

## The Djibouti-Eritrea Conflict

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The three days long war between Eritrea and Djibouti in June is leading, as it should have, to a discussion about the origin and scope of the conflict as well as the future security of the Horn of African Sub region. Djibouti and Eritrea had twice previously clashed over the border area. In April 1996 they almost went to war after a Djibouti official accused Eritrea of shelling the town of Ras Doumeira. In 1999 Eritrea accused Djibouti of siding with Asmara's rival Ethiopia, while Djibouti accused its neighbor of supporting Djiboutian rebels and having designs on the Ras Doumeirah region.<sup>1</sup> As a result Djibouti recalled its ambassador and broke off its relationship with Eritrea until it was fully restored in 2001. Eritrea and Djibouti engaged in a military clash along their mutual border over the course of three days, June 10- 13, 2008, resulting in the deaths of nine Djibouti soldiers, and the wounding of around 60 others. This briefing will assess the nature and course of the conflict and annotate the issues underpinning the increasingly hostile relations between Eritrea and Djibouti as well as its

links with peace and stability in the Horn of African sub-region.

### Overview

The Horn of Africa is notable for the number and complexity of its inter-state conflicts. The recent conflict between Eritrea and Djibouti, which has at least as its formal *casus belli* the exact location of the frontier along the Ras Doumeirah area of their common border is a stark reminder that the sub-region remains one of the most unstable and conflict prone in the world, and still lacks both the subjective and objective conditions for a workable peace and security order. The region continues to evidence contests over the definition of territory, state, and nation, producing a new spiral of regional insecurities with grave implications for human livelihoods and economic viability. The objective of this briefing paper is to provide timely and relevant analysis of the ongoing conflict between Eritrea and Djibouti. It provides a brief background to the recent conflict, explores the disputed character of its origins, and discusses the regional and interna-

tional responses as well as prospects for its resolution. It argues that the recent military clash between Djibouti and Eritrea may illustrate the persistence of territorial disputes in the sub-region, but it also marked the continuation of the trend where governments use and mobilize border claims for other, both narrow and broader, regional political and security agendas.

The conflict shows that the Horn of African region is replete with potential flashpoints, ranging from un-demarcated or contested borders to dispute over interstate power closely related to the unstable power hierarchy in the sub region. To some extent the conflict is part and parcel of an ongoing power struggle in the region. It also demonstrates the intimate links between territory, regime insecurity, and national consolidation. Further, it gives insight into the problems of transition or related complications of adjustment to the inter-state system. Border disputes have also been used to maintain an uneasy internal political status quo postponing reform and democratization. Eritrea's anxieties over its status and security as a sovereign and independent state are a further complication. Probably this explains the fact that independent Eritrea entered into a conflict with all its neighbors except Saudi Arabia. Questions of territory and security as symbols of weak statehood have persisted in an admixture of new and old forms. The Eritrea-Djibouti conflict is obviously not the major regional conflict in the region, but if allowed to fester it certainly will become the most dangerous of all endangering critical strategic interests of many countries, including the war to defeat global terrorism.

### **An Anthology of Raucous Relations.**

Any understanding of the recent conflict between Djibouti and Eritrea must by necessity draw on the developments since Eritrea

gained independence in 1993 and has to be understood in the wider regional context of the Horn and its history of conflict and shifting alliances. In an exceptionally conflict-prone region, Djibouti remained less turbulent partly due to French protection and partly because its leaders pursued scrupulous observance of neutrality in conflicts within and between the neighboring countries. For much of its modern history, Djibouti has struggled to balance the strategic interests of France (the former colonial power) and its more powerful regional neighbors of Ethiopia and Somalia.<sup>2</sup> The emergence of an independent Eritrean state was a new variable, probably a complication, with which Djibouti has to contend with. On the other hand since its formation, Eritrea has had contentious relations with almost all its neighbors, choosing to neglect conventional diplomacy.

This refers to Eritrea's failure to solve conflicts with its neighbors without reverting to armed conflicts of varying degrees of intensity, including all-out war with Ethiopia during 1998-2000 in which tens of thousands of people died on both sides, and has jeopardized many promising developments. Interestingly, the war with Ethiopia and its outcome will greatly shape Eritrea's behavior in the years to come, which will be discussed later. The early years of independence have been characterized by a varying degree of involvement in the internal affairs of its neighbors, often in the name of mediation among opposing sides. Eritrean leaders were actively involved in the internal conflict and the Yemeni civil war by supporting the northern faction. Similarly, Eritrea tried to involve in Djiboutian politics by imposing itself as a third party to facilitate negotiations between the Djibouti government and the opposition.<sup>3</sup> An unpublicized Afar insurgency was going on during the 1980's and early 1990's mainly over demands for autonomy, which slowly weakened after an initial agreement with the

government in 1995. Gradually, the insurgents transformed themselves into a political opposition, the Front for the Restoration of Unity and Democracy/FRUD/.<sup>4</sup>

