four political parties. The parties are the Oromo Peoples’ Democratic Organization (OPDO), the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM), the Southern Ethiopian People’s Democratic Movement (SEPDM) and the Tigrayan People’s Liberation Front (TPLF).

which Eritrea would otherwise have to pay for in scarce hard currency. The agreement on the Assab refinery not only guaranteed Eritrea a stable supply of most of its fuel needs but also considerably helped the Eritrean authorities to save the hard currency. The agreement about nationality allowed Eritreans living within Ethiopia, as well as inside Eritrea to freely engage in economic activities inside Ethiopia and even to retain positions in the civil service and the state-controlled sector of the Ethiopian economy. [13: 278]

The currency and customs union to maximize Eritrean savings of hard currency openly violated the spirit of the currency union by pursuing its own policy in regard to exchange rates of hard currency within Eritrea. [19: 377] There are also indications that with the tacit approval of the Eritrean Government, Eritrean traders abused the transit rights for Eritrean goods to divert transit goods illegally which were to be sold for a handsome profit on the Ethiopian market. [13: 279]

Eritreans and the Eritrean Government itself was involved in illegal trade, such as the smuggling of coffee, oilseeds and other products of Ethiopia. [20: 38] In effect, Eritrea became a major coffee exporter without producing an ounce of coffee and was actively engaged in the Ethiopian black market, forgery activities and illegal business transactions, which ended up damaging Ethiopia's economy.⁶

The predicament began when Eritrea demanded more money from Ethiopia for using the crude oil refinery at Assab; consequently, Ethiopia started importing refined petroleum. Also, Ethiopia diversified its import routes to Djibouti and Mombasa rather than using only the port of Assab and Massawa.

Most importantly, it was the introduction of an independent Eritrean currency, *Nakfa*, which led to a bitter antagonism. The Eritrean Government proposed *Nakfa* in 1997 and the Ethiopian *Birr* should have equal value and should be used in both countries. This would have meant that having a huge stock of *Birr* which could continue buying goods from Ethiopia without having to resort to hard currency. [13: 282] However, this proposal was rejected by the Ethiopian Government, which instead insisted on using hard currency as a medium of exchange. [21: 119] According to Trivelli, it is this demand from Eritrea that angered the Ethiopian Government, as well as the Ethiopian public in general. [21] Eritrea introducing the new currency, left the Eritrean central bank with a large quantity of now worthless *Birr* notes on its hands which created a deteriorating relationship between the two states that made war possible. [21: 119–120]

This economic misunderstanding had an adverse effect on both Eritrea and Ethiopia, to varying degrees. Eritrea suffered most, given its dependence on Ethiopia's economy and markets. Eritrea exported more than 65% of its products to Ethiopia, whereas only 9% of Ethiopia's products were destined for Eritrea. Moreover, Eritrea was highly dependent on Ethiopia for its food consumption. [20: 38] Jon Abbink summarizes the overall unresolved reasons for the conflict between the two states as follows: "The underlying causes of their problematic political and economic relationship since 1991 [...] issues concerning trade, communications, trans-border movements of laborers and pastoralists, the outstanding bank debts (especially of Eritrea to Ethiopia's banking system), goods and property in Assab port destined for Ethiopia and confiscated by Eritrea, Ethiopian military hardware given 'on

⁶ Tadesse cited in source [20: 38].

loan’ to Eritrea well before the war, legal issues relating to ethnic groups in both countries, citizenship, environmental problems, water-sharing and so on.” [22: 409]

The 1998–2000 Border Conflict

The late Nobel Peace Prize winner and Israeli politician Shimon Peres said “war is a competition of making the least mistakes when the biggest mistake is to open the war”. [23] On 12 May 1998, a mechanized brigade of the Eritrean army attacked and conquered the town of Badme. [24] Observers on the region wrote the war was fought over a “small strip of contested territory, nowhere more than a few miles wide, and lacking any resources of evident value”. [21: 120] The Guardian described the war as “Ethiopia and Eritrea are slugging it out with modern tanks, aircraft, and artillery for the sake of a few miles of stony nothingness”. [4]

