Chapter 4

Eritrea: On a Slow Fuse

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Eritrea's diverse society—half Christian, half Muslim, from nine distinct linguistic and cultural groups—has long rendered it vulnerable to centrifugal political forces, while its strategic location at the southern end of the Red Sea has made it the target of regional and global powers, from the Ottoman Empire half a millennium ago to the United States and the Soviet Union at the peak of the cold war. The former Italian colony's first political parties were organized along confessional lines in the 1940s. The liberation movement divided along religious and regional lines in the 1960s and 1970s. Today, as Eritrea struggles to establish itself as a viable state, these fault lines threaten to reassert themselves, opening the country to increased ethnic and religious extremism that could spill over Eritrea's borders, even as it draws inspiration and resources from the hostile states that ring it.

[1]Introduction

Africa's newest nation got off to a promising start. Upon winning de facto independence from Ethiopia in 1991 and affirming its sovereignty through a United Nations–monitored referendum two years later, Eritrea set out to construct the institutions of a law-based state with a high degree of popular participation. At the outset, the country boasted low levels of crime and corruption, a strong work ethic, high levels of volunteerism, little evident tension among ethnic or confessional groups, relatively good relations with its neighbors, and no international debt. But in recent years its trajectory has been all downhill.

During its first decade as a recognized state, Eritrea careened from one armed conflict with its neighbors to another, while sliding ever deeper into political repression and economic malaise. One by one—and at times simultaneously—Eritrea trained its guns on the Sudan, Yemen, Djibouti, and Ethiopia to resolve outstanding disputes. In the last instance, unresolved border questions, together with festering economic and political issues, triggered three rounds of all-out war between Eritrea and Ethiopia that left tens of thousands dead, hundreds of thousands displaced, and both countries' economies in tatters, just as drought intensified throughout the region, adding to their economic woes. In Eritrea's case, another casualty was the prospect of democratic development, as the beleaguered president circled his political wagons against mounting criticism from within and beyond the ruling party over his intransigent approach to peace negotiations, his conduct of the war, and his resistance to democratization.

Today, all political parties are banned, all but a handful of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are prohibited, a constitution—ratified in 1997—has not yet been implemented, national elections have repeatedly been postponed, public criticism has been silenced, independent media are shut down, churches have been forcibly closed, and dissidents indefinitely detained. While these measures put a temporary lid on public expressions of protest, they set the stage for escalating instability in which political violence is almost certain to increase in scope and intensity.

The aftereffects of the Border War, coupled with the regime's deepening repression, have reopened fissures within the fragile society and harrowed the ground for the rise of old and new opposition groups, many of which draw support from border states. Among them are armed Islamists based in the Sudan and loosely affiliated with Osama bin Laden and a gaggle of secular splinters from the original independence movement, many of which, like the Islamists, are committed to the armed overthrow of the present Eritrean government.

Although it is unlikely that global terror networks can implant their own cells in Eritrea, the reverse scenario—that indigenous armed groups, Islamist and secular, will seek affiliation or assistance from such networks to further local agendas—is a strong possibility. Should Eritrea descend into civil war, as it could do within the next two to three years, it will add further to the instability of an already explosive neighborhood. Meanwhile, under the present regime's policies of providing support for armed opposition groups operating in neighboring states, Eritrea is already a center of regional instability.

The problem Eritrea poses is not one of state weakness (or failure), in which external terrorist organizations can establish stopover points or find safe havens. Rather, it is one where conditions of conflict and repression mask the growing alienation of the population from a central government that continues to operate largely through informal and unaccountable structures of power, behind a façade of ineffectual public institutions. This alienation shows itself mainly through acts of passive resistance and noncooperation with the state, but such postures could change suddenly in the event that the growing but yet fragmented underground opposition finds enough common ground among its many competing factions to constitute a threat to public order.

The United States has embraced Eritrea as a key ally in the global war on terrorism, both for its strategic location and for its military prowess in the face of local terrorist threats. However, Eritrea's uncertain political trajectory could make this a risky investment. Conflicted—and at times contentious—relations with the United States, deriving from both current events and a legacy of mistrust, could place Washington in the crosshairs of those contesting for power in Eritrea.

U.S.-Eritrean Relations 1941–Present

The relationship between the United States and Eritrea was shaped from the outset by regional considerations, principally involving Ethiopia. In the 1940s, the United States was plunged into World War II and was beginning to project its power globally. When postwar decolonization got under way, Ethiopia provided an entry point for influence over emergent African states and a base for pursuing strategic interests in the region. It was the first African state to which the United States turned. U.S. relations with Eritrea were subsumed under this relationship.

Weeks after British-led forces defeated Italy in 1941 and took charge of the Eritrean colony, the American firm of Johnson Drake & Piper began implementing military projects there that were taken over by the U.S. Army when Washington joined the Allied war effort. An aircraft-assembly plant was constructed at Gura; workshops in Asmara, the Eritrean capital, were converted to a repair base; naval facilities were established in Massawa, and communications facilities were set up in Asmara. Eritrea's strategic coastline, facing Saudi Arabia and Yemen and stretching to the narrow mouth of the Red Sea at Bab el-Mandab, also gave the former Italian colony a special geostrategic importance. Keeping open the vital sea lanes that connected Europe and North America with East Africa, the Persian Gulf, and Asia through the Suez Canal was essential.[1]

In the late 1940s, Washington was the main champion of landlocked Ethiopia's claim to Eritrea, with its 600-mile Red Sea coast, as the newly established United Nations debated its status. In 1950, a U.S-backed plan was adopted to link both territories in a federation under Ethiopia's control. It went into effect on September 15, 1952. The arrangement gave Eritrea authority over the police, control of other domestic affairs, and the right to levy taxes and adopt its own budget, but Ethiopia controlled defense, foreign affairs, currency and finance, and international commerce and communications. Eritrea had a constitution with a U.S.-style bill of rights, a separate parliament, a national flag, and two official languages—Tigrinya and Arabic—but it lacked the power to defend those attributes.

Meanwhile, the United States and Ethiopia signed agreements that gave Washington a twenty-five-year lease on military bases in Eritrea, including a spy facility in Asmara at Kagnew Station, in return for which it pledged to provide military aid and training to Ethiopia. Between 1953 and 1960, U.S. military advisors built black Africa's first modern army, with three divisions of 6,000 men each, equipped largely with surplus weapons and equipment from World War II and the Korean War (to which Ethiopia contributed an army battalion).

During this decade, Ethiopia systematically dismantled the federation. Emperor Haile Selassie first decreed a preventive detention law, then arrested newspaper editors, shut down independent publications, drove prominent nationalists into exile, banned trade unions and political parties, forbade the use of indigenous languages in official transactions, and seized Eritrea's share of the lucrative customs duties. Whole industries were relocated from Asmara to Addis Ababa. Finally, the emperor ordered Eritrea's flag replaced by that of Ethiopia and forcibly dissolved its parliament.

In 1957 Eritrean students mounted demonstrations against Ethiopian rule, and in 1958 Eritrean trade unions called a general strike. Both were violently put down. With all avenues for peaceful protest closed, Eritrean exiles in 1960 founded the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) to fight for independence. As the revolt gained momentum, the United States stepped up military aid to Ethiopia. In 1964, President Lyndon Johnson sent fifty-five counterinsurgency specialists. He also approved the transfer of twelve F-5As to Addis Ababa, the first supersonic jet fighters in black Africa. The next year, 164 anti-guerrilla experts arrived under Plan Delta to teach the new "civic action" techniques being introduced in Vietnam. U.S. military aid to Ethiopia from 1946 to 1975 totaled $286.1 million in grants and loans, two-thirds of Washington's annual military assistance to all of Africa. From 1946 to 1975, Washington also provided Ethiopia with over $350 million in economic assistance, and the United States was Ethiopia's largest trading partner, taking 40 percent of its exports (mainly coffee).