Although Eritrea, pretty much like Ethiopia, was not sympathetic to Afar insurgency mainly due to a concern that it could politicize its own restive Afar population; hence supported the status quo, its attempt to meddle in Djiboutian politics was received by skepticism on the part of Djibouti leaders. Djibouti leaders were mainly apprehensive with the way Asmara tried "to exert pressure on them", on issues ranging from internal matters to regional conflicts.<sup>5</sup> The issues of Ethiopian naval ships in the Djibouti harbor, its closer relationship with Ethiopia, and the apparent sympathy of Djiboutian leaders towards Yemen in its conflict with Eritrea, were some of the issues that seemed to have angered Eritrea. What seemed to have increased their suspicion towards Eritrea was, however, the way Eritrea was openly criticizing French presence in Djibouti.<sup>6</sup>

The first publicized dispute between Eritrea and Djibouti occurred in April 1996 and the two countries nearly went to war when Djibouti accused Eritrea of shelling Ras Doumeirah and circulating an invalid map, which incorporated areas, belonged to Djibouti. Reportedly, an Eritrean army contingent penetrated seven kilometers across Ras Doumeirah into Djiboutian territory.<sup>7</sup> Following Djiboutian accusations of Eritrean incursion, Eritrea sent a kind of ultimatum requesting the Djibouti government to publicly apologize for the immodest way of accusing Eritrea, denying the incident and any territorial claim, which resembles the way it reacted to the recent conflict.<sup>8</sup> However, the crisis was short-lived, mainly because at the time Eritrea was involved in other conflicts and had to inevitably deal with the French. Djibouti's claims came four months into the

Eritrea-Yemen war of December 1995.<sup>9</sup> Eritrea was technically in a state of war with Yemen over Hanish Islands, and an imminent conflict with Sudan -having declared that Sudan's regime change was central to its foreign policy. Besides, the French reacted by a clear force-backed up warning, which probably forced Eritrea to withdraw. Eritrea is well aware that, if Djibouti accuses Eritrea of direct military attack, it is entitled to invoke French military assistance.<sup>10</sup> The crisis was defused after Eritrean forces retreated from the area and Djibouti retracted the allegations in May 1996.

The final years of the last century saw a dramatic swing in the international relations of the Horn. The principal cause for the most dramatic developments, which were taking place in the realm of inter-state relations, was the 1998-2000 war between Ethiopia and Eritrea. Sudan came out of isolation, while Djibouti became the major conduit for Ethiopia's import export trade, greatly reinforcing the economic, political and security ties developed since a trade protocol was signed in 1996. Undoubtedly, the war between Ethiopia and Eritrea brought substantial economic benefits to Djibouti. However, it had also exacerbated Djibouti's internal situation and its relations with Eritrea. In late 1998, Eritrea accused Djibouti of being a conduit for Ethiopia's war efforts and, to add insult to injury, President Isayas of Eritrea snubbed Djibouti's then-president, Hassen Gouled Optidon, at an OAU function in Ouagaoudugu.<sup>11</sup> Djibouti broke off its relationship with Eritrea in November 1998, recalled its ambassador and subsequently dismissed Eritrea's ambassador to Djibouti, General Ramadan Awliyay, less than a month into his service.

Apparently, Eritrea was dismayed at the speed with which Djibouti tried to cultivate closer relations with Ethiopia and the way it tried to

take the economic advantage at the expense of Eritrea. This will become a recurring theme of discomfort on Eritrea-Djibouti relations.

Two months into the alleged dispute the government of Djibouti claimed that Eritrea was emboldening Djibouti's opposition and supplying the rebels with arms including landmines.<sup>12</sup> Worried by what they call as Eritrea's pattern of behavior in distress, in 1999 Ethiopia and Djibouti concluded a military cooperation protocol. In May 1999 Eritrea began doing what it does when it breaks off relationships with governments: arming the Djibouti opposition, in this case the Front for the Restoration of Unity and Democracy /FRUD/. While angry and under pressure, it seems the Eritrean government has tended to turn inwards and draw on lessons from the past, notably subversion of enemies through alignment with and support to rebel groups. Attempts to restore Djibouti's relations with Eritrea were initiated by Mouamer Ghadafi of Libya, and became fully repaired in 2001 when the heads of states both countries, Isayas Afewerki of Eritrea and a newly elected president of Djibouti, Ismael Omar Guelleh exchanged visits.<sup>13</sup> In 2004 the two countries signed cooperation agreements in the political, economic and social sectors and relations were relatively cordial through 2006, when the Eritrean president attended a Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) meeting in Djibouti.