G rard Prunier analyzed the war in 1998 as follows: “International wars are usually fought to acquire territory, to gain economic advantage, to overthrow a hated or dangerous neighboring regime, for religious or ethnic reasons or in order to improve a country’s position on a regional or international geostrategic chessboard. If we discount the disputed 400 sq. km as relevant to the first possible cause, we are left with nothing since none of the others apply: the Ethio–Eritrean conflict cannot benefit either of its protagonists economically, there is no desire by one regime to overthrow the other, there are no religious or ethnic reasons behind the fighting, and both countries have lost out geopolitically, whether we consider the regional situation or their relationship with their powerful common protector, the United States.” [25]

The number of soldiers mobilized by both states was estimated more than 200,000. The violence generated considerable casualties and huge costs on both sides. An estimated 70,000 to 100,000 people were killed, 1 million were displaced. [26: 168] Both countries bought weapons from Russia, Ukraine, Italy, China, Bulgaria, and other countries. MiG–29s by Eritrea, and Sukhoi–27s by Ethiopia, both supplied by Russia. [27] Ethiopia bought Mi–24 helicopter gunships, and Mi–8 cargo helicopters in a deal which provided, as with Eritrea, for technical support, as well as training and pilots. [27] Ethiopia also bought arms and ammunition from China, and T–55 tanks from Bulgaria. [28] Eritrea obtained weapons and ammunition from Bulgaria and other east European countries. [27] Both Ethiopia and Eritrea spent a huge amount of money on the war, estimated at up to \$1 billion. [20: 45]

The fighting was of the kind associated in Europe with the First World War, with infantry attacks backed artillery on the trenches occupied by the enemy, with a massive loss of life. [21: 123] Since the Eritreans were strategically on the defensive, most of the attacks were carried out by Ethiopians, whose total losses were correspondingly higher.

The initial clashes between 6 and 12 May 1998 left the area around Badme badly damaged. Ethiopia claims that the Eritrean action displaced over 24,000 people and destroyed twelve schools, a veterinary clinic, fertilizers and grain stores and a series of brief but bloody battles along the border between 22 May and 11 June. [27]

On the ground, the fighting centered on three areas: around Sheraro and Badme in the west, around the town of Zalambessa on the road linking the two countries in the center, and in the far south for control of the road to the Eritrean port of Assab. [27]

A series of air raids resulted in a number of civilian casualties. Ethiopian planes attacked the airport in Asmara. The Eritrean air force also hit targets in the Tigrayan regional capital, Mekele, civilian targets, including a school with 47 people killed. Later, the Eritrean President Isayas Afeworki expressed his regret at their deaths and insisted they were not intentional. [27]

On 6th February 1999, after an eight-month lull, Ethiopia made the first of a series of probing attacks on the Badme front, followed by attacks on the Eritrean positions inside Ethiopia at Zalambessa and Bure, on the road to Assab. On the 23rd of February, Ethiopia launched Operation Sunset and finally broke through the Eritrean defenses, driving the Eritreans out of the disputed area, over-running the whole of the Baduma plains and penetrating 25 km into Eritrea. [27]

Gebru Tareke described the war as follows: ... The Eritrean forces had entrenched themselves in fortifications and bunkers that led General Samora Yunus, commander of the northern forces, to contemplate: “The Eritreans are good at digging trenches and we are good at converting trenches into graves. They, too, know this. We know each other very well.” The general was not bragging, for subsequent events proved him correct, but he may have lost twice as many of his own men as Eritreans he buried in their foxholes.” [46: 345]

According to the Human Rights Watch report, the Ethiopian Government is known to have forcibly expelled an estimated 75,000 people of Eritrean origin during the war; likewise, the Eritrean Government forcibly expelled or took part in the voluntary repatriation of an estimated 70,000 Ethiopians. [29]

Attempts were made for a peaceful solution to the conflict that has ranged from the USA to Rwandan efforts as facilitators, to visits by an Organisation of African Unity (OAU) delegation, the Italians, the Egyptians, President Kabila in person, and the Dutch. [30] [31] However, the fighting was brought to an end with the signing of the Algiers Peace Agreement⁷ and the establishment of the Ethiopia–Eritrea Border Commission (EEBC)⁸ in 2000. However, Ethiopia’s refusal to implement the rulings of the EEBC prior to negotiations and Eritrea’s insistence on an unconditional and immediate demarcation of the border, have locked the two governments in an intractable stalemate. [1]

The Failed United Nations Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE)

Following talks in Algiers, a ceasefire came into force on 31 June 2000, under which a United Nations peacekeeping force was set up, when the Security Council, by its resolution 1312 (2000) decided to establish the United Nations Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE) consisting of up to 100 military observers and the necessary civilian support staff. [32] The UNMEE was deployed along a 25-kilometre wide strip between the two armies which

⁷ The *Algiers Agreement* was a peace agreement between the two governments signed on 12th December 2000, at Algiers, Algeria to formally end the war.

