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6 Eritrea and the United States: towards a new US policy

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Introduction

Eritrea's relations with the United States have been fraught from the outset. They have been both shaped and overshadowed by those with Ethiopia, and almost always to Eritrea's disadvantage. At first, this was a result of the global projection of American force during and immediately after the Second World War. Then it was a product of Cold War calculations. More recently, it has been a consequence of the political calculus associated with the Bush administration's 'war on terror'. In each case, the United States saw Ethiopia as its primary strategic ally in the Horn of Africa and tended to deal with Eritrea as something between a lesser asset and an afterthought. At worst – as at the height of the Cold War and again today – it was perceived as an obstacle to be either contained or sacrificed when its actions or articulated interests ran counter to those of Ethiopia and thereby the United States.

This backdrop is well known to most Eritreans, however much they might wish it were otherwise. It must be the starting point for any new initiative from Washington intended to defuse tensions, restore trust and place the relationship with Asmara on a more positive footing. But that is merely a first step, as substantive issues also separate the two states. And for its part, Eritrea under the leadership of President Isaias Afwerki has itself gone a long way towards poisoning the relationship through its heated anti-American invective, its intensely repressive domestic policies and its belligerent regional behaviour. Nevertheless, Eritrea has also demonstrated the capacity to make sudden, sharp corrections of course in its relations with others precisely because it views those relations as transitory and tenuous to begin with (see my examination of this in Chapter 2). The arrival of a new administration in Washington in 2009 under President Barack Obama thus offers

both sides an opportunity for a fresh start, but they must build on, and overcome, a weighty legacy.

Early US–Eritrea relations

The initial encounter between the United States and Eritrea came in 1941, before the former officially joined the Allied war effort but after it had become clear to the Roosevelt administration that it would soon do so. Weeks after British-led forces defeated Italy and took charge of the strategic Red Sea colony in the middle of that year, the American firm Johnson Drake & Piper began to implement a series of military projects that was taken over by the US Army as soon as Washington formally declared war. An aircraft assembly plant was constructed at Gura; workshops in Asmara were converted to a repair base; and naval facilities were established in Massawa as the harbour was modernized for commercial and military purposes (Trevaskis, 1960: 137).

The United States also began working with the British to develop a communications facility in Asmara, known as Radio Marina. In the early 1950s, this was enlarged and transformed into the Kagnew Station complex, for nearly a quarter of a century one of the most important overseas US intelligence facilities in the world – an electronic listening post for all of Africa and the Middle East run by the National Security Agency and reaching as far as the Persian Gulf and parts of the Soviet Union. It was also a key relay station for communication with US ships and submarines in the Indian Ocean and for links to forces in South-East Asia, as well as for coded diplomatic traffic. At one point, Kagnew was staffed by more than 3,000 civilian and military personnel intercepting radio, telephone and telegraph messages in half a dozen or more languages – from Soviet missile crews in Cairo and French diplomats in Senegal to African revolutionaries in Mozambique and Arabs plotting an uprising against the British in Aden. Eritrea's strategic coastline, facing Saudi Arabia and Yemen and stretching to the narrow southern entrance to the Red Sea at Bab al-Mandab, also gave the former Italian colony a special importance during the Cold War. Control of this point was critical for keeping open the vital sea lanes connecting Europe and North America with East Africa, the Persian Gulf and Asia through the Suez Canal.

In the late 1940s, the United States became the main champion of

Ethiopia's claim to Eritrea. The complex debate over the colony's future started among the victorious 'Four Powers' (America, Britain, France and the Soviet Union), who sought unsuccessfully to settle the matter. When differences among them blocked agreement, Eritrea's status went to the newly formed United Nations where, over strong Eritrean protests, a US-backed plan was adopted to link the two neighbours in a federation under Emperor Haile Selassie's control. John Foster Dulles, the representative to the General Assembly and future Secretary of State, noted during a 1950 UN Security Council debate that 'From the point of view of justice the opinions of the Eritrean people must receive consideration. Nevertheless, the strategic interests of the US in the Red Sea basin and considerations of security and world peace make it necessary that this country has to be linked to our ally, Ethiopia'. (AESNA, 1976: 54)