## **The June 2008 Military Conflict**

### *The precursor*

The military clash between Djibouti and Eritrea on the 10th of June looked like a sudden occurrence. However, some kind of tension has been brewing between the two capitals since the beginning of the year.<sup>14</sup> It started in January this year when, according to Djiboutian sources, Eritrea requested to cross the border in order to get sand for a road, but

instead occupied a hilltop in the region.<sup>15</sup> On 4 April, Eritrean troops had moved seven kilometres into Djibouti, seizing Ras Doumeira. Around the same time Djibouti accused Eritrea of sending troops across the border and digging trenches and defensive emplacements inside Djibouti. On April 16 Eritrea is reported by Djibouti to have set up fortifications and dug trenches on both sides of the Djiboutian border near Ras Doumeira. After that came a military movement from the Djibouti side, in which its armed forces were repositioned within a close range of the Eritrean army, virtually occupying the same hill. It seems Djibouti had little choice but to respond by sending troops to the occupied border as well. Nonetheless there were reports of significant diplomatic activity between the two states, with Qatar and Yemen mediating to resolve the conflict to no avail. By May 5, Djibouti had already complained to the UN Security Council about what it called as Eritrean aggression against its sovereignty and territorial integrity. Djibouti accuses Asmara of entering its territory to build defenses.<sup>16</sup> Both sides had built up their forces, seven kilometres inside Djibouti, and units were in some places less than a few meters apart.

### *The Brief Encounter*

It was only a matter of time before the eruption of fighting on June 10 2008. The clashes erupted on Tuesday morning the tenth of June after a nearly two-month face off in the Mount Gabla area, also known as Ras Doumeira, which straddles the Bab al-Mandib straits.<sup>17</sup> The clash was triggered after some 30 Eritrean soldiers among those Eritrean defense forces originally deployed along the common border deserted their positions (which is common in recent years) and fled to Djibouti and Eritrean soldiers opened fire toward Djibouti territory to return the soldiers back, prompting Djibouti to return fire.<sup>18</sup> "If Eritrea wants war, it will get it," said Djibouti's President, after visiting injured troops.

Djibouti's leader declared that his country is at war and called up soldiers and police who had retired since 2004 in response to the fighting.<sup>19</sup> A military clash which involved heavy armaments but with no pitched battles between the two forces have reportedly continued for at least two several days before Djibouti's military announced on June 13 that fighting had subsided.<sup>20</sup> The clashes have killed nine Djiboutian soldiers and wounded 60 others, and the capture of several Eritrean prisoners.<sup>21</sup>

### *The French factor*

The French defense ministry announced they were increasing their military presence in Djibouti and their support for Djibouti's army following the border clashes. On June 16 2008, France sent three ships, including a helicopter carrier and a frigate, to assist with medical care, logistics and intelligence and announced that it was "preparing to deploy a forward logistics base and a land force near the zone where the clashes took place."<sup>22</sup> Reports also indicated that additional naval forces were being moved to the region including an additional team of military surgeons and its military has stepped up air surveillance over the border to monitor the activities of Eritrean forces.<sup>23</sup> In a clear show of concern over the incident and underscoring that the two nations have a mutual defense agreement, the French defense minister reassured his Djiboutian counterpart of the full support his country, at the same time calling for a "diplomatic" settlement of the issue.<sup>24</sup> He further stated that Paris is preparing to deploy a forward logistics base and a land force near the zone where the clashes took place.<sup>25</sup>

Probably due to maneuvers by the French the military showdown between Eritrea and Djibouti has remained brief and short lived. It has been always difficult for Eritrea to continue a military confrontation indefinitely, probably appreciating its sense of standing alone against Djibouti: a small country with

powerful allies. It is worth noting that the 13th Demi-Brigade of the French Foreign Legion, with 2,850 troops, shares a military base, called Camp Lemonnier, with the Combined Joint Task Force Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA) of the United States Central Command, since 2002.<sup>26</sup> Just days after the conflict America, which has a plan to construct permanent military base in Djibouti, has send 200 of its navy to Djibouti while France has moved two of its war-ships toward Eritrea.<sup>27</sup>

### *The Ethiopian factor*

Whatever form it actually took, the conflict was unlikely to have gone unmarked by Ethiopia, which gave measured but bold statement prior to the actual military clashes. In May, Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi announced that his country is "prepared to secure its vital trade route" with Djibouti, in the event an Eritrea-Djibouti border breaks out. Despite a decided reluctance by Ethiopia to get involved in another costly war, it didn't only sent clear signals to Eritrea but also prepare itself for any eventuality.<sup>28</sup>

