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The Ethiopia-Eritrea Peace Deal: Why Now?

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On 16 September 2018, the leaders of Ethiopia and Eritrea, Prime Minister Dr. Abiy Ahmed and President Isaias Afwerki, respectively, convened in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia to sign a peace agreement ending the longstanding conflict between the two neighboring states. Saudi Arabia's royal family, including King Salman, and the Crown Prince, Mohammad bin Salman (MbS) hosted the two heads of state in a trilateral summit.¹ What led Abiy Ahmed and Isaias Afwerki to come to terms after more than 20 years of conflict and hostility? It was a combination of political and economic factors, namely the rise to power of a new political leadership in Ethiopia, increased political and economic interest in the Horn of Africa from the Persian Gulf monarchical regimes, and the all-important need for Ethiopia and Eritrea to improve their respective economic situations. The peace deal has, thus far, helped improve the general political situation in the Horn of Africa region, however, due to the historical nature of the conflict, Ethiopia and Eritrea, and the other regional nation-states still face numerous obstacles that must be overcome. The primary challenge is the settlement of territorial and border disputes.

The Ethiopian-Eritrean conflict and conflict resolution efforts have been ongoing for roughly 20 years. However, the tension between the two dates back to 1952 when Ethiopia, under imperial rule, annexed Eritrea. As a result, in the 1960s the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) emerged in opposition to the Ethiopian regime. In the early

1970s, another group of Eritrean separatists formed the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), an organization that became the leading Eritrean secessionist movement.² When the military (Derg) overthrew the Ethiopian imperial rule in 1974, it attempted to forcefully integrate Eritrea into Ethiopia. Ethiopian opposition groups, which opposed the Marxist-Leninist Derg regime, began to appear, spearheaded by the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF). In 1991, after several decades of collaboration and cooperation between the EPLF and the TPLF, the two entities were able to successfully topple the Derg regime in Ethiopia. After this occurred, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) rose to power in Ethiopia and the TPLF became a major part of the coalition. The EPRDF supported the Eritrean efforts to establish their own state, in return for the assistance that Eritrean forces provided to Ethiopian rebels in regaining control of the capital, Addis Ababa. Thus, in 1991, Eritrea successfully declared independence, a decision later affirmed through a 1993 independence referendum, which overwhelmingly passed. Once Eritrea officially became an independent state, the two states maintained close ties and, as Ethiopia remained landlocked, there was much hope that cooperation between the two would be mutually productive. However, the ties between the neighboring states ruptured in 1998 due to a combination of several factors, including longstanding border disputes, resulting in a two-year long war.³

On the whole, between 2002 and up until the first half of 2018 Ethiopia and Eritrea did not directly engage in open warfare. Rather, each resorted to stationing troops on its side of the border, while concurrently backing various rebel groups in each other's territory. Additionally, the two countries waged proxy wars against the other in "third party" countries. During the Somali Civil War, for example, Ethiopia and Eritrea supported competing rebel groups.⁴ Ethiopia and the international community accused Eritrea of supporting jihadist groups in Somalia, an allegation the Eritrean regime continues to vehemently deny.⁵ In recent years, there have also been direct skirmishes between Ethiopia and Eritrea, including Ethiopian bombings of Eritrean targets in 2012 and 2015 and cross-border clashes in mid-2016.⁶

In February 2018, the Ethiopian Prime Minister, Hailemariam Desalegn, a TPLF backed figure, abruptly resigned after a period of mass protests and unrest, which was

primarily led by the Oromo and Amhara ethnic groups. As a result, the EPRDF held a vote for the purpose of selecting a new head of state. To the surprise of many, the victorious candidate was Dr. Abiy Ahmed.⁷ This move signaled the beginning of a transition, given that the TPLF had dominated the EPRDF coalition since 1991, and now the Oromo bloc had managed to rise to power under Ahmed's leadership. This led to a drastic shift in power relations within the coalition. From the beginning of Ahmed's rule, the 42-year-old has sought to promote an agenda of reform, both internally and externally, and his most important pillars have included leading efforts to establish peace with Eritrea and to end the state of emergency in Ethiopia.⁸