By the mid-1970s, however, the importance to the United States of both Eritrea and Ethiopia declined. Other African states had more modern infrastructures, were more deeply integrated into the world market, and held more promising opportunities for American investors. Kagnew Station, whose eavesdropping facilities were being replaced by satellite systems, was scheduled for phase-out when the twenty-five-year treaty with Ethiopia expired in 1978.

Against this backdrop and with the war in Eritrea going badly, a self-described "socialist" military committee overthrew Ethiopia's aging emperor in 1974, ousted the United States two years later, and then aligned Ethiopia with the Soviet Union, which pumped billions of dollars in new arms into the country, prolonging Eritrea's independence war another fifteen years. Throughout the next phase of this protracted conflict, however, the United States declined to support the Eritreans—out of a deep distrust of the left-leaning nationalist movement, now led by the breakaway Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF). The US hoped that once the Eritreans were defeated, Ethiopia would realign with it once again.

The independence war was a long-drawn-out affair due both to the nationalist movement's lack of external support and because it was divided into rival armies that fought each other—principally, but not only, the EPLF and the ELF. The EPLF decimated the ELF in a bitter civil war in the early 1980s. It then went on to defeat the Ethiopian army in 1991 and set up a provisional government based almost exclusively on its own membership, but it left numerous, intensely hostile political fragments in its wake and it did nothing to bring them in from the cold once the independence war was over—setting the stage for internal instability and conflict later.

Two years after the fighting ended, the EPLF-led government, acting with the approval of a new Ethiopian regime, held a UN-monitored referendum on the territory's political status. It produced an overwhelming vote for independent sovereignty (98.5 percent), which the Eritreans declared in May 1993. However, even with such a mandate, the victorious liberation movement did not see fit to provide space for its former rivals, whose supporters continued to be harassed—even arrested—through the 1990s.

The United States became one of the first countries to recognize the new state, and bilateral relations grew stronger through the decade as Washington provided relief and development aid and military training. With its apparent success at transcending ethnic and religious divisions, its extremely low levels of corruption and crime, and its dedication to self-reliant development, Eritrea was an attractive partner in post–cold war Africa. President Bill Clinton characterized it, together with Ethiopia, Uganda, and Rwanda, as emblematic of the "African renaissance." Clinton met several times with Isaias Afwerki, Eritrea's president and the former EPLF commander. Hillary Rodham Clinton visited the country in 1998, arriving to a banner at the Asmara airport proclaiming "Yes, it takes a village," a homage to her recently published book.

The emergence of a Sudan-based terrorist threat to Eritrea in the form of Eritrean Islamic Jihad (EIJ)—at the top of President Isaias's agenda when he visited Washington in February 1995—heightened the urgency of aiding Eritrea. Numerous high-ranking military officials, including Gen. Tommy Franks, the head of CENTCOM, visited the country in the 1990s, and Eritrea's then chief of staff—later defense minister—Gen. Sebhat Ephrem, made frequent visits to the United States to confer with Pentagon

officials about regional security. Between 1994 and 2001, Eritrea received $6 million in Foreign Military Financing (FMF) and $2 million in International Military Education and Training (IMET) assistance.[2]

This evolving relationship was hindered, however, by growing concerns that the Eritrean leadership was still operating as if it were a band of bunkered guerrillas running a liberated zone, rather than officials governing a modern state. Each time a dispute arose with one of its neighbors, Eritrea rolled out the artillery—first against Sudan (1994), then Yemen (1995), Djibouti (1996), and finally Ethiopia (1998). Doing so helped to cement Eritrea's reputation as a volatile warrior-state and made the United States wary of getting too close, especially after Eritrea resumed the war with Ethiopia.

Relations between Eritrea and Ethiopia had appeared to be friendly after the former's independence, allowing the United States to pursue ties with both, but a legacy of petty rivalry and tension remained close to the surface. After several disputes over economic policy in the mid-1990s and following a year-long series of armed incidents along the two countries' as-yet-undemarcated border, war broke out in May 1998. Early American efforts to mediate the conflict collapsed amid Eritrean charges that the United States was tilting toward Ethiopia.

There were three rounds of fighting before a cease-fire was reached: May–June 1998, February–March 1999, and May–June 2000. Once the combat began, long-buried resentments and unresolved grievances erupted with a depth and intensity never before experienced in this volatile region. Both governments rounded up and deported people whose ethnic origins—sometimes going back two generations—identified them with their foe, regardless of whether they were legally citizens of the country from which they were being ousted. This tactic helped to poison the atmosphere for future reconciliation.[3]

A temporary truce went into effect between the warring states in June 2000 and a formal agreement to end hostilities and turn the dispute over to an international commission was signed in Algiers in December. United Nations peacekeepers were deployed the following February and have remained in place ever since, their mandate routinely renewed by the UN Security Council every six months. On April 13, 2002, the Boundary Commission issued a binding verdict that made adjustments to the boundary in each country's favor and placed the village of Badme, where the first shots of the war had been fired. within Eritrea. Both states at first accepted the verdict, but Ethiopia subsequently rejected key parts of it—notably, but not only, the placement of Badme—and the commission's decision has yet to be implemented in mid-2005. As a result, hundreds of thousands of soldiers remain deployed along the disputed frontier.

When leading members of the Eritrean president's party raised criticism of the conduct of the war, the failed negotiations, and the slow pace of democratization, Isaias had them arrested, shut down the private press, refused to implement a newly ratified constitution, and postponed national elections. These measures, coupled with the detention of two Eritreans employed at the American embassy, led to a cooling of U.S.-Eritrean relations. Relations took another turn for the worse in 2002, as the Asmara government blamed Washington for coddling Addis Ababa rather than pressuring it to follow through on its commitment to abide by the results of the arbitration. Nevertheless, in 2003, the United States provided Eritrea with $71.6 million in humanitarian aid, including $65 million in food assistance and $3.36 million in refugee support. It also gave Eritrea $10.16 million in development assistance.[4]

Eritrea's importance to the United States in the 1990s had been in part conditioned by the Clinton administration's hostility to the Islamist government in Sudan, which supported Iraq in the first Gulf War and provided bases to Osama bin Laden and other terrorist groups during the first half of the decade. Because Eritrea provided bases for Sudanese opposition forces, the United States designated it a frontline state in this confrontation and gave military and other aid on that basis. However, under the administration of President George W. Bush, which invested heavily in a peace process to end Sudan's long-running North-South civil war and open that country's largely untapped oil reserves to U.S. companies, Eritrea's importance declined, despite the fact that it supported the American-led intervention in Iraq and offered military facilities to combat regional terrorism.

Relations continue to be uneven, due to American unease with Eritrea's poor human rights record and perceptions that the new nation is unstable, as well as Eritrean perceptions that the United States

continues to tilt toward Ethiopia. For their part, many Eritreans—in and out of government—argue that it is hypocritical to criticize their new nation for human rights abuses when the United States has behaved similarly in Afghanistan and Iraq. This resentment has fed efforts by the authoritarian government to weaken support for civil liberties and multiparty politics, which it derogates as Western imports unsuited to Eritrean culture or current conditions.

The Postindependence Eritrean State

Eritrea's contemporary political culture has long been authoritarian, predicated upon secrecy and the arbitrary exercise of absolute power. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the EPLF was organized and led from within by a clandestine Marxist core chaired by Isaias: the Eritrean People's Revolutionary Party. The EPRP met in secret to draft the EPLF's program prior to its three general congresses (1977, 1987, 1994); to select slates for leadership prior to elections; and, unbeknown to non–party members, to manage its affairs on a day-to-day basis. EPRP and EPLF members who broke the rules were punished mercilessly and then suddenly rehabilitated, as was the practice in Maoist China, where Isaias had received military and political training in 1968–1969. This pattern of behavior, established in the liberation movement in the 1970s and 1980s, held true for the government in the 1990s, obtains today, and will define the practices for future elections convened under this leadership—if and when they occur.