### *International reaction*

Within days of Djibouti's complaint, the United Nations, the African Union, the Arab League, the Organization of Islamic Conference, and even IGAD have condemned what they call as an aggression and demanded that it be reversed. The State Department of the United States issued a press release condemning Eritrea's "military aggression" saying it represented "an additional threat to peace and security in the already volatile Horn of Africa" and calling for Eritrea to accept third party mediation on the border dispute. The League of Arab States held an emergency session in response to the fighting and called for Eritrea to withdraw from the border region. The Arab League, which called for dialogue and had initiated fact-finding mission to Eritrea and Djibouti (the latter is a member of the Arab

League) was denied a visit to Eritrea on May 8<sup>th</sup>. The UN Security Council called on both sides to exercise maximum restraint and re-establish dialogue. In a further sign of the deterioration in relationship between two countries, Djibouti has recalled its ambassador to Eritrea, Mr. Ahmed Issa, and expelled Eritrea's ambassador to Djibouti, Mr. Mohammed Saeed Mantai, who returned to Asmara on the 16<sup>th</sup> of June.<sup>29</sup> Fact finding teams dispatched by the UN, the Arab League and the African Union or supposed to be dispatched by the regional organization, IGAD to Djibouti and Eritrea were received in Djibouti—but not Eritrea.<sup>30</sup> Continuing the tradition of perceiving and treating the international community as an undifferentiated hostile entity Eritrea ignored all calls for mediation to resolve the conflict.

Referring to IGAD President Isayas said the organization had not been efficient since it had fallen victim to external interference, and needed reorganization.<sup>31</sup> Eritrea also dismissed accounts from Djibouti as "anti-Eritrean". A statement from Eritrea's foreign ministry said it would not "get involved in an invitation of squabbles and acts of hostility" and claimed Djibouti was trying to drag Eritrea into its "concocted animosity, implying some connections with Ethiopia."<sup>32</sup> Typical of its responses to other similar conflicts in the recent past, Eritrea denied it had any problems with Djibouti, accusing the U.S. of instigating conflict in the region. Eritrea went on to characterize the tension between Eritrea and Djibouti as one that is fabricated entirely by the United States and Ethiopia. What is remarkable about all of this is neither Eritrea's alleged intransigence nor its silence and denial about the purpose of the attack nor Asmara's pandering during the conflict. It is, rather, the extraordinary speed with which regional organisations and major powers made statements calling upon Eritrea to desist from its actions, directly implying Eritrean aggression.

### *Eritrea's Point of View*

Eritrea dismissed any account that it had attacked or even a military clash has taken place, and resolutely rejected any mediation. From Asmara's point of view there is a lot to be gained by denying, for several reasons. Firstly, the reasons behind the conflict are controversial, at best tricky. Secondly, Eritrea has been villified for its acts of destabilisation so much so that it propelled Eritrea towards a policy of isolation. It was roundly criticized for clashing, in the first seven years of its existence, with all its neighbors except Saudi Arabia, including a bloody war with Ethiopia. The very fact that most of these disputes, including this one, were in themselves so gratuitous itself however helped to establish Eritrea's reputation in the region as a bad neighbor, and one which was ready to resort to military action on the slightest pretext. This brings into question the otherwise puzzling nature of the Djibouti Eritrean conflict.

### **Making Sense of the Djibouti-Eritrea Conflict**

Border dispute and weak territorial boundaries that invited external and internal challenges have long dominated Eastern Africa. Particularly in the Horn of Africa, borders really count. The issue of frontier went to the heart of the self-perceptions not only of governments, but of societies which in some measure they represent. Indeed, the importance of securing territory remains the major determinant in Eritrean foreign policy, and to some extent Eritrean foreign policy must be understood in the context of its nation-building process.<sup>33</sup> It is however helpful to point out that differences over the location of national frontiers will not necessarily lead to military hostilities and infact they could be handled elsewhere on the continent without giving rise to anything remotely approaching the level of armed conflict. Moreover, there is no official complaint from Eritrea about a border claim.

Convincing evidence does not exist for any territorial claim, or for the tendency to interpret the conflict in terms of real disagreements on the actual border. Probably, given its entanglement in regional conflicts Eritrea may be eyeing on strategic locations and other cards seem to be on the offing. The Red Sea is a vital oil and petrochemicals route and Djibouti, Ethiopia's main marine outlet, is fast becoming a regional trans-shipment hub.<sup>34</sup> The further Eritrea pushes through the contested area, the closer it gets to Bab El-Mendeb, a location of such strategic importance to international maritime traffic. This doesn't make it, by any standard, a border dispute; hence this particular conflict cannot be resolved by mechanisms used to sort out such disputes elsewhere.