Ahmed's decision to showcase his interest in peace, along with a visit by an Eritrean peace delegation to Addis Ababa, helped launch the 8-9 July summit held between the Ethiopian and Eritrean heads of state in Asmara. As part of this bilateral summit, the two leaders signed a "Joint Declaration on Peace and Friendship" on 9 July, thus officially ending decades of conflict between the countries.⁹ The declaration included several provisions, like the reopening of borders and embassies in each country, renewing flights, restoring telecommunications between the two, and working towards cooperation on various fronts, such as economic and political cooperation.¹⁰ There are many benefits and advantages to the Eritreans and Ethiopians decision to renew their relations. According to Dr. Fikrejesus Amhazionian, peace between the two countries will promote regional stability and assist Eritrea to increase foreign direct investment (FDI), as well as help it to rebuild important economic sectors, including tourism.¹¹ Nonetheless, challenges remain. Ethiopia, in particular, faces internal opposition, and there have been clashes between members of the EPRDF coalition. The TPLF fiercely opposes provisions of this peace deal, particularly when it comes to sensitive territorial concessions in the disputed border areas.¹²

The peace between Ethiopia and Eritrea helped motivate attempts by other states, specifically Somalia and Djibouti, to rekindle their relations with Eritrea. Eritrea's ties with both of these countries have soured over the past decade. With Djibouti, relations became embittered due to a border dispute over the Dumeira region that began in 2008. With Somalia, relations soured over Eritrea's alleged support of militant groups in the

Somali Civil War. In late July 2018, Eritrean President Afwerki and Somali President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed met in Asmara, leading to the restoration of their relations. Ever since this renewal of these ties, the Ethiopian and Somali governments have attempted to mediate talks between Djibouti and Eritrea. These efforts appeared to bear fruit when, on 6 September Eritrea and Djibouti agreed to normalize ties. Nine days later, Saudi Arabia hosted the heads of state of both countries for a historic summit.¹³

There are multiple external parties who have become interested in stability in the Horn of Africa, including the UAE and Saudi Arabia; both Gulf states are interested in both promoting their trade interests as well as expanding their spheres of influence. Since 2016, the UAE has leased the port in Assab, Eritrea and operates a military base there, a move which has helped bring a much-needed flow of capital to Eritrea, as it suffered immensely from the international sanctions imposed upon it. The Ethiopia-Eritrea peace deal allows land-locked Ethiopia access to Eritrea's Assab port after several decades of reliance on Djibouti's ports to export its goods.¹⁴ In mid-2018, Ethiopia began to produce crude oil, several decades after first discovering that it possessed natural resources. The increased interest in oil is part of its effort to diversify the economy.¹⁵ The UAE, as a result, is interested in building an oil pipeline between Addis Ababa and Assab, which would be just one example of the benefits of the new peace.¹⁶

Despite the optimism for peace in the Horn of Africa, Ethiopia and Eritrea have yet to fulfill major provisions of the peace agreement. Analyst Goitom Gebreluel, among others, argues that, despite the reopening of the border between the two countries on 11 September 2018, the fact that the demarcation of the boundary between the two states has yet to occur will likely make the agreement's implementation more complicated than expected. This is the case due to fierce objections, led by the TPLF, over the method of its execution. Gebreluel also claims that consistent criticism of the TPLF by Eritrean government officials will make future cooperation and reconciliation efforts between Ethiopia and Eritrea even more challenging.¹⁷ Therefore, the peace agreements between Ethiopia, Eritrea, and other states in the Horn of Africa are still fragile; only time will tell if they will be able to hold.

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¹²See footnote 10

¹³Daniel Mumbere, "It's a Season of Peace in the Horn of Africa Region", *Africanews*, September 06, 2018. Available at: <http://www.africanews.com/2018/09/07/it-s-a-season-of-peace-in-the-horn-of-africa-region/>; Daniel Mumbere, "Eritrea, Djibouti Leaders Hold Historic Meeting in Saudi Arabia", *Africanews*, September 17, 2018. Available at: <http://www.africanews.com/2018/09/18/eritrea-djibouti-leaders-hold-historic-meeting-in-saudi-arabia/>

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