The federation, which came into effect on 15 September 1952, granted Eritrea nominal autonomy, including authority over the police, control of other domestic affairs and the right to levy taxes and adopt its own budget, but Ethiopia controlled defence, foreign affairs, currency and finance, and international commerce and communications. Eritrea had a constitution complete with an American-style bill of rights, a separate parliament, a national flag and two official languages, Tigrinya and Arabic – the trappings of sovereignty but not the power to defend it (Trevaskis, 1960: 113–21). In the following year, the United States and Ethiopia signed agreements that gave Washington a 25-year lease on military and intelligence bases in Eritrea and pledged the United States to provide military aid and training to Ethiopia (Sherman, 1980: 143). Between 1953 and 1960, American military advisers built sub-Saharan Africa's first modern army, with three divisions of 6,000 men each, equipped largely with surplus weapons and equipment from the Second World War and the Korean War (to which Ethiopia sent an army battalion).

During this time, with the United States silently standing by, 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 so as to cut the former colony's economy down to size. Finally, the emperor ordered the Eritrean flag to be replaced with that of Ethiopia

and forced the former colony's parliament to dissolve. At no time did the United States object.

Throughout the 1950s, Eritreans protested, with no noticeable impact. In 1957, students mounted mass demonstrations; and in 1958, the trade unions launched a general strike that was put down with much loss of Eritrean life. With all avenues for peaceful protest seemingly closed, Eritrean exiles in 1960 founded the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), to wage an armed struggle for independence. The first shots were fired a year later. As the revolt gained momentum and following an attempted coup in Addis Ababa, the United States stepped up military aid to Ethiopia. In 1964, President Lyndon Johnson discretely sent 55 counter-insurgency specialists to Ethiopia. He also approved the transfer of 12 F-5As to Addis Ababa, the first supersonic jet fighters in sub-Saharan Africa. In the next year, 164 US anti-guerrilla experts arrived under 'Plan Delta' in order to teach the new 'civic action' techniques being introduced in South Vietnam (Shepherd, 1975: 5–6; Pateman, 1990: 97).

American military aid to Ethiopia from 1946 to 1975 totalled $286.1 million in grants and loans, two-thirds of Washington's annual military assistance to all of Africa. At the peak of its presence, there were more than 6,000 US citizens working there in one capacity or another, including 925 Peace Corps volunteers, almost twice as many as in the rest of the continent. From 1946 to 1975, the United States also provided Ethiopia with more than $350 million in economic assistance, and it was Ethiopia's largest trading partner, taking some 40 per cent of its exports, mainly coffee (Sherman, 1980: 144).

By the mid-1970s, however, both Eritrea's and Ethiopia's importance to the United States was in decline. Addis Ababa was no longer central to influencing the newly independent African states. They were now open to direct penetration and they had far more modern infrastructures, were more deeply integrated into the world market and held more promising opportunities to attract American investors. Southern Africa, with its great mineral wealth, its potential for growth and its long-term strategic value, was attracting increasing attention, especially in the wake of the Portuguese empire's collapse and the emergence of Marxist-orientated governments in Mozambique, Angola and Guinea-Bissau. And Kagnew Station, whose eavesdropping facilities were being replaced by satellite systems, was scheduled for phasing out when the 25-year treaty with Ethiopia expired in 1978, at a time when the American public, reeling from the losses in

Vietnam, had little appetite for another prolonged counter-insurgency in a faraway land.