At all events, Eritrea's catastrophic engagement in war with Ethiopia, which at a stroke destroyed the prospects for what had until then appeared to be quite promising start to its independent existence, affected its relations with its other neighbors. One outcome of the war is that for the first time, Eritrea suffered serious military defeat, destroying the myth of the superiority of its army and fighting capacity, subsequently damaging the legitimacy of Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front/EPLF/ -now PFDJ-rule in Eritrea.<sup>35</sup> EPLF's rule in Eritrea had been solely based on its revolutionary legitimacy and military invincibility, the latter being the source of both domestic support and international legitimacy. Such legitimacy was shattered as a result of the war with Ethiopia and the militarization and social hardship that followed. Following defeat in the 1998-2000 war, and given the dominant position that Ethiopia has been able to establish, both in the region and more widely, through a combination of superior diplomacy and military power, Eritrea has been reduced to the role of a regional spoiler, seeking to take advantage of any possible Ethiopian weakness. To some

extent Eritrea's push appears to stem from Eritrea's decision to have a military presence in the Eritrea-Djibouti border.

This probably explains why Eritrea has fully given itself completely to the cause of being a military base to all insurgencies throughout the region, firmly establishing near-monopoly over non-state actors. This involves opening up so many war fronts with Ethiopia that the Ethiopian government would either collapse or sue for peace. Fragmented reports indicate that in recent months, arms and soldiers were smuggled from Eritrea to Somalia via Djibouti.<sup>36</sup> The move could also be one among several ways of showing antipathy towards Djibouti's increasingly growing links with Ethiopia, particularly at a time when it is involved in a proxy war with its biggest neighbor in areas adjacent to Djibouti. It is not impossible to assume that Asmara wants to disrupt this and wean Djibouti of its Ethiopian links. The interdependence between Eritrean foreign policy and Ethiopia is such that Asmara's main agenda and focus has become to assault on what it considers as Ethiopia's weakest points in the sub region. One puzzle about the military clashes is its timing. Arguably, nothing has played more directly into Eritrea's determination to provoke Djibouti than the convening of the Somali peace process in early June.

Regional interests-economic, political and ideological-are played out in Somalia, relatively unhindered by a functional state. Not surprisingly, the civil war in Somalia thus increases the extent of polarization in the Horn of Africa. Eritrean obsession with the strategic goal of keeping its powerful neighbor in thrall or weak is such that it has made Somalia a major diplomatic priority so much so that last year it pulled out from the regional grouping IGAD, over the management of the conflict in Somalia.<sup>37</sup> Actually Asmara has been at odds with IGAD since the bloc approved the

deployment of peacekeepers in Somalia to help the Ethiopia-backed Transitional Federal Government/TFG/. It is now the main backer of the extremist wing of the Somali opposition, with a profound impact on the war in Somalia and the quest for a peaceful settlement of the crisis. The *Shabab* and hardline elements of the Somali opposition will not accept anything that would favor a win-win solution partly because their backer (Eritrea) will not satisfy anything less than humiliating its arch enemy, Ethiopia. Clearly, Eritrea was angry when Djibouti offered to mediate the TFG and the ARS, at a time when it thought it was winning, through its support to the opposition, in a frontline proxy war against Ethiopia.

There is yet another reason for a possible hostile outlook: Eritrea's analysis and prognosis regarding Djibouti's strategy of development. The economic vision or paradigm of Eritrean leaders' vis-à-vis their neighbors were clearly evident in the hostilities that led to the war with Ethiopia. Competing over similar economic resources was a crucial aspect of the Ethiopia-Eritrean conflict. This is truer with Djibouti because under normal circumstances, Eritrea and Djibouti would have competed for the same business—port services to Ethiopia and others in the shipping business. Infact, Eritrea is more poised to involve in hostilities of an economic nature with Djibouti than with Ethiopia. Close to the important shipping lanes of both the Suez Canal and the Persian Gulf, Djibouti's economy is dominated by its strategic location, which is contiguous in strategic terms to Eritrea. But the current disadvantaged position of Eritrea and its displeasure towards Djibouti is, to a great extent, attributed to the complications surrounding the last war with Ethiopia, and the remorse and sense of bitterness associated with it. While the economy in Djibouti is booming, Assab is at a standstill, Massawa is operating at

well below its capacity, and Eritrea has lost an important market for its goods. Clearly, Djibouti is gaining a comparative edge over Eritrea in terms of economic surge.<sup>38</sup> It is possible that Eritrea wants to send a message to Djibouti to be careful not to invite the razz from Eritrea which could compromise its economic potential: to show to the Djibouti leaders that their decision to establish closer links with Ethiopia or solve the Somali conflict will do more harm than good to Djibouti. A clear reminder to reconsider their positions and sense of alliances. It is not surprising that central to Eritrea's foreign policy is its conflict with Ethiopia.