Isaias took formal control of the EPLF in 1987 at its second congress, though as party head he had always been the key figure within the EPLF, controlling the secret party and pulling the strings for the liberation front. In 1989, he froze the operations of the EPRP (known by then as the Eritrean Socialist Party) but continued to meet secretly with its leadership to plan the postwar transition. This positioned him both to assume the postwar presidency and to make the state the dominant institutional apparatus in an independent Eritrea, subordinating both the Front and what remained of the party to it.[5]

Prior to the EPLF's third congress in 1994, when it changed its name to the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), Isaias convinced many veterans to step aside from the leadership in order to bring what he called "new blood" into the political movement. Afterward, however, he rarely used the Front's newly elected bodies to decide issues. Instead, the PFDJ's nineteen-member executive committee spent most of its time discussing how to implement policies determined elsewhere. In this respect, the newly christened organization mimicked the EPLF's operational forms during the liberation struggle—but with a singular difference. There was no organized party providing the guidance; no collective body, however secret, was operating behind the scenes. There was only the president and his personally selected advisors.

The same was true of the state. Though there appeared to be a separation of powers in the new government—an executive office with a cabinet of ministers, an interim parliament (pending the first national elections), and a nominally independent judiciary—it was an illusion. The cabinet did not provide a forum for debate or decision-making. It, too, served mainly as a clearinghouse to determine how policies hammered out elsewhere would be put into practice. Even the military remained under the president's personal control, as Isaias leapfrogged his own Defense Ministry to exercise direct command through four theater-operation generals whom he had brought with him from the EPRP.

Throughout the 1990s, Isaias expanded and strengthened the president's office with specialized departments for economic and political policy that duplicated (and effectively out-ranked) equivalent ministries. He staffed these departments with loyal individuals who reported to no one but him. Ministerial portfolios were frequently shuffled to keep rivals from developing power bases of their own. High-ranking officers and government officials who questioned the president's judgment found themselves subjected to the Chinese practice of *midiskal* (freezing), in which they were removed from their posts, kept on salary but not permitted to work, and then abruptly brought back into the fold when they were perceived to be rehabilitated. After the Border War, these practices turned uglier, as dissatisfaction with Isaias's rule became widespread.

Meanwhile, individual members of oppositional groups like the Eritrean Liberation Front were allowed to return to the country. A few were even awarded top positions in the ruling party and

government or on special commissions, such as the one that drew up the constitution in the mid-1990s—but only if they renounced their former organizations. Even so, most of these ex-ELF fighters—including Ibrahim Totil, former head of the ELF's Political Department, who served as governor of the Northern Red Sea *zoba* (province)—were stripped of their posts in 2004, as the regime circled its political wagons and purged those considered potentially disloyal to the beleaguered president. This action left no legal, institutional base for contesting Isaias's leadership.

Up to 2001, however, the president's authority and judgment had been vigorously tested behind the scenes within the PFDJ, and measures to draw a widening circle of the general population into the country's political life had encouraged many to hope for a more open future. The two-year mobilization for the 1993 referendum on Eritrea's political status brought thousands of people into the political process for the first time. A three-year, highly participatory, constitution-making process produced a legal foundation for the articulation, exercise, and future debate on basic civil and human rights. Despite its flaws, the manner in which it was produced—involving tens of thousands of Eritreans at home and abroad in discussions on what rights they held dear and what they wanted from their newly created state—added value beyond the constitutional document itself. It fed the dream held by many liberation-era veterans that Eritrea was on the road, however rocky, toward a popular democracy that would come to operate transparently within a defined legal framework—once they passed the transitional stage.

Up against this dream was the apparent conviction at the center of power that the people could not be trusted to rule themselves, especially in an unsettled regional environment where enemies and spies might manipulate them against their own interests. What was needed under these conditions, those close to Isaias argued, was "guided democracy," in which an enlightened few would make the key decisions about Eritrea's future and involve the general population (and the rest of the movement) largely by mobilizing people after the fact.

Throughout the 1990s, the country followed two paths at once—one toward shared participation in the very definition of the "New Eritrea," as well as in its reconstruction, development, and rule; the other toward increasingly centralized executive power that stripped the population of any agency in the process, providing them material benefits but only as objects, not subjects, of their collective destiny—in a word, patronage. Renewed war brought these contradictions to a head, and decisively resolved them in favor of the latter path.

The Crackdown on Dissent

The continuing hostilities between Ethiopia and Eritrea provided the government of Eritrea with a rationale for suspending moves toward democratization and for suppressing public criticism of the regime. The limited dissent that had been tolerated after the independence war—a period that saw the appearance of a vigorous and critical private press, heated debates among government and party officials, the convening of an international Eritrean Studies Association conference with papers raising questions about democracy and development, and more—was sharply curtailed in the summer and fall of 2001. Indeed, the stage had already been set, with the failure to implement the new constitution after it was ratified in 1997.[6]

In August 2000, several high-ranking PFDJ officials privately criticized Isaias's conduct of the Border War at a closed-door session of the PFDJ leadership. Among these were top military and political leaders who had been at the forefront of the liberation movement for thirty years. They also questioned the president's resistance to diplomatic solutions to the conflict before Eritrean defenses collapsed in May 2000, and they called for rapid progress toward multiparty <**one word in Webster's ok**> democracy in Eritrea. These criticisms were repeated in September at a closed-door session of the National Assembly (a majority of whose members are on the PFDJ's Central Council). This was the last time Isaias permitted the body to meet until it was purged of his critics.

Over the next four to five months, Isaias's critics continued to question his leadership within the EPLF/PFDJ. When he refused to convene a meeting to take up their charges, they went public. Known as the Group of 15 (or G-15), they first published their critique on the Internet. Later, several gave lengthy

interviews to Eritrea's private press. Their arguments kicked off a vigorous public debate about the country's political future.

Isaias's crackdown on dissent gathered momentum in mid-2001 with the arrest of Semere Kesete, a student leader at the University of Asmara, after he criticized the government for underpaying students for enforced "national service" during the summer months—echoing protests raised by liberation army fighters in 1993 (the only mass public protest in Eritrea's modern history). Hundreds of university students were rounded up and sent on a work project, to contain the rising protest on the campus. Parents who protested the treatment of their children—several of whom died—were also arrested. Semere remained in prison for months without being charged before making his escape with the help of sympathetic guards.[7]

On September 18–19, 2001, the Eritrean government initiated a sweeping crackdown on its high-level critics, arresting eleven of the fifteen who had signed the open letter to the president (one recanted and the three others were not in Eritrea at the time of the arrests). Shortly after this crackdown, the government closed all the private newspapers in the country and began arresting others associated with the G-15 or with expressions of dissent during the previous year. Their justification was that those arrested, and the press, had constituted an Ethiopian fifth column, though no formal charges were brought, no evidence presented, no trials conducted, and no explanations ever offered.[8]

In the years since, there have been numerous, less publicized arrests—of elders who sought to mediate on behalf of the detainees, more journalists, mid-level officials, merchants, businessmen, young people resisting conscription, and church leaders and parishioners associated with minority Christian denominations, among others. Some were held for short periods and discharged. Others, like the G-15 and the journalists, have been held indefinitely, with no charges leveled and no visitors allowed. Some of those who were released claim that they were tortured, but no executions have been reported.