With the war in Eritrea going badly, a self-described 'socialist' military committee, the Derg, overthrew the aged emperor in 1974, closed down US military bases two years later and then realigned Ethiopia with the Soviet Union, which promptly pumped billions of dollars worth of new arms into the country, prolonging Eritrea's independence war another 15 years. But throughout this protracted conflict, the US declined to support the Eritreans, owing to an apparent distrust of the left-leaning nationalist movement, now led by the breakaway Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), and with a view to wooing Ethiopia away from the Soviets once the Eritreans were defeated. During this period, the last years of the Cold War, Washington opted to encircle the region through new or expanded alliances with Kenya, Sudan, Somalia, and use of the British-controlled Indian Ocean naval facility at Diego Garcia rather than to back the Eritrean insurgency.

Eritrea's independence war was protracted both because the nationalist movement lacked external support and because it was divided into rival armies – principally, but not only, the EPLF and the ELF. The EPLF decimated the ELF in bitter fighting in the early 1980s. It then went on to defeat the Ethiopian army in 1991 and to 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.

US–Eritrea relations

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 (98.5 per cent) for sovereignty. On 23 May the Eritreans declared their formal independence. Even with such a mandate, however, the victorious liberation movement did not see fit to provide space for its former rivals, whose supporters continued to be harassed, even arrested, throughout the 1990s.

The United States became one of first countries to recognize the new state of Eritrea after the 1993 referendum, and bilateral relations grew

stronger through the decade as Washington provided relief, 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 an 'African renaissance'. He met several times with President Isaias, and First Lady Hillary Clinton visited the country in 1998, arriving to a banner at Asmara airport proclaiming 'Yes, it takes a village', a reference to her recently published book of the same title.

The emergence of a Sudan-based terrorist threat to Eritrea in the form of the Eritrean Islamic Jihad – at the top of Isaias's agenda when he visited Washington in February 1995 – heightened the United States' incentive for aiding Eritrea. Numerous high-ranking military officials visited the country in the 1990s, including General Tommy Franks, the head of Central Command, whose brief ranged from the Horn of Africa across the Middle East to Afghanistan. General Sebhat Ephrem, Eritrea's chief of staff and later its minister of defence, also 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 and $2 million in international military education and training assistance (Garcia, 2004).

Eritrea's importance to the United States was also conditioned in those years 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 in the early 1990s, as well as to Islamist guerrillas threatening Eritrea and other regional states. The United States designated Eritrea, which provided bases for Sudanese opposition groups, as a 'front-line state' in this escalating confrontation. This was further incentive for providing it with military and other aid. But Eritrea's importance declined with a change in regional strategy under President George W. Bush, whose administration invested heavily in a peace process to end Sudan's long-running north–south civil war and moved to dismantle the sanctions on Sudan in place since the mid-1990s. And it declined despite the fact that the country nominally supported US intervention in Iraq and repeatedly invited the United States to develop military facilities along its coastline so as to combat regional terrorism.

This evolving relationship had been hindered even during the time of the Clinton administration by growing concern that the Eritrean

leadership was operating as though 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 neighbours, Eritrea rolled out the artillery – first against Sudan (1994), then Yemen (1995), Djibouti (1996) and finally Ethiopia (1998). And when US diplomats raised questions about this behaviour, they were spurned and often publicly insulted. This helped to cement Eritrea's reputation as a volatile and unpredictable warrior-state and made the US wary of getting too close, especially after Eritrea went to war with Ethiopia and balked at American efforts to end the fighting.

The outbreak of the border war (1998–2000) and Eritrea's subsequent crackdown on political dissent arising from it derailed this promising new start in US–Eritrea relations. Early American efforts to mediate the conflict collapsed amid charges by the Eritreans that the United States was tilting towards Ethiopia. When members of the Eritrean president's own party criticized the conduct of the war and the failed peace negotiations, and also the slow pace of democratization, President Isaias responded by arresting his rivals, shutting down the private press and repeatedly postponing both the implementation of the newly ratified constitution and the convening of national elections. He also refused to license new political parties. These measures, coupled with the indefinite detention of two Eritreans employed at the American embassy over unspecified charges, led to a swift cooling of relations. In April 2002, after the Eritrea–Ethiopia Boundary Commission (EEBC) set up to arbitrate the border dispute presented its findings and Ethiopia refused to accept them, relations with Eritrea took another turn for the worse. The government in Asmara blamed Washington for coddling Addis Ababa rather than pressuring it to relent. Even so, 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 (Bureau of African Affairs , US Department of State, 2004).