The notion that continuing the destabilization strategy can best check Ethiopia is not the only widely held Eritrean view about its security which is contradicted by logic and experience. Eritrea seem to have developed the tendency to take its frustration out beyond its borders, the region, and the world. There is a great deal of displeasure towards the West and the US.<sup>39</sup> The Eritrean government has tried hard to make the conflict with Djibouti part of the Ethiopian-Eritrean conflict and its hostile relations with the US, but its propositions have been unconvincing. Asked about the conflict, President Isayas Afeworki of Eritrea is quoted as saying that he doesn't see a problem with Djibouti but with Ethiopia and its "sponsor" the USA.<sup>40</sup> According to Eritrea, Washington is solely responsible for the failure to implement the decision of the Ethiopian-Eritrean Border Commission, hence its obsession with the border issue. The reason why Eritrea wants Ethiopia to accept the border decision under duress is beyond the scope of this paper and will not be discussed here. It is suffice to say that the disputed area of Badme is significant to the Eritrean regime only to the extent that it serves as a reminder of Ethiopia's loss, and resultant political crisis to the EPRDF.



Whatever form it takes Eritrea's stand is not eyeing on peaceful resolution of the conflict and normalization of relations with Ethiopia. It would be naïve to suppose that border demarcation, as being requested by Eritrea, would end the conflict and lead to stability. Eritrea is enraged because Ethiopia, by sticking to dialogue, was trying to build peaceful coexistence.

It is true, a border settlement would not eliminate Eritrean intransigence, but it would radically reduce the obsessional hatred of the US allegedly associated with its support for Ethiopia. Eritrea also accuses the U.S of fuelling conflict in Somalia by supporting Ethiopian intervention in the pretext of fighting terrorism.<sup>41</sup> As indicated above Eritrea's foreign policy is strongly shaped by the narrow circle of the leadership of the PFDJ, it may be assumed that personal and psychological factors have an impact on its foreign policy, like the political elites resentment towards Ethiopia and their disappointment of the negligence of Eritrean positions and interests by the United States during the liberation struggle as well as on the border conflict with Ethiopia.<sup>42</sup> To Eritrea, it seems that all of the powerful countries, the region-are in collusion to exclude them-or are at war with them. Hence, unsettling the big powers by all means has become the only way of expressing its displeasure. And the border dispute and the war in Somalia is a constant backdrop to them. It is also embedded in Eritrea's quest for relevance.

Having failed to become a regional hegemon, the only way to keep its hub and spoke approach to security is to actively involve in regional conflicts and consistently seek the attention of global powers. This too does not seem to fare any better. Given Eritrea's geographical situation close to Yemen and Saudi Arabia, its larger landmass (compared to Djibouti) and its access to the sea Eritrean

leaders certainly had every reason to believe that the US would establish closer military links with them. But finally, and despite intense lobbying by Eritrea, the choice to set up an American military base at the Red Sea fell on Djibouti in 2002, a fact that most probably disappointed the Eritrean government. Since then, U.S.-Eritrea relations have deteriorated from bad to worse. One can notice that especially since 2005, the move towards an anti-Western and anti-American position of the government has accelerated.<sup>43</sup>

But every politics is local. Due to the deteriorating domestic situation ongoing conflicts allow the Eritrean government more domestic leeway on political and economic concerns. Any conflict with neighbors helps to present the picture of an Eritrea under siege as an excuse of recruiting an endless supply of teenagers in the army-from the schools and the labor market. This strategy, in addition of camouflaging internal economic and political crisis, was intended to impose a total dictatorship in Eritrea, and sustain undeclared state of war with its neighbor, Ethiopia. Many young Eritreans are fleeing the country to avoid conscription. The sense of resentment and loss of internal legitimacy had made the government more intransigent in its dealings with the outside world and consequently had undermined Eritrea's international legitimacy.

It is the interplay of all these factors that has contributed to the recent military clash and continued hostility between Eritrea and Djibouti. There are several reasons for provocation. It is possible that, by provoking Djibouti, Eritrea wanted to call the attention of the world to the dangers posed by Ethiopia's defiance of accepting the border Commissions decision, only to find out that the world is far more worried about the dangers posed by its incursion to Djibouti territory. Hence the symbolic significance of the conflict is more important than its actual course and dynamics.

As such there is no basis for the claim that the goal of Eritrea was to mount a serious military attack on Djibouti.