In 2002, the government banned all religious denominations but Islam, the Eritrean Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Evangelical Church of Eritrea (Lutheran). Members of prohibited denominations were forbidden from worshipping anywhere in Eritrea, even in private homes. Dozens of members of Pentecostal and other independent evangelical groups and Jehovah's Witnesses have since been arrested for flouting these restrictions.[9]

Eritrean public opinion on political issues has been extremely difficult to gauge since the crackdown began, as there is no legal outlet for expressing perspectives at odds with official policy. This repression has produced a climate of fear in the urban centers, where citizens believe that telephones are tapped, public conversations are monitored, and email is routinely intercepted. These anxieties have been enhanced by the manner in which arrested dissidents are treated: People disappear, after which no one has access to them, including their families. The lack of clarity on where the red lines are—what will get one arrested—has engendered a pervasive terror of the authorities and a growing mistrust of friends, neighbors, co-workers, and others in the general population.

Amnesty International reported that fourteen journalists remained in prison without charge in December 2004, including Aklilu Solomon, a reporter for Voice of America, who was detained in July 2003 after reporting adverse public reaction to the government's announcement that soldiers had been killed in the Border War with Ethiopia.[10] In an email message sent through an Internet-based server in December 2004, one former detainee claimed he had seen the VoA reporter in a secret prison near Abi Abieto in the Eritrean highlands, where he was held without charge in a shipping container. Aklilu was released at the end of that month in poor physical condition.[11]

By the middle of 2004, visitors reported that residents of Asmara—long noted for their outspoken character—spoke of politics only in hushed tones and clipped utterances. Most had become deeply pessimistic and were preoccupied with the declining economy, as prices had doubled or tripled and fuel was extremely scarce. More disturbing, the Eritrean people, known for their generosity and openness to outsiders but fed on a steady diet of anti-foreign propaganda since 2001, had begun to turn aggressively xenophobic, blaming outsiders for their increasingly desperate plight. All foreigners were required to get special permission from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to travel in Eritrea outside Asmara. Few did so,

leaving most of the country cut off from the outside world and informed about it only by party cadres and government-controlled print and broadcast media.

External Threats

Armed threats to the Eritrean government come from two directions: Islamist and secular. Nearly all opposition groups, regardless of ideology, derive from splits or spin-offs from the original independence movement, the Eritrean Liberation Front, and draw strength from those constituencies that have either run afoul of or feel shorted by the ruling EPLF/PFDJ since it came to dominate the nationalist movement. Separately, none constitutes an imminent threat to the regime in the sense of having the capacity to seize power—or even to render the country ungovernable—but taken together they signal a gathering drift toward instability whose cumulative effect will be to weaken the central state, accelerate political polarization, and contribute to conditions in which a sudden rupture could occur. That such a danger exists was underlined by the government itself in early 2005, when it charged Sudan with harboring terrorists who plotted Isaias's assassination.[12]

The principle Islamist threat comes from Eritrean Islamic Jihad, which was slow to garner support within Eritrea in the first flush of postindependence euphoria, in part because political Islam lacks historical roots in Eritrea. However, it has lately found fertile soil in which to grow by capitalizing on Muslim dissatisfaction with the secular regime in Asmara while linking its critiques of the Isaias government to Eritrea's relations with the United States and Israel.

For their part, the secular groups have begun to accelerate efforts to form a coherent opposition alliance, though so far with little notable success beyond the production of fresh polemics. What remains is for them to set aside their parochial organizational interests and personal rivalries to mobilize around a credible program of democratic development—and to demonstrate that there is more to such a formulation than mere words. Should they do so, they would almost certainly find support, both active and passive, among the repressed and increasingly restive population inside the country, allowing them to operate clandestinely in the densely populated highlands and large urban areas, where EIJ has failed to establish a foothold. This development would abruptly alter the security situation across the country.

Eritrean Islamic Jihad

In 1989, the newly installed National Islamic Front (NIF) government in Sudan opened its doors to armed opposition groups from countries in Africa, the Middle East and beyond. In Eritrea's case, those given support included both Islamist and secular guerrilla groups. Chief among them were the Eritrean Islamic Jihad Movement (EIJM, often shortened to EIJ) and factions of the Eritrean Liberation Front, which had split into numerous rival groups in the 1980s. By 1993, Eritrean organizations operating from bases in northeastern Sudan and drawing on the large impoverished Eritrean refugee population there were carrying out sporadic terrorist attacks inside Eritrea. Once war broke out between Eritrea and Ethiopia in May 1998, many of these groups found sanctuary in Ethiopia as well, operating radio stations beamed into Eritrea as well as mounting military and political actions.

The EIJ received support from both the NIF and Osama bin Laden's emerging Islamist coalition, headquartered in Sudan through the first half of the 1990s. It also resonated with simmering discontent in Eritrea's long-marginalized Muslim communities, and it drew recruits from the large population of war-displaced Eritreans living in Sudan, some for decades. While it initially failed to generate large-scale popular backing, a series of missteps by the Eritrean government, the clumsy implementation of reconstruction and development programs, and then the outbreak of the Border War with Ethiopia, with all its economic, social, and political repercussions, prepared the ground for the EIJ to expand its influence and to step up its clandestine operations. With no outlet for political protest in Eritrea, the Islamist resistance became by default the channel for rising popular dissatisfaction among Eritrean Muslims. The help it received from outside facilitated its growth, but was not causal.

Harakat al-Jihad al-Ertrrya al-Islammiya, as the EIJ was **<"is"?>** called in Arabic, had its roots in Eritrea's labyrinthine political past. In its early years, the Eritrean Liberation Front was dominated by Muslims from the western lowlands and coastal plains dominated the ELF. After the ELF split over

internal differences in 1970, the two main trends that emerged from it—the ELF and the EPLF—adopted strongly secular orientations. This drove some with Islamist politics to quit both Fronts. When the two rivals fought a civil war in 1980–1981 and the ELF split into weakened, contending factions, Islamic radicals among the refugees and former fighters in Sudan formed their own organization: the Eritrean Muslim Pioneers Organization (Munezemet Arrewad al-Muslimeen al-Ertrrya). Two years later, a second group in Sudan formed the Eritrean National Islamic Liberation Front (*Jebhat al-Tahrir al-Ertrrya al-Islammiya al-Wetenniya*).

The EIJ was launched at a conference in Khartoum in November 1988, when these two Islamist organizations merged with several smaller ones that also drew from disaffected guerrilla fighters and the refugee community in Sudan. Among them were Islamic Uprising, the Movement of Oppressed Eritreans, and the Islamic Defense Committee. The founding conference's final communiqué denounced the EPLF and "vowed to liberate the country and raise the banner of Islam over it," though there was little evidence of the EIJ's military activity until after independence.[13]

The first EIJ combatants entered Eritrean territory in 1989, nearly two years before the end of the independence war and shortly after the NIF seized power in Sudan, but the EIJ's first offensive military operations did not take place until January 1992. In the interim, the movement had already experienced one minor split. More were to occur over the next decade, as the more extreme wing came to dominate and as the organization deepened its affiliation with bin Laden and his emerging global terror network. By the mid-1990s, it fielded an estimated 500 fighters.[14]

Throughout these years, bin Laden and his operatives schooled guerrillas from the EIJ and other Islamist guerrilla groups in the use of explosives, forgery, coding, and other such skills, according to a former noncommissioned officer who defected from Sudan in 1996 and with whom I spoke in western Eritrea while researching the arms trade for Human Rights Watch. Weapons for the guerrillas were imported mainly from Iran and China through Port Sudan, and then trucked to Khartoum, where the Ministry of Defense turned them over to bin Laden's representatives. Officers who carried out successful operations were rewarded with money and arms. [15]

Another defector who acted as a liaison between the NIF and bin Laden's Islamist coalition said that the EIJ held a seat on the new international network's coordinating council, the Majlis al Fatwa. This body, a precursor of Al Qaeda, had forty-three members, who served on sub-councils responsible for security, military affairs, economics, media and information, and policy. They included representatives from such far-flung armed groups as the Egyptian Islamic Group, the Oromo Islamic Front in Ethiopia, the Islamic forces of Sheikh Abdullah in Uganda, Algeria's Islamic Salvation Front, and the Moro Liberation Front from the Philippines.