9/11 and the 'war on terrorism'

In the years after the 11 September 2001 ('9/11') attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, Eritrea repeatedly called for a closer relationship. Its ambassador to the United States, Girma Asmerom, did so even as government-controlled websites carried diatribes against the Central

Intelligence Agency for allegedly promoting back-door negotiations with Ethiopia to end the fighting in 1998–2000, and for supporting the dissident liberation movement leaders who criticized the Eritrean president for his conduct of the war. Officials close to Isaias, sometimes writing under pen names on the Popular Front for Democracy and Justice's (PFDJ) website Shaebia.org, charged that the CIA was behind the rising chorus of dissent and was funding the private press while meddling in Eritrea's dispute with Ethiopia. Rumours of the day, stoked by the PFDJ, described a foiled *coup d'état* during the border war, allegedly promoted by Clinton's former National Security Advisor Anthony Lake, who had been engaged in shuttle diplomacy in an attempt to diffuse the conflict. The rumours emanating from Eritrea strongly implied that the arrested dissidents were guilty of high treason, although formal charges were never brought.

This war of words steadily escalated during President Bush's second term as the United States moved closer to Ethiopia on a regional level and as Eritrea deepened its involvement with Islamist political groups in Somalia and stepped up its support for armed Ethiopian opposition groups operating from there, notably the Oromo Liberation Front and the Ogaden National Liberation Front. This was brought to a head by the rapid rise to power of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) in southern Somalia, culminating in its capture of Mogadishu in June 2006 – apparently unanticipated in Washington, whose attention to the area had wandered (or had been skewed from the perspective of Addis Ababa). When the United Nations reported that Eritrea was arming the Islamist forces and supporting them with hundreds of soldiers, an exaggeration based on a kernel of truth, and there were similarly overblown reports of al-Qaeda influence within the ICU, the United States gave Ethiopia the go-ahead to step in and oust it while providing intelligence and logistical support for the effort. The operation got under way at the end of December, after Ethiopia managed to goad the Somali Islamists into providing a pretext for an invasion, much as they had done with Eritrea in 1998. The well-publicized US bombing in January 2007 of remote camps in southern Somalia in an unsuccessful attempt to kill three high-value al-Qaeda operatives responsible for the East African embassy bombings of 1998, and also the simultaneous American commando raids launched from an Ethiopian airstrip near Dire Dawa, only cemented the association of the US with the Ethiopian invasion in the eyes of both Somalis and Eritreans.[1]

1 The American commandos were dispatched to Dire Dawa by the Djibouti-based Joint

During 2007, relations between Eritrea and the United States deteriorated further. Asmara imposed new regulations on the American embassy and on embassy personnel there, and Washington retaliated by shutting down Eritrea's consulate in Oakland, California. Its importance lay mainly in its role as a collector of 'tax' from the large and relatively well-heeled west coast diaspora. This was calculated at two per cent of annual income and was required as a condition of maintaining citizenship; and it was crucial to Eritrea's economic survival. Later that year, Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Jendayi Frazer raised the possibility of adding Eritrea to the US list of countries that sponsor terror, which then included only Cuba, Iran, Sudan, Syria and Libya (this last since removed). Listing would impose a set of automatic restrictions and sanctions that not only penalized the countries so designated but also 'those persons and countries engaging in certain trade with state sponsors'.

This, in turn, fuelled widespread anger at the United States among Eritreans at home and abroad for what many believed was a US–Ethiopian conspiracy against them whose roots lay in resentment over the American failure to put teeth into calls for Ethiopia to accept the Boundary Commission ruling of April 2002. This also fed efforts by the authoritarian government in Asmara to weaken support for American-style civil liberties and multiparty politics, dismissing them as Western imports unsuited to Eritrean culture or current conditions. It also cited American treatment of prisoners at Guantánamo and elsewhere to justify its own treatment of dissenters, arguing that it was 'at war' when the arrests took place and that dissent was therefore treasonous.

