



School in Ali Addeh.

DAN CONNELL

# Eritrean Afars

## The Refugees You Never Hear About

Dan Connell

**A**hmed, a 25-year old Afar who served eight years in the Eritrean infantry, fled his country in 2006. He went first to Djibouti, and then to neighboring Ethiopia but, finding no work and fearing the risks of crossing the Mediterranean Sea, he went back to his first place of refuge. I met him in Djibouti Ville—the country’s bustling deepwater port and only city—where he now struggles to carve out a life.

*Dan Connell is a contributing editor of Middle East Report and vice chair of MERIP’s board of directors. He is working on a book about Eritrean refugees. Part two of this story, on the Afars in Ethiopia, will appear in a subsequent issue.*

Most Eritreans from other ethnic groups who flee to Djibouti continue on to Ethiopia and Sudan for the long and dangerous journey to Libya and a chance at a boat to Europe—that is, if they are not jailed here and sent to a desert refugee camp, the rough equivalent of a life sentence. But Afar refugees have it better, for they tend to blend into Djibouti’s populace, about a third of whom are Afars.

Ahmed was typical of the Eritrean Afars here. Though he said he felt trapped and had few prospects for work or education, he preferred to remain among other Afars, with whom he shares culture and community, even though he is cut off from

what little attention and aid reach Eritreans in other parts of the region. The other option was to venture into the conflict and uncertainty that awaits elsewhere.

One of Eritrea's more downtrodden Muslim minorities, the Afars also live on the margins of its exploding refugee crisis, which broke into the news when hundreds of bodies washed up on the shores of Italy's Lampedusa island in October 2013 and has popped in and out ever since, whenever a large boat goes down in the Mediterranean.

Despite Eritrea's small size—its population is between 4 and 5 million—and the fact that it is not a hot war zone, it is producing one of the largest groups of asylum seekers in Europe. These people flee to escape indefinite terms of “national service” in the military or civilian jobs in state-run projects or services and from suffocating political repression at the hands of the army that won Eritrea's independence from Ethiopia nearly 25 years ago, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), now known as the People's Front for Democracy and Justice. Both iterations are known in local parlance as the “popular front,” which for Eritreans underlines the reality of continuity masked by the name change.

Thousands make the risky Mediterranean crossing each week. Others join the throngs of refugees and migrants trekking through the Balkans. Some even fly to South America and make their way to the United States. But most of those we are seeing in media portrayals are urbanites from the country's densely populated, mostly Christian highlands.

By contrast, the Afars, pastoralists and fishers from the coastal lowlands of southern Eritrea, rarely make the news. Few go to Sudan, the launching pad for the trans-Saharan journey, and none are in the crowded camps in northern Ethiopia, which have gotten some media attention. The Afars who flee—and there are thousands—are on the other side of the Horn of Africa, facing the Arab world, not Europe. And they are Muslims.

Each person I met had his or her own tale of neglect and abuse, of trampled dreams and dashed hopes. Some of the young, unmarried Afar men dreamed of a new start in a faraway land and were applying for resettlement, though few had any real idea of what might await them. But most who came with families—a majority of Afars—opted to remain close to their homeland, some in cities, others in rural camps. What they all had in common was the conviction that they were part of a mistreated minority within Eritrea and that this deeply felt grievance had to be redressed if there was to be peace in the country and if they were to return, which most wanted to do some day.

Because the Afars fly below the radar does not mean their human needs are any less pressing than those reaching Greece or Italy or that the political dimension of their situation is any less consequential. Quite the reverse, as extremes thrive in the chaos of this strategic crossroads between Africa and the Middle East. And if ever Eritrea is to emerge from its dark slide into repression and dictatorship

as a stable multicultural state that citizens will want to return to instead of run from, then all its Muslim minorities, including the Afars, will have to be brought into the nation-building process, not as targets of forced assimilation but as actors in their own right.