By 1993, the EIJ was carrying out occasional raids and ambushes. As reports of its clandestine activities filtered into Asmara, representatives of foreign NGOs operating in western Eritrea also began to speak off the record about pressure being put on rural residents not to participate in government-sponsored rehabilitation and development projects. None of this talk reached the domestic or international media, however, as Eritrean officials sought to play down the threat. Meanwhile, informal discussions between Eritrea and Sudan carried out through a regional forum, the Intergovernmental Authority for Drought and Development (IGADD, the earlier incarnation of IGAD, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development), failed to reach an agreement to end these raids. The relationship between the two states began to sour, especially after 1993, when Eritrean forces captured EIJ operatives who said they had been trained at camps in Sudan.

At the EIJ's second general conference in Khartoum in December 1994, the organization pledged to expand and continue its jihad "until achieving victory or martyrdom." Shortly afterward, EIJ units launched a cross-border attack, during which Eritrean forces reportedly killed a half-dozen guerrillas, including at least two from other countries. This thrust underlined EIJ's growing participation in bin Laden's terror network and it led to a rupture in diplomatic relations between Eritrea and Sudan in early 1995, when Asmara publicly called for the overthrow of the NIF government. Soon after, Eritrea opened its doors to the Sudanese opposition, hosting two conferences by the National Democratic Alliance

(NDA), an emerging political and military coalition, and giving it the Sudanese embassy as a headquarters.

The Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), which the Eritreans had directly assisted with troops and training in the south in the early 1990s, provided the core of the NDA's military capacity, and SPLA leader John Garang was initially appointed the new coalition's military leader, though he was rarely in the field. By the end of the decade, veteran SPLA commander Pagan Amum had taken over the post and was personally responsible for conducting some of the NDA's most daring military actions into the northeastern Sudan, including a twenty-four-hour takeover of the important border city of Kassala in late 2000. The rebels claimed to have captured thirteen government tanks and a large quantity of artillery and light weapons before withdrawing to their desert base area..[16]

The opposition alliance's largest political components, apart from the SPLA, were the traditional northern parties—the Umma Party and the Democratic Unionist Party—that had dominated Sudanese politics since independence, but neither one initially fielded military forces. The newly formed Sudan Alliance Forces (SAF)—led primarily by northern, Arab dissidents, many of them former military officers—developed a military arm that operated from bases in Eritrea and Ethiopia. It later merged with the SPLA and then experienced a series of debilitating leadership splits, but its units continued to engage in battles with government forces. The Beja Congress, whose base was among peoples living along the Eritrean-Sudanese border and whose origins date to the 1950s, also received Eritrean support and fielded a small military force that operated in northeastern Sudan. It has since grown to be one of the largest armed opposition movements operating there.

The launch of an armed northern opposition, first from bases in or adjacent to Eritrea and later from western Ethiopia, posed a different kind of threat to Sudan's central government from that in the chronically conflicted south. At various points, these groups launched attacks that threatened such key economic targets as the Roseires Dam near Damazin in the Blue Nile region and the highway linking Port Sudan with Khartoum in the northeast. The government responded to these armed incursions with calls for a national mobilization and a renewed quest for arms from its global suppliers, while charging its neighbors with invading its territory. It also stepped up support for Eritrean opposition groups, particularly the EIJ.

In an interview in early 1998, Abul Bara' Hassan Salman, the second-in-command, characterized the EIJ's objectives as to liberate the region from Christian-Jewish control through armed struggle and regional diplomacy and to replace the Isaias Afwerki regime with an Islamic government. In defining the enemy, he pointedly linked Eritrea with the United States and Israel:
[extract]As for the latest Christian onslaught, which is being led by America, its scenario is being executed by the puppet regimes in the region. This onslaught is also an attempt to impose the sovereignty of the Christian minorities in the region in order to ascertain the strategic security and economic needs of the imperialists. . . .

[T]he Afourgy [Afwerki] regime is regarded as one of the elements of the Christian strategy in the African Horn. This is evident in its employment of Eritrea and its people to destabilise the security of the region. The behaviour of the regime, its enmity to neighbouring countries such as Sudan and Yemen, and its complete denial of the role of the Arab countries and the Muslims (during the war for liberation from Ethiopia), and its alliance with the Jews are amongst the biggest indicators of this.[17][end][shouldn't this extended quote be indented?]

At its third general conference in 1998, shortly after the outbreak of war between Eritrea and Ethiopia and after Al Qaeda's attacks on the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania had focused the global spotlight on Sudan, the EIJ changed its name to the Eritrean Islamic Salvation Movement (Harakat al-Khalas al-Ertrrya al-Islammiya, or al-Khalas for short) in an effort to defuse the increasingly hostile attention from the international media. Nevertheless, the conference renewed its call for jihad, and EIJ operatives continued to launch attacks into Eritrea, seeking to capitalize on dissatisfaction with the secular regime in Asmara and the perception that the government was controlled by Christian Tigrinya-speakers, who dominated the economy in mostly Muslim western Eritrea. Of particular concern then—and more so as the confrontation with Ethiopia accelerated—were the government's efforts to challenge conservative

social mores on gender issues and the conscription of Muslim women into the military.

In the immediate aftermath of the devastating third round of fighting with Ethiopia in May–June 2000, conditions for Muslims living in western Eritrea deteriorated significantly, even as demands on Eritrea's limited capacity for emergency relief multiplied. Dissatisfaction in Muslim communities grew as refugees began returning from camps in Sudan under a long-delayed UN resettlement program and the military call-ups to guard the still unstable border with Ethiopia continued [spelling change]. The EIJ capitalized on this fact to expand its reach. By 2001, it had begun to operate freely in the Northern Red Sea region, and it became dangerous for government officials or foreigners to travel there without armed escort. This situation worsened when PFDJ cadres, backed by military force, intervened in the Beja Congress to impose a puppet leadership. Afterward, disaffected Bejas began to cooperate with Sudanese authorities and with the EIJ. Eritrean investigators probing an August 2003 attack on a vehicle in the Sahel region, in which two local employees of the U.S.-based aid group Mercy Corps International were killed, blamed members of the EIJ. Surprisingly, however, the State Department's "Patterns of Global Terrorism 2003" report did not mention the group, though it cited the incident in its chronology of terrorist attacks.[18]

In April 2004, the United Nations reported "a spate of attacks in western Eritrea, believed to have been carried out by the Eritrean Islamic Jihad Movement (EIJM)."[19] Two months later, Eritrean national television broadcast footage of a "confession" by an Eritrean man, identified as Segid Mohamed Kelifa Mentay Ali, who said he had planted a bomb in Barentu on May 25 that wounded ninety people. Ali, who took responsibility for other bombings earlier in the year, said he had carried out the attack on the orders of a group he characterized only as "jihad."[20]

At its August 2004 general conference in Khartoum, the organization altered its name again, to al-Hezb al-Islami al-Eritree LilAdalah Wetenmiya (Eritrean Islamic Party for Justice and Development). It also dropped the image of an automatic rifle on its official emblem. Yet it appeared to have changed little in its strategic orientation.