One reason why so many Eritreans, supporters and opponents of the Isaias regime alike, accept the government's interpretation of Washington's tepid response to Ethiopia's non-compliance with the 2002 Boundary Commission findings is that they view it as the latest slight in a consistent pattern. This goes back to Washington's failure to protest against Emperor Haile Selassie's abrogation of the 1950 UN resolution that federated Eritrea to Ethiopia in the first place. This lengthy experience of neglect fuels popular anger at the United States and encourages anti-American attitudes and actions, and it must be taken into account by the Obama adminis-

Special Operations Command, together with a small fleet of AC-130 helicopter gunships, and repeatedly crossed into Somalia to kill or capture al-Qaeda operatives, according to senior Bush administration sources quoted in the *New York Times*, 10 November 2008. Retrieved 10 November 2008 from http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/10/washington/10military.html?_r=1&hp&oref=slogin.

tration if there are to be effective fresh initiatives to promote peace and stability – as there must be.

Towards a new US policy

US policy for Eritrea was set adrift after the Clinton administration's efforts to mediate an end to the bloody 1998–2000 border war with Ethiopia failed to make headway, leaving relations to sour steadily during the Bush administration years and reach the dysfunctional point they are at today. Throughout this period, the political environment in Eritrea has also deteriorated, as society has become deeply polarized, even as public expressions of protest were rendered impossible by state repression and by the reluctance of many Eritreans to confront the state during a time of war. The result has been an appearance of order that masks deepening alienation and instability in which the United States is implicated by its inaction, even as the Asmara government pillories it for real and imagined slights. This can and must change if conditions in Eritrea and the Horn are not to worsen, as history demonstrates they surely can and will do.

The United States has a choice of three broad policy frameworks within which to shape its approach to Eritrea:

- Isolation and containment, designed to limit Eritrea's ability to do damage in the region while squeezing it from without through a steadily tightening web of sanctions.
- Constructive if limited engagement, intended to salvage the few positives available, particularly as they pertain to wider US counter-terrorism interests, while encouraging incremental changes in behaviour that foster regional stability.
- Regime transition, generated from within the country or through the intervention of Ethiopian or Eritrean opposition groups – or some combination of these.

The administration of President George W. Bush began with the second approach, and then, as relations deteriorated, migrated towards the first. It never seriously contemplated the third approach, despite the Eritrean government's allegations to the contrary. The administration of President Barack Obama needs to blend all three, employing carrots and sticks that contain while engaging political, not military, support for regime transition, whether gradual or abrupt. It must be guided by an understanding that

each approach could in different ways promote change within Eritrea and stability in the region while safeguarding America's overarching strategic interests and that, if managed carefully, they need not cancel one another out.

How the Obama administration manages these interlocking approaches and sets priorities within and among them depends on the desired result, itself a result of the spectrum of possible outcomes that the administration contemplates. It became an axiom within the Bush administration, for example, that it was impossible to influence President Isaias' behaviour in any significant way because he was too personally obtuse to change direction at all if he (or others) perceived a change to be (or if it looked as though it was) in response to pressure. The upshot was a policy intended, at best, to isolate and contain. Yet even that did not work to any appreciable extent. This was demonstrated by the continuing crisis in Somalia and the related one along Eritrea's border with Djibouti in June 2008, if the point had not already been brought home by Eritrea's interference in Sudan with no regard for American concerns.

But if neither engagement nor containment worked – and if regime transition also appeared out of the question owing to the absence of a viable alternative and the conviction that a non-violent transition was not possible – what was left for the Bush administration? The answer was, in practice, policy incoherence, punctuated by occasional rants from Washington that accomplished little more than provoking similar rants from Asmara. Against this rather bleak backdrop, the Obama administration must comprehensively reassess both the situation and its options, excluding no course of action if new experience indicates that it is an appropriate response to actual conditions.