### **Conclusion and the Way Forward**

The Eritrea-Djibouti conflict could be considered as the most disturbing 'border' dispute since the Ethiopia-Eritrea war. But that war (1998-2000) changed everything in the Horn of African region, since it reconfigured the regional inter-state system, and had consequences for regional power order. This one has nothing to do with regional power asymmetry. The incident is a phenomenon of futility-but a revelation nonetheless. It has no ideology, no purpose other than to make a statement of distress and anger. It is really beyond politics. It broke out spontaneously and spread in the same way, communicated by one of the parties, confirmed by international news agencies and diplomats, major powers and regional organizations, none of whom had any idea what to do. It has been an immensely pathetic spectacle, whose primary meaning has been that it happened.

It will be hard to find a resolution to the conflict, until Eritrea admits that there is a conflict, and is ready to talk. Facilitation, it should be clear, no longer holds any hope of ending or resolving the conflict. Only active engagement, vigilant role and interventionism can. Although it is not exacting an unacceptable human cost, the conflict between Djibouti and Eritrea, if allowed to fester, could endanger critical strategic interests of many countries, including the war to defeat global terrorism, the international community should not permit it to continue. The larger issue is whether Eritrea can continue to afford aligning its national security interests as closely as it has on the destabilization of Ethiopia. Eritrea may feel that its much bigger and powerful neighbor always wants to dominate and dictate. Probably, it is just a feeling. Whether it is a misperception or just a state of mind, it seems

to have unfortunately shaped the calculations of the Eritrean leadership. Thus, both sides are locked in mutual mistrust and suspicions, some justifiable and others totally untrue. The communication gap between the two is such that one may not have the clue about the concern of the other; hence could not understand the position of the other side. The solution to the problem largely lies in creating a situation whereby both sides would be able to understand each other. The challenge is no body can talk to Eritrea. Then, it's not at all obvious what can be done.

<sup>1</sup> [Djibouti: IRIN Focus on mounting tension with Eritrea \[1999\]112\]](#)

<sup>2</sup> Medhane Tadesse. Continuity and Change in the Djiboutian Foreign Policy-Making Process. In Globalization and Emerging Trends in African Foreign Policy: Comparative perspective of eastern Africa. Volume II. University Press of America. 2007.

<sup>3</sup> For detailed analysis see Medhane Tadesse. The Eritrean-Ethiopian War: retrospect and Prospects. The Making of Conflicts in the Horn, 1991-1998. Mega Publishers, Addis Ababa, 1998.

<sup>4</sup> FRUD signed a peace agreement with the government in May 2001, and later formed a coalition with the ruling party to form the Union of the Presidential Majority

<sup>5</sup> Discussions with Djiboutian official. October 1994, Addis Ababa.

<sup>6</sup> The Pro-EPLF9 (now PFDJ) magazine, the Mirror in its September 1997 v.1.N.1 issue detailed the quest for independence and challenges in the sub-region and concluded that "there is one small country, however, still in the hands of France, and that is Djibouti and her old master."

<sup>7</sup> Tesfatsion Medhane, Eritrea's conflict with Neighbors: To Who's Benefit? A speech delivered in Tigrigna to Eritrean Community. Kasel, Germany 1996

<sup>8</sup> Reportedly, Eritrean leaders submitted a list of officials to be removed by the Djibouti government, accusing them of complicating the relations between the two countries.

<sup>9</sup> Djibouti and Eritrea began the relationship of equals in 1993, when Eritrea formalized its statehood. Djibouti's president, Hassen Gouled Aptidon, attended the ceremonies to commemorate Eritrea's declaration of independence

<sup>10</sup> Even the Ethiopian Prime Minister, Meles Zenawi, argued that had it not be for the French Eritrea could have prevailed over Djibouti. Ouagadougou, December 18, 1998.

<sup>11</sup> President Hassen Gouled Aptidon took great offense at the snub and African diplomats who observed Isaias's behavior were appalled because Hassen was then 82 years old.

<sup>12</sup> There are allegations that some of the roads in the mountainous north districts and along the Djibouti- Eritrea border have been recently mined in late 1999. In January 1999, France set up a special 520-strong force to Djibouti in order to protect it from any fallout of the Ethiopian-Eritrean war.

<sup>13</sup> By then, Hassan Gouled Aptidon had retired and Ismail Omar Gheleh had been elected president with, ironically, the support of FRUD

<sup>14</sup> Since most of the reliable sources remain chronicled in the desks of Foreign Service and security agencies of the two countries, this discussion is based on fragmented open sources and very few oral sources.