[2]*Secular Opposition Movements*[end]

Chronic turmoil within the ELF has produced numerous splinter groups since the 1960s. The EIJ draws heavily on this process. Even the EPLF/PFDJ traces its origins to three groups that broke with ELF in 1969–1970. By 2004, there were more than eighteen organizations committed to the ouster of the Isaias regime, nearly all of them arising from the ELF. Some defined their separate identity by ideological orientation, but most were differentiated by their links to external powers, their regional or ethnic base, or the personalities who led them. Though they quibbled endlessly over seemingly inconsequential points, however, two major issues divided them: whether or not to wage an armed struggle to topple the government, and how closely to work with Ethiopia in pursuing their objectives.

The rise of a vocal but poorly organized opposition within the EPLF/PFDJ in 1998–2000, the government crackdown on dissent that got under way in earnest in 2001, and the creeping split within the PFDJ that followed gave rise to a new trend that drew on the EPLF's legacy even as its adherents denounced the president for hijacking it. In February 2002, the dissenters launched the EPLF-Democratic Party (EPLF-DP) under the leadership of Mesfun Hagos, a founder of the EPLF and a member of G-15 member, with the goal of establishing "a constitutional system in accordance with the democratic principles laid down in the ratified Constitution of Eritrea."[21] Two years later, its name was changed to the Eritrean Democratic Party (EDP). After defections over the two main issues noted above, it absorbed another small party based on former EPLF/PFDJ supporters, the Movement for Democratic Change, and allied itself with two ELF factions, the ELF and the ELF-Revolutionary Council. This bloc has the greatest potential to undermine the president's support within Eritrean society—and within the Eritrean Defense Forces, where Mesfun retains considerable popularity.

Most of the other secular groups deriving from the old ELF or EPLF are in the thirteen-member Eritrean National Alliance (ENA), which also includes several new secular and religious opposition formations. The ENA is committed to the armed overthrow of the Isaias government and maintains political offices in Ethiopia. Their adherents are drawn mainly from former ELF fighters and from

refugees in Sudan and Ethiopia. They include the ELF-National Congress (the largest of the former ELF factions), the strongly pro-Ethiopia Eritrean Revolutionary Democratic Front (whose name mimics that of the ruling party in Ethiopia), the Eritrean People's Movement (an EDP splinter), and several small regional groups like the Democratic Movement for the Liberation of Eritrean Kunama, the Red Sea Afar Democratic Organization, and others.[22] Three of these opposition formations—the EDP, the ELF-RC, and the ENA—beam weekly short-wave radio programs to Eritrea via satellite.

New parties, civic organizations, and would-be armies drawing their roots from the old ELF emerge and fade frequently. The political culture from which they spring is one of bitter enmity toward the Asmara regime, often mixed with driving personal ambition, and it is bound to keep gestating new groups and alliances. When this volatile political cocktail is stirred by outside interests, the result can be deadly.

While the opposition groups that cooperate with Ethiopia differ over tactics, they share the short-term goal of weakening the Isaias regime in order to displace it. In the absence of significant popular support—badly eroded by their association with Ethiopia—this grouping is most likely to resort to terrorism, the more so if it acts as a proxy for either Ethiopia or Sudan. Both of these states have interests in destabilizing Eritrea—to promote regime change and to exact retribution for Eritrean support for opposition groups operating in their own territories—and they both see ready opportunities to do so through proxy groups. Thus, the attainment of regional peace and stability are key factors in limiting the potential for terrorism.

The Potential for Terrorism

The likelihood of Eritrea becoming a regional outpost for global terrorist organizations operating on their own is slim. The dangers are that the reciprocal action between domestic repression and external threats will open spaces for acts of terrorism to increase in frequency among indigenous groups, both as political instruments and as gestures of frustration and anger—or simply revenge; and that such groups will seek stronger relationships with and support from global networks to accomplish such attacks. What we have in Eritrea is a set of factors that individually do not equate to a major threat, but taken together amount to a dangerous trend. In circumstances where the stability of the regime declines—which many actors seek this volatile mix could produce America's worst nightmare.

The tenor and direction of the present political situation, coupled with the ripening of related environmental features, create conditions in which terrorist attacks on domestic targets will almost certainly increase in frequency and intensity. At the same time, Eritrea's continuing confrontations with both Ethiopia and Sudan incubate centers of state-sponsored terrorism that operate in both directions and are aimed at weakening the other's capacity to rule. Should order break down in Eritrea, politically motivated terrorism could spread faster and further. But there is also a danger that the continuing militarization of Eritrean society will lead to an atmosphere of increased criminality within which terrorists of all sorts could thrive.

Eritrea has frequently been implicated in the promotion of unrest in both Ethiopia and Sudan through its support of rebel groups ranging from Oromo militants in southern Ethiopia to the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) in southern Sudan, the NDA coalition in the Sudan's east and northeast, and the newly formed Sudan Liberation Army in Darfur. Both Ethiopia and Sudan have responded by aiding armed opposition movements that target Eritrea. Recent acts of terror in Eritrea have consisted mainly of land mine detonations and small-scale ambushes near the country's highly militarized borders with Ethiopia and Sudan or in the coastal lowlands. Most are blamed on the EIJ or on ELF-derived guerrilla groups, but a series of bomb explosions in Asmara in 2002 were ascribed to supporters of the jailed G-15 dissidents. Should Eritrea's security situation deteriorate further, these incidents will grow in scope and potency. So far, none of these acts has targeted U.S. interests, but that also could change.

The United States now finds itself in a peculiar position. On the one hand, it is blamed by the Eritrean government for abetting "treason" during the Border War with Ethiopia, and since then, of supporting "enemies of the state" (political dissidents, jailed journalists, and members of minority

religious denominations). On the other hand, it is castigated by the government's opponents for counting the Isaias regime among its allies in the Iraq coalition and continuing to provide it with aid while doing nothing to enforce criticisms of the suppression of democracy. Islamist critics also chastise the United States for promoting closer ties between Eritrea and Israel and use this linkage to buttress their charge that the Asmara government is Christian dominated.

The most important factor shaping Eritrean attitudes toward the United States—and allowing the government to deflect attention from its own failings—is America's toothless protests over Ethiopia's noncompliance with the 2002 findings of the international boundary commission. Many Eritreans see this as the latest slight in a historical pattern going back to Washington's failure to protest Emperor Haile Selassie's abrogation of the UN treaty that federated Eritrea to Ethiopia in the first place. This neglect fuels popular anger at the United States and harrows the ground for future anti-American actions. The unfolding political situation within Eritrea needs to be read and interpreted in this context.

Although the present climate of fear may forestall direct challenges to the regime over the coming one or two years, Eritrea's medium-term prospects for stability and democracy are poor. National elections, when held, will not be free and fair. With no public space for political discussion, let alone protest, and severe constraints on the organizational expression of the most benign social or economic interests—that is, the blanket suppression of civil society—the possibility to contest the PFDJ's grip on power is simply nonexistent. Elections under such conditions can only rubber stamp the sitting government. With all peaceful avenues for altering the political situation thus closed, those who reject this dispensation are increasingly driven toward extra-legal forms of resistance.

Few in the opposition who advocate armed force to topple the regime expect to win a military victory. Their hope is to so weaken the ruling party that the state will collapse from within, perhaps through a popular uprising, perhaps by an assassination, perhaps in the course of a coup d'état*,* or, more likely, through some combination. The danger comes largely from the possibility of a collapse at the center before the opposition is prepared to fill the vacuum. Under such circumstances, the country could slide into civil war or anarchy, as significant fault lines—regional, religious, and ethnic, as well as political and personal—lie under the social surface.