## Afar People and Politics

The Afars are a Cushitic people related to the Somalis and the Saho of central Eritrea. They have their own language and culture, shaped by the unforgiving environment in which they live. Most derive their livelihoods from pastoralism, the only viable mode of existence on this parched land, though some along the coast have lived from fishing and regional trade. Their homeland stretches from the Red Sea coast of Eritrea to what is now eastern Ethiopia and includes half the territory of the modern state of Djibouti in an area often termed “the Afar triangle,” or just Afarland.

Its location astride the Bab al-Mandab straits at the southern entrance to the Red Sea has given Afarland a strategic importance for centuries and repeatedly made the Afars targets of conquest. This fact, coupled with their extremely harsh environment, hardened the Afars while fostering a fierce warrior culture that has endured through the intrusions of the Ottoman Turks, the European colonial powers and the Ethiopian empire even as their lands were carved up and distributed among what were to become the post-colonial states.

Almost all Afars are Sunni Muslim, with a traditional leadership anchored in four sultanates and more than one hundred clan families that still exert a powerful influence over their lives. The mightiest of the sultanates was the Awsa (Aoussa) headquartered in Assaita, which was the Afar capital until the Afar Regional Council decided to relocate it to the tiny hamlet of Semera, until then hardly more than a rest stop on the Addis Ababa-Djibouti road. Semera was officially designated the regional capital in 2007. Today, it is a bustling commercial center with a university and a regional airport. The Semera-Assaita axis remains at the core of Afar culture.

Afar militancy in Ethiopia traces back to the 1970s when young reformers studying in Cairo organized themselves as the Afar Koborih Angoyya (the Afar Mobilization Movement) and forces loyal to Sultan Ali Mirah formed the Afar Liberation Front to wage guerrilla attacks on the new regime of Col. Mengistu Haile Mariam.

Names changed over the years, as did allegiances, but Afar resistance to Ethiopian rule continued sporadically until Mengistu's overthrow in 1991 and carried over into the first years under Meles Zenawi, whose own rebel group, the Tigray People's Liberation Front, led a multi-ethnic coalition that took over Ethiopia and began to transform it on the basis of “ethnic federalism.” Under this policy, the Afars got a semi-autonomous Afar Regional State. But infighting



Boy walking to school in Ali Addeh.

DAN CONNELL

broke out among factions of the resistance movement, at that point called the Afar Revolutionary Democratic Unity Front (ARDUF, commonly known as Ugugumo, or Revolution). Some chose to work within the new Ethiopian framework, but a few broke off and fought on.

The Afar region in Eritrea—then still part of Ethiopia—had served as an early base for the territory's original independence movement, Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), in the 1960s and 1970s, but the Afars were for the most part on the periphery of the independence struggle. The EPLF, which broke away from the ELF in 1970, pushed into the region in 1983 after driving the ELF out of the country in a civil war, but according to Afar veterans of that period, their fighters were not popular as they had little grasp of or appreciation for the distinctive Afar culture. This

feeling intensified in the early years following Eritrea's independence as the Afars resisted what they took to be a new round of conquest.

In response, the government in Asmara teamed up with both Djibouti and Ethiopia in the mid-1990s to crush the Afar revolt, only to end up in conflicts with each erstwhile ally by the end of that decade, leaving them to deal with the Afar situation alone. They did so with gusto, refusing to consider anything like the accommodation reached in Ethiopia and repressing the Afars who would not submit to the new order.

Since then, the Afar struggle has devolved into local fights defined by the national territories in which—or against which—they rage. In a stark political twist, one of the Ugugumo factions found support from Eritrea after the

1998–2000 border war with Ethiopia and began carrying out small ambushes and raids. This group made headlines in 2012 when they attacked a group of European tourists in Ethiopia, killing five, but Ethiopia responded two months later with air attacks on what they charged were training bases inside Eritrea, and the faction has been inactive along the border ever since.