Throughout this process, it is essential to keep in mind that Isaias will not endure forever, nor will his regime. Whether he will ever change his character is beside the point (he will not); how to weaken his grip on unchecked power is the issue. American policy needs at least to take into account the possibility of an alternative, whether or not that policy is specifically designed to help bring it about. This is necessary because the potential for chaos in Eritrea, which would extend outwards in ever-widening circles in the event of a sudden change in Asmara, whether through natural causes, violence or unforeseen political action, is enormous. This would be the case in any situation in which despotic rule has so thoroughly impoverished the political environment and prevented the emergence of viable successors, but

particularly in Eritrea. At the very least, American policy ought to support democratic forces, now based outside the country but with significant if passive support inside, for the eventuality of a return to Eritrea to contest power in a more open political arena, with or without Isaias, who sustains himself in his present position by claiming that Eritrea's existence will be threatened by any sign of weakness or political dissent while keeping the Eritrean population as isolated as possible from alternative sources of information and perspective. And it is precisely these that need attention and action, for removing the border issue and breaking down Eritrea's North Korea-like internal isolation are the keys to bringing about change there.

The present climate of fear may forestall immediate challenges to the regime from within short of a *coup d'état*, but in the medium term Eritrea's prospects for stability and democracy are poor, too. National elections, when held, will not be free and fair. With no public space for political discussion, much less protest, and severe constraints on the expression of the most benign social or economic interests – in other words the blanket suppression of civil society organizations – the possibility of contesting the PFDJ's grip on power is non-existent. Elections under such conditions can only rubber-stamp the sitting government. With all peaceful avenues for altering the political situation closed, those who reject this state of affairs will be increasingly driven towards extra-legal forms of resistance. That will come about unless a combination of circumstances, including the definitive end of the confrontation with Ethiopia and civilian and military pressure from within Eritrean society, creates space for a legal opposition.

Few in the opposition who advocate the use of 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 a combination of them. The danger is that a collapse at the centre before the opposition is prepared to fill the vacuum could push the country into civil war or anarchy, as significant fault lines – regional, religious and ethnic, and also political and personal – lie under the surface. But the deeply divided opposition, which includes more than a dozen distinct parties or fronts, numerous civil society formations in the diaspora and clandestine but largely unorganized forces in Eritrea, is no more ready to step in today than was the Iraqi opposition in 2003, though a process of consolidation among them into three distinct blocs is now underway.

Thus the promotion of a coherent opposition built on democratic principles and committed to a clearly defined, stable transition should be a high priority for the Obama administration, however long that takes to develop and consolidate and however remote that now appears, coupled with efforts to increase the flow of news and information into the country to break the state's present monopoly. Rushing such a process, or trying to control every aspect of it, would be a terrible mistake because that would almost certainly reify the fissures that now exist under a façade of paper unity. But there are ways to show commitment to multiparty politics in Eritrea and to promote a non-violent transition from a distance while leaving it to the Eritreans to accomplish.

Direct support for any one of these alliances, individual parties or NGOs would exacerbate divisions rather than heal them, implying favouritism and stigmatizing the party as the instrument of a foreign power. However, conferences that promote dialogue among them and greatly enhanced support for web- and radio-based media that carry news and information to Eritrea would make much-needed contributions to the evolution of both the organized opposition and their political culture.

The first requirement for a modest move towards a future democratic transition is to map the existing opposition. This starts with the Eritrean Democratic Alliance (EDA), a loosely defined umbrella organization for groups of widely varying ideological orientation, size and internal coherence, some favouring violence, some renouncing it. They range from secular democrats organized into unarmed political parties, such as the Eritrean Democratic Party and the Eritrean People's Party—now in merger talks—to armed religious and ethnic movements such as the Islamic Party for Justice and Development and the Kunama-based Democratic Movement for the Liberation of Eritrea, with a full spectrum between them. But there are also many Eritreans who distrust the existing parties, most of which are led by people who have fought among themselves to dominate the national movement since the 1960s and 1970s. The younger generation, many of whom have spent time outside Eritrea and experienced democratic societies at first hand, has declined to join EDA affiliates in significant numbers, focusing instead on building human rights organizations and NGOs. This trend too needs to be mapped and to be treated as an integral part of the emerging alternative to the present despotism.