Meanwhile, a generation of young people has lost the opportunity for education or skill development, apart from war-making, for more than six years. Whatever happens to alter the political situation, this cohort could be a major source of political (or criminal) violence in Eritrea and the wider region for many years to come. The longer this crisis situation obtains, the more serious will be the problem—fostering the development of a warrior class with few personal or political scruples. This is an army united by nationalist values (and coerced into serving for this extended period) but lacking in the culture of social and political responsibility that underlay the liberation movement. Absent nationalism as a unifying dynamic, they could put their martial identities and skills at the service of new and far more dangerous demagogues than populate the scene today. Effective demobilization programs could help to avert this danger, but only if these hardened, disgruntled soldiers are disarmed and in transition soon.

Disenchantment is most advanced among the Muslim population, where grievances against the Isaias regime have grown steadily over the past decade, especially since the outbreak of war with Ethiopia. These sentiments find expression through the EIJ. Issues that feed its growth include a litany of perceived cultural slights: the government's refusal to accept Arabic as an official language; its imposition of leaders on Islamic religious institutions, including the grand mufti in Asmara; the virtual colonization of the lowlands by Tigrinya-speaking Christians; the denigration of pastoralism as a way of life; perceptions of unequal representation in state and party leadership; a conviction that the official (but haphazardly implemented) land reform program will impinge on traditional grazing rights; and, most important, outrage over the conscription of women into an army where they reportedly suffer extensive abuse.

Prior to the Border War, the government managed to minimize complaints over such issues by extending new services to areas that had rarely received them in the past, from primary education and rudimentary health care to rural roads and electrification. But its capacity to maintain these services was sharply curtailed by the onset of war, and existing structures were badly damaged in the fighting and the

looting that followed. Meanwhile, the program to resettle refugees returning from Sudan, accelerated after 2001, brought many Eritreans influenced by Islamic values and organizations back to these war-devastated areas—lands where, in some cases, the government was already attempting to resettle highlanders. At the same time, Eritrean Muslims returned from conservative Middle Eastern states where they had been exposed to even more radical interpretations of Islam and Islamist politics. These factors contributed to an atmosphere of increased toleration for—and in some cases direct assistance to—EIJ's organizing efforts among the mostly Muslim western lowlanders.

Should the EIJ escalate its tactics and turn to the suicide bombing rife in Islamist movements with which it maintains loose connections, the situation in Eritrea could take a drastic turn for the worse. However, military aid to Eritrea to counter terrorist threats in this political environment runs the risk of identifying the United States with the worst excesses of a regime whose days may be numbered—and of inviting those opposed to this regime to regard the United States as a target as well.

Toward a New U.S. Policy

U.S. policy in Eritrea has been adrift since the outbreak of war with Ethiopia. In Eritrea, the political environment has deteriorated substantially, as the society has become polarized over the repression of dissent and as expressions of protest have been rendered infeasible—apart from clandestine acts of violence—both by state repression and by a popular hesitation to confront the state during a time of war. The result is an appearance of order that masks deepening alienation and progressive instability in which the United States is implicated by its inaction. This inaction needs to be reversed.

The United States must articulate a set of objectives for the region as a whole and pursue policies toward Eritrea that arise from and are consistent with these, rather than reacting piecemeal to problems and opportunities that wax and wane within each individual country. An effective strategy to prevent any country in this region from becoming a haven for terrorists demands closer coordination among all of them. These states are too deeply intertwined to do otherwise with any expectation of preventing the spread of terrorism.

The strategy for achieving these objectives must be built around settling disputes, promoting democracy, and destroying emerging terrorist threats, without which such interstate cooperation is impossible. Publicly articulating such an approach would help to isolate those who stand in the way and facilitate linked incentives and penalties to advance policy objectives. But the penalties and incentives must be more than rhetorical flourishes.

For Eritrea, sequencing is important; but from the standpoint of U.S. interests, linkage between movement on the border dispute and on democratization—and on leveraging one to achieve the other—is critical. The United States should move aggressively to end the confrontation between Eritrea and Ethiopia. No former colonial power, nor any other state or multilateral institution, is positioned to play this role, from the standpoint either of historical engagement or of current influence. And no other objectives can be effectively dealt with until this issue is taken off the table. But the United States should not act on this in isolation from other objectives.

Both the prospect of more war and the continuing suppression of democracy in Eritrea contribute to a chronically unstable environment in which terrorism will develop. Preventing terrorism must start with a resolution of the border dispute, as intractable as it now seems. However, making clear that the United States is committed to democracy and respect for basic civil and human rights in Eritrea is also essential—and could be a key to moving dispute resolution forward, even as it addresses the gathering alienation within the Eritrean population and the slide toward despotism.

The acceptance "in principle" by Prime Minister Meles Zenawi of Ethiopia in November 2004 of the 2002 border commission ruling raised hopes of movement in the stalled peace process, but the announcement hedged on details, and despite gestures of support from across the global political spectrum, the Isaias government dismissed the initiative as offering nothing new. The failure of the international community to use this initiative, however flawed, to pry open the stalled peace process represented another in a series of missed opportunities. This failure may come back to haunt all parties involved if, as is likely, it rekindles tensions along the disputed frontier.

If left to fester, this crisis could lead to renewed conflict that would not only devastate the two foes but could also unravel peace efforts in Sudan and Somalia, while opening the region further to terrorist penetration. That would be a disaster for the peoples of the affected countries and for U.S. policy. Even if full-scale conflict does not ensue, the no-war/no-peace stalemate holds great risk: it tests Eritrea and Ethiopia, both of which are threatened by drought-induced famine; puts the entire region at risk (especially Sudan); strengths antidemocratic trends in both states; and undermines confidence in all such international peace agreements, from Sudan to Israel-Palestine and beyond.

It is in the interest of the United States to move the peace process forward on the basis of the acceptance of the boundary commission's findings, coupled with sufficient incentives to make a settlement palatable. In part this approach involves pressuring Ethiopia to implement the findings as they are; in part it involves offering incentives to both sides to make progress toward peace more acceptable to their constituencies. A new initiative should be coordinated with both the European Union (EU) and the African Union (AU) to strengthen its impact and to signal U.S. intent to work within multilateral frameworks. Doing so would underline the risk of isolation for both states if they drag their feet. But that message must be backed by a credible threat of sanctions that have more than symbolic value. Demands without punch carry no weight with either antagonist.

The United States should also take an aggressive approach to reversing the suppression of liberties and rights in Eritrea. Making this policy a centerpiece of American action while pushing Ethiopia to accept the boundary commission's findings without hedging on details (including Badme) would blunt charges that the United States is somehow tilting toward Eritrea, while implicitly addressing one of Ethiopia's larger concerns—the risk of placating an unpredictable state on its northern border that shuns diplomacy and is prone to violent confrontations. Meanwhile, the United States should refrain from actions (public statements, high level delegations, aid other than that for humanitarian purposes, and so on) that appear to condone or accept the deterioration of the political situation within Eritrea.

The Eritrean government is convinced—and often makes this point in public statements—that the Bush administration is divided over Eritrea, with the Pentagon favoring closer relations out of respect for Eritrea's military prowess and its commitment to the war on terrorism and the State Department advocating the opposite due to concerns over human rights and democracy. As a result, most Eritrean initiatives toward strengthening relations with the United States are targeted at the Defense Department, rather than using conventional diplomatic channels.[23] This contradictory posture must change, so that the U.S. speaks to Eritrea with a one voice on foreign policy—that of the State Department. The United States should not abort the reform process in Eritrea by propping up Isaias's repressive regime with military assistance as a cold-war-style payoff for joining the war on terrorism. To do so makes a mockery of claims that this "war" has anything to do with promoting democracy.