<sup>15</sup> This claim is not yet contradicted by any Eritrean response, infact a prominent Eritrean [website www.awate.com](http://www.awate.com) dated--- seem to reinforce the claim by stating that in January 2008, President Isaias of Eritrea had two meetings at Assab with local Djibouti officials where he gave them a courtesy briefing of where the Eritrean Defense Forces (EDF) will be re-positioned. Reportedly, Eritrean military officers in Assab asked if they could cross the border to get some sand to build a road. The Eritrean request left unattended and Eritrean forces occupied a hilltop on the Djibouti side and started digging trenches.

<sup>16</sup> On May 5, the government of Djibouti filed a complaint and circulated a document entitled: "Border Crisis between Djibouti and Eritrea" with the Security Council against Eritrea, and included a timeline of activities dating back to February 4, 2008. Djibouti, in a letter to the UN calling for intervention, claimed new maps put out by Eritrea showed Ras Doumeira as Eritrean territory.

<sup>17</sup> [Horn of Africa neighbors clash](#)", [Al Jazeera English](#) (2008-06-10). Retrieved on 2008-06-13

<sup>18</sup> On June 10, according to Djibouti, several Eritrean troops deserted their positions fleeing to the Djiboutian side. Djiboutian forces then came under fire from Eritrean forces demanding the return of the deserters.

<sup>19</sup> African Press Agency 2008.

<sup>20</sup> The Earth Times(2008-06-13

<sup>21</sup> Djiboutian state media said the Red Sea state had captured 100 Eritrean prisoners. According to Sudan Tribune (2008-6-20) Accessed on July 5,2008. Eritrea has lost over 25 soldiers in a clash with Djibouti..

<sup>22</sup> [France says supporting Djibouti in clashes with Eritrea - Summary](#)", The Earth Times (2008-06-13). Retrieved on 2008-06-14. According to French Colonel Ducret, French soldiers in Djibouti provided logistical and medical assistance to the Djibouti army as well as providing them with intelligence.

<sup>23</sup> [France says supporting Djibouti in clashes with Eritrea - Summary](#)", The Earth Times (2008-06-13

<sup>24</sup> [Xinhua](#) (2008-06-14)under the title "France reinforces military in Djibouti following border clash.

<sup>25</sup> Evidently, French Defense Minister Herve Morin held discussions with his Djibouti's counterpart Ougoureh Kifleh Ahmed three days after the clashes and promised to strengthen the French military presence in the country in case there is "an escalation in the current border row."

<sup>26</sup> Ibid:Xinhua(2008-06-14)

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> The accusation by Eritrea's ambassador to the UN that Ethiopia has militarized its presence in Jebel Mussa, at the tripartite border of Eritrea-Djibouti-and Ethiopia could not be discarded as a pure fabrication, which must have been related with Ethiopia's alleged preparedness.

<sup>29</sup> Awate.com: Gedab News Analysis by Gedab News - Jun 20, 2008

<sup>30</sup> Diplomatic sources indicate that when heads of states and diplomats from neighboring countries offered to mediate between the two countries because he has good relations with Djibouti's Foreign Minister, Isaias turned down the offer and advised: "don't get involved in this non-issue; we do not have a problem with Djibouti."

<sup>31</sup> Isayas Afeworki presenting a report to a cabinet meeting in the capital, Asmara, on 28 August, 2008

<sup>32</sup> [Www.Shabait.com](#).June 15, 2008.

<sup>33</sup> Tanja R Muller."Understanding the Dynamics of Foreign Policy- Making in a New State: The Case of Eritrea." In [Globalization and Emerging Trends in African Foreign Policy: Comparative Perspective of Eastern Africa](#). Volume II.University Press of America.2007.

<sup>34</sup> Africa Confidential, V.49 N.11 23-05-2008.

<sup>35</sup> EPLF had changed its name to the Peoples Front for Democracy and Justice/PFDJ/.Tanja Muller, Understanding the Dynamics of Foreign Policy-making in a New State also shares this assertion.

<sup>36</sup> [Report of the UN Monitoring Group](#) Arms Embargo Enforcement on Somalia, April, 2008.

<sup>37</sup> Statement from the Eritrean foreign Ministry. Quoted by *Peter Martell* ASMARA, April 22, 2007 (AFP)

<sup>38</sup> Djibouti, which finds itself being courted by wealthy businessmen from the Gulf states, Europe and the United States, is also in the process of developing Al Noor, located 30 kilometers south of Asab, Eritrea.

<sup>39</sup> This is clear from how Eritrea writes Soviet-style protest communiqués each time someone dared to criticize aspects of Eritrean policies.

<sup>40</sup> Afronews. Novemebr 15, 2008.Eritrea now sees US as archenemy. Similar arguments were reportedly echoed in a cabinet meeting held in Asmara, on 28 August, 2008

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> The author repeatedly argued along this line in its weekly commentaries. Others like Nicole Hirt, in Eritrea, the

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

# InterAfrica Group

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