Meanwhile, the Obama administration must articulate a set of objectives for the Horn as a whole and pursue policies towards Eritrea that arise

from and are consistent with those objectives rather than react piecemeal to problems and opportunities that wax and wane in each country. An effective strategy for preventing any country in the region from becoming a haven for terrorists, for example, demands closer coordination among all of them. These states are too intertwined to do otherwise with any expectation of promoting and sustaining stability. The strategy for achieving these objectives must be based on settling disputes, promoting democracy and destroying emerging terrorist threats, without which sustainable interstate cooperation is impossible. Publicly articulating such an approach would help to isolate those who stand in the way and would facilitate linked incentives and penalties for advancing policy objectives. But the penalties and incentives must be more than rhetoric.

For Eritrea, sequencing is important. But from the standpoint of US interests, linkage between movement on the border dispute and on democratization – leveraging one in order to achieve the other – is critical. The new administration should move aggressively to end the confrontation between Eritrea and Ethiopia. In terms of historical engagement or current influence, no former colonial power, nor any other state or multilateral institution, is able to play this role. 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, and it will not secure the cooperation of Ethiopia if it tries to do so. In fact, making clear the United States' commitment to democracy and respect for basic civil and human rights in Eritrea is the key to winning Ethiopia's agreement to resolve the border dispute once and for all. It is the key because it addresses the growing alienation among the Eritrean population and the descent into despotism, and it enables that population to refocus on its own political agenda. Ethiopia needs to understand this and to allow the United States to make the effort.

This approach starts with pressuring Ethiopia to implement the Boundary Commission findings as they are, with no hedging. It also necessitates offering incentives to both sides to make the ending of their confrontation not only palatable but also essential to each of their constituencies. A new initiative should be coordinated with the European Union and the African Union in order to strengthen its impact and to signal American intent to work within multilateral frameworks. Coordination would underline the risk of serious isolation for both states if they drag their feet. But that message must be backed by a credible threat of sanctions

with more than symbolic value. Demands without punch carry no weight with either antagonist.

In sum, making an aggressive approach to reversing the suppression of liberties and rights in Eritrea the centrepiece of American action while pushing Ethiopia to accept the Boundary Commission's findings without fudging the details (including Badme) would blunt charges that the United States is somehow appeasing Eritrea at Ethiopia's expense. It would implicitly address one of Ethiopia's major concerns – the risk of placating an unpredictable state on its northern border that shuns diplomacy, is prone to violent confrontations and is actively engaged in trying either to displace the sitting regime in Addis Ababa or to break up Ethiopia into weak microstates. It would also speak to Eritrean concern that pushing for democratization in Eritrea plays to Ethiopia's territorial ambitions. At the same time, the United States must refrain from actions (public statements, high-level delegations, aid other than for humanitarian purposes and so on) that appear to condone the political situation in Eritrea.

Finally, it is also important to note that the Eritrean government became convinced, and often made this point in public statements, that the Bush administration was divided over Eritrea, with the Pentagon favouring closer relations because of respect for Eritrea's military prowess and its commitment to the 'war on terrorism' and the State Department advocating the opposite owing to concern over human rights and democracy. This was reinforced by a personal visit to Eritrea by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld in December 2002. He praised the US–Eritrea relationship in a press conference and dismissed concerns over the domestic political situation, saying that sovereign nations 'arrange themselves and deal with their problems in ways that they feel are appropriate to them'.[2] As a result, most Eritrean initiatives for strengthening relations with the United States over the past seven years have been directed at the Defense Department rather than conducted through conventional diplomatic channels. This contradictory posture must change, so that the US speaks to Eritrea with one voice on foreign policy – that of the State Department.