⁸ Establishment by the Algiers Agreement, it was mandated to delimit and demarcate the colonial treaty border based on pertinent colonial treaties (1900, 1902 and 1908) and applicable international law. The Commission was seated in The Hague with the Permanent Court of Arbitration serving as registry and the UN Cartographic Section providing technical support.

is agreed by the Algiers Agreement. [26: 168] Later, the UNMEE expanded to a total of 4,200 military personnel, including 220 military observers, three infantry battalions and the necessary support units, to monitor the ceasefire and border delineation between Ethiopia and Eritrea.

However, on 30th July 2008, the Security Council unanimously adopted resolution 1827 terminating the mandate of the UNMEE. The Council decision came in response to crippling restrictions imposed by Eritrea on the UNMEE, as well as the cutting off of fuel supplies—making it impossible for the operation to continue carrying out its mandated tasks, and putting at risk the safety and security of UN personnel. [32]

Post-War Stalemate and Proxy War

Since 2015 the security situation in Ethiopia has deteriorated and the government declared a state of emergency from October 2016 up to August 2017. However, as this paper is being written, there are still violent protests and targeted killings across the country. A leaked document assessing the security and political situation presented at the National Security Council meeting held on October 2017 revealed that “all anti-people forces are forming a strategic consensus and using the latest support of the Egyptian and Eritrean governments and are trying to destroy the constitutional system by sectarian violence and riots”. [33] This is not unexpected because the two states are in quasi-war. For example on 15th April 2011, the Ethiopian Government for the first time openly announced it would use “any means at its disposal” to remove the incumbent regime in Asmara. [34] Ethiopia is assisting the Eritrean Democratic Alliance and other smaller groups, such as the Red Sea Afar Democratic Organization in their fight against the Eritrean regime. [35: 98] In September 2013 the Red Sea Afar Democratic Organization and Saho People’s Democratic Movement made an agreement in Ethiopia to carry out military attacks to topple the Eritrean regime. [36]

In line with the saying “the enemy of my enemy is my friend” Eritrea has been arming and training insurgent groups, namely the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) and the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), to infiltrate Ethiopia through Somalia and undermine its security. Eritrea’s support for Islamist groups in Somalia was also viewed as a security threat by Ethiopia, given their irredentist rhetoric and radicalization agenda.

In fact, since its independence, Eritrea has fought all its neighbors including Yemen and has been linked with military activity as far away as the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and South Sudan. [5: 491] In December 2009, invoking Eritrea’s alleged support for Somali armed opposition groups and its border conflict with Djibouti, the Security Council passed resolution 1907 (2009), which imposed a sanctions regime on Eritrea, including a general and complete arms embargo (on both imports and exports) and prohibited Eritrea to provide support to the armed groups engaged in destabilization activities in Somalia and to undermine the peace and reconciliation efforts as well as regional stability. [37]

The report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea dated in July 2011 describes the Eritrean post-war subversive deeds in the region as follows: “Eritrea’s foreign and security policy, including its involvement with various armed groups throughout the region, can only be understood in the context of the 1998–2000 war with Ethiopia. Ethiopia’s failure, to date, to implement the ruling of the Eritrea–Ethiopia Boundary Commission on the disputed

border, and the continuing presence of Ethiopian civilian officials and military forces on territory awarded to Eritrea by the ruling, is routinely cited by the Government of Eritrea as justification for its support to Ethiopian armed opposition groups, such as ONLF and OLF, which are named in this report. Eritrea’s ‘cold peace’ with Ethiopia is also reflected in its actions elsewhere in the region, notably Somalia, where Ethiopia and Eritrea have supported various rival factions and administrations since 1998.” [38]