Specific Recommendations

The most urgent priority for the United States is to defuse the border dispute between Eritrea and Ethiopia. All else turns on this reality, and it must be addressed first. To promote a fair and lasting resolution of that conflict, the United States should:

1. Pressure Ethiopia to implement the boundary commission's 2002 decision promptly and fully, without additional conditions or qualifications.

2. Pressure Eritrea to enter into side talks on issues of importance to Ethiopia, without linking them to Ethiopia's acceptance of the commission's findings.

3. Provide the boundary commission and the United Nations mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE) the necessary support and security guarantees for the border demarcation.

4. Negotiate parallel initiatives with the help of the UN, the African Union, and the European Union to reduce the impact on civilians in the affected areas and to prevent conflict that might result from the demarcation process.

5. Offer material incentives for rapid progress on the resolution of this confrontation and work to build an elite consensus for it within both societies.

6. Spell out a sequence of gradually escalating political and financial penalties for any party that blocks such a resolution of the conflict

7. Publicize these opportunities and penalties as widely as possible to the populations of both states, through both diplomatic channels and global media, in order to generate pressure from below to accept a settlement.

To promote a stable, democratic, political arena that will be less conducive to terrorist threats, the United States should pressure Eritrea to:

1. Immediately implement the constitution that was ratified in 1997, bringing all of Eritrea's laws into line with it.

2. Release or bring to public trial all political prisoners, including but not limited to the former liberation front leaders and government officials identified with the Group of 15.

3. Grant amnesty to members of opposition political movements based outside the country, allowing those organizations to renounce violence and enter the political process as legal entities competing on a level playing field with the ruling PFDJ.

4. Untangle the complex (and secret) interlocking economic relations between the government and the ruling party and make them transparent—or forego international development assistance.

5. Permit the reestablishment of a free, independent media, including broadcast as well as print outlets.

6. Adopt a law on religion that provides legal protections for all religious groups, and take prompt legal action against those who attack members of minority faiths.

7. Approve the Party Law tabled in the National Assembly in March 2001, which legalizes multiple parties and lays the groundwork for national elections.

8. Establish an independent commission to organize Eritrea's first national elections, with adequate safeguards for competing parties and open campaigns and with extensive international monitoring throughout the process.

The Eritrean people should not be punished for the sins of the regime. The United States should provide generous humanitarian aid to victims of drought and war, while withholding other assistance until the Eritrean government takes decisive steps to return the country to the path of democratic development.

In the event of significant progress on dispute resolution and democratization, the United States should be prepared to:

1. Commit funds and technical support for the rapid demobilization and reintegration of combat troops.

2. Assist with the resettlement of war-displaced civilians, those who have been expelled from Ethiopia and those returning from Sudan.

3. Provide support for poverty-alleviation and development programs within the scope of Eritrea's national priorities.

4. Increase support for HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment, particularly among demobilized soldiers.

5. Resurrect the Greater Horn of Africa Initiative, dormant since the outbreak of the Border War, and promote the development of regional infrastructure and the expansion of regional trade.

6. Offer Eritrea enhanced terms of bilateral trade and expedite its inclusion in the Millennium Challenge Account program.

7. Assist Eritrea in modernizing and reequipping a slimmed-down military to identify and destroy terrorist threats more effectively.

NOTES

1. The National Security Agency operated the Kagnew Station complex until the mid-1970s, intercepting radio, telephone, and telegraph messages from Soviet missile crews in Egypt, French diplomats in Senegal, African revolutionaries in Mozambique, and Arabs plotting against the British in Aden. It was also a relay station for communications with U.S. ships and submarines in the Indian Ocean, for links to forces in Southeast Asia, and for coded diplomatic traffic. See Connell, *Against All Odds: A Chronicle of the Eritrean Revolution* (Trenton, 1997).
2. Victoria Garcia, "Terrorism: Eritrea" (May 19, 2004), http://www.cdi.org/program/document.cfm?documentid=2223&programID=73&from_page=../.
3. For a discussion of the underlying complexities of this conflict, see Leenco Lata, "The Ethiopia-Eritrea War," *Review of African Political Economy*, XXX (September 2003), 369–388.
4. Bureau of African Affairs, U.S. Department of State, "Background Note: Eritrea" (March 2004), http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2854.htm.
5. See Connell, "Inside the EPLF: The Origins of the 'People's Party' and Its Role in the Liberation of Eritrea," *Review of African Political Economy*, XXVIII (2001), 345–364.
6. See Connell, "Enough! A Critique of Eritrea's Post-Liberation Politics," http://allafrica.com/stories/200311060876.html.
7. For a narrative account of these measures, see Debessay Hedru, "Eritrea: Transition to Dictatorship, 1991–2003," *Review of African Political Economy*, XXX (2003), 435–444.
8. I was in Eritrea in 2001 as criticism of the president went public and I interviewed several top-ranking dissidents shortly before they were imprisoned indefinitely. These interviews appear in Connell, *Conversations with Eritrean Political Prisoners* (Trenton, 2004).
9. U.S. Department of State, "International Religious Freedom Report 2004" (Washington, D.C., September 15, 2004), http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2004/35354.htm.
10. "Eritrea 2004," *Amnesty International Report 2004* (January 2004), http://web.amnesty.org/report2004/eri-summary-eng.
11 "VOA correspondent freed in Eritrea, 16 journalists remain in secret jails," Committee to Protect Journalists (March 3, 2005), http://allafrica.com/stories/200503030914.html.
12. "Eritrea Dismantles 'Terrorist Network' Backed by the Sudan: Official," Agence France-Presse (October 20, 2004), http://www.keepmedia.com/ShowItemDetails.do?itemID=614937&extID=10030.
13. See the EIJM website, http://www.alkhalas.org/Significant.htm. See also Ruth Iyob, "Shifting Terrain: Dissidence versus Terrorism in Eritrea," in *Terrorism in the Horn of Africa* (Washington, D.C., 2004), http://www.usip.org/pubs/specialreports/sr113.html.
14. See the Gedab Investigative Report, "The 'Executed': No Smoking Gun, but Plenty of Circumstantial Evidence," http://www.awate.com/cgi-bin/artman/exec/view.cgi/11/1090.

15. Interview with a defecting Sudanese noncommissioned officer in Tessenei, Eritrea, March 10, 1997, as cited in Human Rights Watch, *Global Trade, Local Impact: Arms Transfers to All Sides in the Civil War in Sudan* (New York, 1998).
16. I observed and photographed these arms at an NDA base in northeastern Sudan after this attack.
17. "The Governing Regime Is a Terrorist Regime which Acts with Enmity against the Eritrean People," *Nida'ul Islam* (February-March 1998), http://www.islam.org.au/articles/22/index.htm.
18. Department of State, "Patterns of Global Terrorism 2003" (April 2004), http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/pgtrpt/2003.
19. Integrated Regional Information Network, "Sudan: Peace and the Region" (April 2, 2004), http://www.plusnews.org/S_report.asp?ReportID=40388&SelectRegion=East_Africa.
20. "Eritrea Bomb Suspect Admits 'Jihad' Attack Planned from Sudan," Agence France-Press (June 23, 2004).
21. See the EPLF-DP's founding program (February 2002) at http://www.eritreaone.com/Docu/publication.htm.
22. On May 2, 2003, Hiruy Tedla Bairu, general secretary of the Eritrean National Alliance, told the BBC that its military wing would attack strategic targets such as television and radio stations. See the ENA website, http://www.erit-alliance.org.
23. On September 15, 2004, for example, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement rejecting recent U.S. criticism of its policies on religious freedom. It cited past Central Intelligence Agency "intervention" in Eritrean affairs and termed it "astonishing to see the United States, which lacks moral and legal high grounds on human rights and respect for religions, make an attempt to become the self-appointed adjudicator."