2 The statement was made at a press conference in Asmara on 10 December 2002. Retrieved 5 November 2008 from the Department of Defense website at http://www.defenselink.mil/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=2855.

What next for the US and Eritrea?

The most urgent priority for the United States is to defuse the border dispute between Eritrea and Ethiopia. All else turns on this, and it must be addressed first. To promote a fair and lasting resolution of that conflict that will in turn open the door to political change within Eritrea, the United States should pressure Ethiopia to implement the Boundary Commission's decision of 2002 promptly and fully, without additional conditions or qualifications, and 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. The US should also negotiate parallel initiatives with the help of the UN, the African Union and the European Union in order to reduce the impact of the settlement on civilians in the affected areas and to prevent conflict that might result from the demarcation process, while offering material incentives for rapid progress on the resolution of this confrontation and work to build an elite consensus for it in both societies, defining a sequence of gradually escalating political and financial penalties for any party that blocks a resolution. These opportunities and penalties should be publicized as widely as possible to the populations of both states, and through both diplomatic channels and the global media, in order to generate pressure from below to accept a settlement, and the US should provide generous assistance to alternative media directed at Eritrea from outside the country to expand that population's access to such news and information.

To promote a stable, democratic political arena in Eritrea that will be both less conducive to terrorist threats and less threatening to Ethiopia and other of its neighbours, the United States should pressure it to immediately implement the constitution that was ratified in 1997, bringing all Eritrea's laws into line with it and release or bring to public trial all political prisoners, including the surviving former liberation front leaders and government officials identified with the Group of 15. Eritrea should also be pressured to grant amnesty to members of opposition movements based outside the country, allowing them to renounce violence and to enter the political process as legal entities competing on a level playing field with the ruling PFDJ, and it should be pushed to permit the re-establishment of a free, independent media, including broadcast as well as print outlets, as well as to provide legal protection for all religious groups and take prompt legal action against those who attack members of minority faiths. All this

should be part of an effort to lay the groundwork for free and fair, internationally-monitored national elections.

Though it is extremely unlikely the government of Eritrea will act on such reforms so long as it is headed by Isaias, strong US support for these measures – if communicated to the people of Eritrea – will strengthen the democratic forces inside the country and in the diaspora who favour them. Meanwhile, 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 progress on dispute resolution and democratization or a change in the PFDJ regime, the United States should also be prepared to commit funds and technical support for the rapid demobilization and reintegration of combat troops, the resettlement of war-displaced civilians, and the expansion of poverty-alleviation and development programmes within the scope of Eritrea's national priorities, and the Eritrean people should be made fully aware of these offers through global media as well as alternative channels.

Should the Obama administration make progress towards these objectives, Eritrea could be a force for in the Horn of Africa. By the same token, Eritrea will continue to be the spoiler if it is not brought in from the cold. Thus it will be wise to distrust it but not to refuse to deal with it altogether, as some in the Bush administration advocated. Nor does insulting Eritrea or its leadership publicly, as key Bush administration figures began to do in 2007, have any effect other than to reinforce that country's recalcitrant nationalism. If the new administration in Washington is at all serious about bringing stability to the region, it must start with pressure on Ethiopia to end the border conflict, even as it places Eritrea on notice that its bullying behaviour will not be tolerated when it threatens the interests of others – not only those of the United States but also those of its African neighbours. But new avenues for Eritrea to resolve problems and to promote its interests must be available for this to be credible.

The dangers of doing nothing are various. The reciprocal action between domestic repression and external threats will open spaces for acts of terrorism to increase among indigenous Eritrean groups, both as political instruments and as gestures of frustration and anger or simply revenge. Those groups will seek stronger relationships with and support from global networks in order to carry out terrorist attacks. At the same

time, Eritrea's continuing confrontation with Ethiopia incubates parallel centres of state-sponsored terrorism that 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 would thrive. This eventuality could create America's worst nightmare. Better to act now and at least risk a more constructive alternative.

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