After six years, on 2nd November 2017, the Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea in its report states: “Investigated allegations by a neighboring Member State of support provided by Eritrea to Al-Shabaab in Somalia. Despite receiving some corroborating information from another regional Member State and regional administrations in Somalia, the Group has not been able to substantiate the allegations. As such, the Group has, for its fourth consecutive mandate, not found conclusive evidence of support provided by Eritrea to Al-Shabaab. [...] Eritrea continued to provide support to armed groups intent on destabilizing Ethiopia and Djibouti, including the Benishangul People’s Liberation Movement, the Front for the Restoration of Unity and Democracy (FRUD-Armé), Patriotic Ginbot Sebat (PG7) and the Tigray People’s Democratic Movement. While none of these groups poses a critical threat to either Djibouti or Ethiopia, the support of Eritrea for them continues to generate insecurity in the region and undermines the normalization of relations between the regional Member States.” [39] Consequently, on 14th November 2017 the UN Security Council extended arms embargoes on Eritrea, by adopting Resolution 2385 (2017).

The very purpose of both governments eventually becomes to destabilize each other with their extended support to respective opposition groups. [35: 98] Meanwhile, there have been episodes of military incursion. In March 2012 Ethiopia attacked an Eritrean military base after the killing of five European tourists it blamed on Asmara. [40] On December 2014 an Ethiopian air force pilot has defected to Eritrea, flying an MI-35 gunship helicopter across the border with his co-pilot and a technician. [41] On 22nd March 2015, the Ethiopian Air Force has bombed the Bisha gold mine in Eritrea, located 150 kilometers west of Asmara, along with the Eritrean military depot at Mai Edaga. [42] On 12th June 2016, Ethiopian forces launched an unprovoked assault over the Eritrean border at the town of Tsorana and Eritrean forces managed to launch a counter-offensive that ended the assault. [43]

Conclusion

The defense expert, Fred Charles Ikle stated “[m]any wars in this century have been started with only the most nebulous expectations regarding the outcome, on the strength of plans that paid little of any attention to the ending. Many begin inadvertently, without any plans at all”. [44: 108] *“If indeed war should break out, then it would not be in our power to stop it, for such is the logic of war.”* This is an excerpt from Khrushchev’s letter to John F. Kennedy at the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis. [23] Terminating a conflict under favorable conditions has been one of the most difficult tasks facing any political and military leaders. [45] Today after almost 20 years, both Ethiopia and Eritrea are in the inauspicious situation because of a protracted “foolish war, against the wrong enemy and on a false pretext”. [46: 343]

The war was unplanned; when the Eritrean leaders sent their tanks and artilleries across the border, their intention was to intimidate a government they believed would capitulate

to their demand. Isayas Afewerki, the President of Eritrea underestimated the patriotism, fierceness and willingness of Ethiopians to fight when he ignited a war whose scale and duration he did not plan for and of which he had no exit strategy. [46: 343]

After nearly two decades of a cold war, a resolution requires political courage from both governments. Only negotiation can address the root causes of the war which are historical, economic and political. Hailemariam Desalegn, Ethiopia's Prime Minister said that he is willing to hold talks with Eritrea. "The most important thing for us is to fight poverty [...] to have regional integration. If we two do that, it will be much more productive", he also mentioned his predecessor "Meles Zenawi had asked for more than 50 times even to go to Asmara and negotiate with Isaias Afwerki". [40] The leaders of both countries should know that both states are "condemned by geography, economy, and history to have their future inextricably entwined". [46: 343] Otherwise the result will be as B. H. Liddell Hart, the military historian, and military theorist puts it "the downfall of civilized states tends to come not from the direct assaults of foes, but from internal decay combined with the consequences of exhaustion in war". [47: 359]

This article was written at the end of 2017. By the time of the publication in 2019, there is a new political development. After the appointment of a new Prime Minister in Ethiopia, Abiy Ahmed (Ph.D.) in April 2018, and his call for peace, the two countries signed a Joint Declaration on Peace and Friendship in July 9th, 2018 in Eritrean capital, Asmara and an Agreement on Peace, Friendship And Comprehensive Cooperation in September 16th, 2018 in Saudi Arabia. This will be a beginning of a new chapter in the complicated relationship between the two states.

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