Meanwhile, another Ugugumo offshoot, supported by Ethiopia, appeared on the scene in 1999, calling itself the Red Sea Afar Democratic Organization. It carried out occasional attacks against Eritrean forces in the 2000s, but it also built a social support structure in the Afar Regional State, engaged with the refugees in the new camps there, and developed a wider role among other Eritreans living in Ethiopia than its counterpart on the other side of the border. Its leaders say they make occasional forays into Eritrea to attack security forces when they abuse civilians, but their military wing appears to be mainly occupied with securing sections of the border and protecting the many Eritreans now on the Ethiopian side of it. The low-intensity conflict in this area appears to be in a lull.

Eritrean Afars interviewed in Ethiopia complain of marginalization by successive governments on the basis of language, culture, economics and politics, with no viable channel to redress grievances. They describe a system of governance that emulates the British Empire's "indirect rule." Local administration is done by Afars, but many popular Afar leaders have been jailed for suspected oppositional activity or have fled, and Tigrinya speakers top the bureaucracy. Current policy permits elementary school instruction in local languages up to fifth grade, so many of the early classes are taught by Afars. But from sixth grade onward, classes are taught in English, mostly by Tigrinya speakers lacking facility with the Afar language. There are more primary schools than ever before, but only two secondary schools in the entire southern Red Sea zone and not a single technical or other post-secondary school, all of which are in other zones. The one bright spot, as in other regions of Eritrea, is marked improvement in primary health care and prevention and treatment of HIV and AIDS.

Commerce with Ethiopia—the mainstay of the local economy—has been halted since the border war, and fishing and other external trade is tightly controlled, so the port of Assab, the region's only city, is all but dead, and an intensifying drought is devastating the rural economy. The one growth area is prisons, of which there are many, swollen with soldiers and national service conscripts caught trying to flee. But if they succeed in reaching Djibouti, they face new challenges.

## Djibouti's Urban Refugees

Most of the Eritreans who come to Djibouti crossed their country's heavily militarized southern border after escaping

from one of the many jails and military installations in and around Assab. Djibouti authorities view them all with suspicion, as they have been in a tense standoff with Eritrea since a border dispute that erupted into armed conflict in 2008. Eritrea still holds Djiboutian prisoners of war. One result is that Eritreans caught crossing into Djibouti are often treated as possible enemy combatants or spies and detained. Most are sent to camps if released.

Djibouti officially houses fewer than 1,000 Eritrean refugees in three camps administered by the Office National d'Assistance aux Réfugiés et Sinistrés, the official refugee authority, and supplied by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), but refugees, relief workers and diplomats say that many new arrivals never register, particularly Eritrean Afars who melt into Djibouti's large Afar community or continue on to Ethiopia. This statement was consistent with my observations in the capital, where I interviewed a dozen Afar refugees at length and met more than one hundred at a wedding in the Afar quarter, most of them young men.

Kamil Mohammed, 27, was born in Djibouti to a Djibouti Afar father and an Eritrean Afar mother and raised in Assab. He could claim citizenship in either country and carried a Djibouti identity card. He had left Eritrea for Ethiopia in 2006 at the age of 18 to avoid national service and had recently migrated to Djibouti to be near his family. Though he held a good job with the UNHCR, he said he still thinks of Eritrea as his home and would return if he could be certain of the possibility of traveling back and forth to Djibouti to visit his relatives.

Ahmed, the former soldier referred to above, had also gone from Djibouti to Ethiopia and back again, after fleeing Eritrea. He had been sent to the Sawa military training center for his twelfth year of secondary school and for basic training before serving a year in the army, as with all students from his generation. He said he left because he saw no prospect of release from service to find work to help support his impoverished family. After a fruitless three-month search for work in the Afar Region of Ethiopia, he came back to Djibouti to register with the UN and ask for resettlement, but he said he received no identity card there after filing his application, so he had to hide from local authorities to avoid being sent to Ali Addeh, the government-run refugee camp. Meanwhile, he was trying to raise money from relatives and through part-time work to get to Sudan, in case his effort to be resettled through UN channels failed.

Another Ahmed I met, a 35-year old Afar from a small fishing village outside Assab, had traveled 155 miles north to the port of Tío and then crossed into Ethiopia at the frontier town of Bada, the site of heavy fighting in the border war. This route was typical for Eritrean Afars. He said his father had died in the 1980s and his two brothers were in national service, so he had been the family's sole provider. He had avoided national service for nearly seven years by working on fishing boats and keeping an extremely low profile on land,

but he fled after he heard the authorities came to his home looking for him. He called the national service “a form of colonization.” He said he came to Djibouti because “I can fit into the culture.” He had no plans to leave, though he lacked proper identity papers and like other urban refugees lived in constant fear of being detained and sent to one of the camps or, worse, to one of the city’s detention centers.

## The Ali Addeh Refugee Camp

Temperatures were pushing 118 degrees Fahrenheit when we reached the crest of a rocky hill overlooking Ali Addeh, a desolate shantytown on Djibouti’s southeastern border with Ethiopia and Somalia. Clumps of dull brown scrub dotted the ochre hills. Nothing stirred. It was the end of May, the hottest, driest time of the year.

As we neared the entrance on a rutted dirt road, a guard appeared from a tiny gatehouse to demand our papers: Where was our letter? Did we have a permit to be here?

We did not.

Two days earlier I had met the ONARS director and he had told his assistant to phone the camp to convey his approval. The guard had apparently not gotten the message. Nevertheless, after probing a bit more to determine who we were and flipping through my passport, he waved us in, no doubt relieved to return to his air-conditioned shelter.

Ali Addeh lies in a small, bowl-shaped valley 18 miles from the nearest town, Ali Sabiyeh, and is accessible only by a single unpaved road that ends there. Established in 1991 with 7,000 refugees, it has grown to more than 14,000, which ONARS considers full capacity. The largest share are Somalis, but there are minorities of Eritreans and Ethiopians (roughly 700 and 350, respectively).

Entering, we wound our way through a warren of houses patched together out of sticks, bits of plastic, flattened oil cans, burlap sacks and scraps of tarp to a community center where some 40 Eritrean refugees awaited our arrival. Mebrahtu, a camp elder, stood outside to greet us. Otherwise, the dirt streets were empty. If I had not known better, I would have thought the camp abandoned. As I soon learned, many residents wished it were. The guard was there as much to keep people in as to keep intruders out. Some of its 14,000 residents had been there since it opened.

Lutheran World Relief supports a clinic and a primary school, and the Norwegian Refugee Council has installed latrines and a few other facilities, but Ali Addeh is otherwise not served by international aid agencies and visited only rarely by outsiders. Apart from a handful of positions filled by refugees at the clinic and school, there is almost no work available, so most residents pass their days idly. “I have no future here unless I die,” said one.

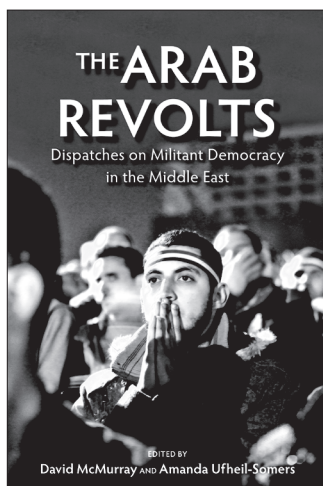
During a day of individual interviews at the small Eritrean community center, I heard many stories of flight from Eritrea by refugees from the highlands, who were a majority of the Eritreans in this camp.

Hermon, 37, had been called up for the mandated 18 months of national service in 1996 but was kept in the army when war erupted with Ethiopia in 1998 and never released. He said he stayed until 2011 out of fear his family would be punished if he fled but finally did so when he lost all hope of discharge. “We were kept like slaves,” he added.

Ghebreab, a highland Tigrinya-speaker who had been orphaned as a child, was only 15 when the border war broke out in 1998. He said he was taken out of school then and sent to a military training camp and kept in the army afterward. He put up with the drudgery until he heard that the authorities had come to his house and arrested his younger brother. When he asked his commander for an explanation, he said he was hung by his hands in the hot sun for 100 hours and warned he would be killed if he asked again. That is when he decided to flee. He made it out in 2011, walking into Djibouti under cover of darkness.

Amanuel, 43, another highlander, was initially exempt from national service due to a deformed right leg, but said he was called up in 2006 after being caught in a raid on a clandestine Pentecostal church, which had been banned four years earlier. He said he was sent to a desert training camp as punishment. He, too, crossed into Djibouti in 2011 and, like the other two, was immediately arrested as an enemy combatant. All three were released last year and sent to Ali Addeh.

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### The Arab Revolts

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Mebrahtu, the “elder” who arranged the encounters, said that only about 120 from this group of detainees are left in the country today; most moved on to Libya. For his part, he had been jailed twice in Eritrea in the first years of a sweeping crackdown on dissent after the border war, once for trying to escape to Yemen, another for questioning party leaders about state control of the economy. The second time he was tortured for five weeks to get him to give up names of those who shared his outlook. He was released after being forced to sign a confession that could be used to rearrest him at any time. Soon after, he fled his post and hid in the capital, Asmara. It took him almost ten years to scrape together the money to be smuggled out in 2012.

Zahara, a 26-year old Afar, was one of the fortunate few—she had one of the rare jobs. She, too, had done her twelfth year of secondary school at a military camp, and was then sent to nursing school. But she soon grew disillusioned and angry over the sexual harassment to which she was subjected. In 2009, she and four others tried to flee to Sudan. They were followed, however, and caught.

The would-be escapees were sent to the notorious prison at Adi Abieto in Eritrea’s central highlands where, she said, she saw “many terrible things.” Many men were beaten with wood or metal rods on the soles of their feet until they were unable to walk; women were struck in their upper bodies, often on their arms as they sought to protect themselves. Some were mothers of escapees being interrogated about their children’s flight. She said she saw some die.

Zahara drew on her medical training to treat their wounds, which was apparently appreciated by her jailers. After eight months, she was sent back to the nursing college and then assigned to a hospital in Asmara, but she was not permitted to visit her family. Nor was she paid for her work, she said, not even pocket money, as she was still being punished. After another year and a lot of remonstrating, she got a short leave to attend what she insisted was an important wedding. Once in Assab, however, she met soldiers she knew and quickly made plans to leave, with the soldiers.

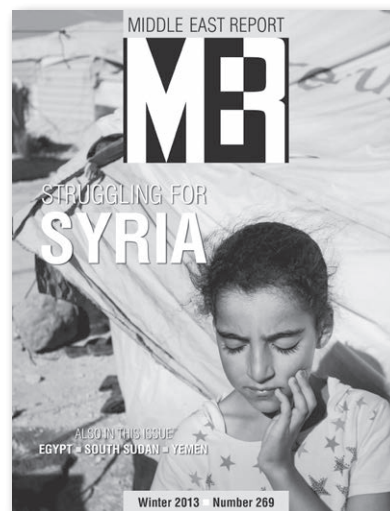
As soon as they crossed into Djibouti, they were detained. The boys were taken to prison, the girls to Ali Addeh. Today, Zahara works as a nurse at the camp clinic but is paid only a third of what citizens earn for the same work. This underpayment, said other refugees, is standard practice. But Zahara is not griping. She said that having nothing to do day after day would be worse.

Ismael, 25, also Afar, fled to Djibouti at the end of 2013 after six years in national service, much of it as a teacher. He said he left because he had lost hope for his future and feared imprisonment for his dissenting political views. He had also been jailed upon his arrival but was quickly released and sent to Ali Addeh. He said he, too, felt stuck here, but he dreamed of returning to Eritrea once the political situation changed and was not going anywhere else until that happened. ■

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