



The Berhale camp in Ethiopia's Afar Regional State.

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# Caught in the Crossfire of Climate and Politics

## The Eritrean Afars in Ethiopia

Dan Connell

**C**onscription into the army or other government service for years on end, fear of detention and torture for real or imagined transgressions with no legal recourse, no prospect of schooling or meaningful work, and no personal freedom: The reasons Afar refugees in eastern Ethiopia gave for fleeing their homeland often echoed those I had heard from their countrymen in interviews I conducted in 19 countries over the last two years. But most I spoke with had another grievance—disempowerment and discrimination based on their ethnicity and culture.

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Eritrea is a diverse society, roughly half-Christian and half-Muslim from nine distinct ethno-linguistic groups, and its leadership is relentlessly secular. But Christian Tigrinya speakers dominate both the political sphere and the economy under a regime derived almost exclusively from the army that won Eritrea's independence from Ethiopia in the early 1990s, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front, whose core leadership came largely from the Tigrinya heartland. EPLF veterans control all the top government posts under the front's former commander, who has refused to implement a constitution drafted in the 1990s or to hold national elections.

The Afars are Sunni Muslims, but religion is not central to their status, at least not in a doctrinal sense—the regime has jailed far more Christians for banned religious practices than they have Muslims, banning all denominations it could not control. Only four denominations, which have a long history in the country, are legal: Orthodox Christian, Roman Catholic, Evangelical Lutheran and Sunni Muslim. But all media are state-run, no non-governmental organizations or social movements are allowed, and either the state or the ruling party—now called the People’s Front for Democracy and Justice—hold controlling interests in all large-scale enterprises and agricultural schemes. The upshot is that if you are outside the EPLF/PFDJ core, you are by default marginalized. And the Afars are the quintessential outsiders.

A tightly knit, insular society with a strong warrior tradition, the Afars inhabit an area that extends from southern Eritrea into Djibouti and Ethiopia in one of the harshest environments in East Africa. Over the centuries, most eked out a living from pastoralism, though some on the Red Sea coast lived from fishing and regional trade. Life was always precarious, which no doubt made the Afars that much more determined to hold onto what they had—and to who they were.

And for the most part, they succeeded, maintaining traditional forms of social organization and administration despite the imposition of artificial borders and repeated efforts by outside powers, including imperial Ethiopia, to subdue them. They also kept their distance from the liberation fronts within Eritrea, which left them with little representation at the center of power when the EPLF formed a new government in 1991 and set out to re-engineer the society in its image.

One aspect of EPLF’s nation-building project was the denigration of pastoralism as a mode of economic life, coupled with ever tighter limits on fishing and trade, as the front sought to consolidate control over resources. Another was the replacement of traditional forms of clan administration with a top-down model of appointed leaders. Perhaps the most sweeping, though, was the requirement that all young Afars, men and unmarried women, train with the army and then enroll in national service, often at great distances from families and communities that relied on them for survival. That service became indefinite after a 1998–2000 border war with Ethiopia that ended with a shaky truce and has yet to be resolved.

Under conditions of permanent mobilization, Afar insularity became itself a source of mistrust, and the relationship between state authorities and the population came more and more to resemble that of colonizer and colonized.

## The Underserved Afar Camps

Ali Ahmed’s story was typical. When he was a child, his father had worked as a small merchant, but during the border war trade ground to a halt, leaving the family destitute. Ali had only finished tenth grade by 2006 at the age of 22 because he had taken time off to support the family and only attended school part-time, but he knew he would be called to national

service the next year so he fled that summer. “My life was not in my hands after tenth grade,” he told me.

But it was not just the prospect of national service that triggered his flight. Ali said he had been alienated from the government since the 1998 arrest of 48 prominent Afar elders accused of being pro-Ethiopia. The idea of serving this regime was too much to bear, but he still longs for the chance to go home again if things change there. Now 31, he lives in the Assaita camp, close to Ethiopia’s border with Djibouti, where he survives on UN rations and occasional day labor. “I never forget Assab,” he said, recalling the once bustling port where he was born and raised. “If there was some hope, I would go back. Why would anyone live here?”

Ethiopia’s Afar Regional State, one of nine created under its policy of “ethnic federalism,” is among the country’s poorest and least populated, with some 1.6 million people spread across 270,000 square kilometers, all but 13 percent of them in rural areas. Much of it is desert at or below sea level. Over 90 percent of the inhabitants are Afars, by far the largest concentration in a region whose total Afar population is around 2 million, including 100,000 in Eritrea and 300,000 in Djibouti.

The office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Ethiopia counted nearly 29,000 Afar refugees in this state at the start of 2015, but more crossed the border without registering to live within the local Afar community, as became clear on walking tours of the towns of Assaita, Semera and Loggiya clustered along the Addis Ababa-Djibouti highway where my guide repeatedly hailed people he knew from Eritrea. Some had been in Ethiopia for decades, but most came in the last ten to 15 years.

Nearly all the camp residents are ethnic Afars, as Ethiopia transports refugees from other ethnic groups to camps in the northern Tigray Regional State and relocates Afars who enter Ethiopia to one of two camps here—Berahle or Assaita—regardless of where they enter the country. Because many Afar refugees come with families and settle in the camps or towns with others from their place of origin, fewer move on to other destination countries than refugees of other social backgrounds, many of whom fled as individuals.

With the degree of autonomy the Afars enjoy here, the sheer size of their population, and the cultural and political limits on Afars in Eritrea and Djibouti, the Afar State has become not only a primary destination for Afar refugees but also the base for contemporary Afar nationalism and the headquarters for the largest Afar political movement, the Red Sea Afar Democratic Organization (RSADO), the only indigenous organization of any consequence with a presence in the region.

Meanwhile, the Afar region has an outsize importance for Ethiopia, despite its poverty and harsh environment, due to its strategic location, bordering on Djibouti, through which Ethiopia has access to the Red Sea, and on Eritrea and Somalia, where Ethiopia has fought major wars and which have served as bases for Ethiopian opposition groups. And the Afar region appears to sit on significant mineral deposits.

All of which makes it surprising that the Afar refugees appear to fall off the radar for most international aid agencies. Assaita and Berahle are, like all refugee camps in Ethiopia, administered by the country's refugee authority, known as ARRA, and supplied by UNHCR, which supports limited social and educational programming there. The Norwegian Refugee Council has supported some construction, but neither the Council nor the International Rescue Committee, the two most active NGOs in other camps, has an active presence in those for the Afar. Nor do any other European or American NGOs. There are primary schools and sports for older children, but most of the adult refugees are idle and have few prospects of steady work. It is, for most of them, the end of the line.

## Inside the Assaita Camp

Abdalla Mohammed, 32, from a small village outside Assab, had fled Eritrea in 2009 after serving ten years in national service. He cited the treatment of the Afars, not national service, as the main reason he left. "There was no equality," he told me when I met him in the Assaita camp last year. "They abused our language, our culture, our religion." He said it finally became too much, so he started planning as he waited for right moment: "To leave is very difficult." During the Eid celebrations at the end of the Ramadan fast, he slipped out, walking ten miles in one night to reach Ethiopia. He went straight to Assaita and has been there ever since.

Mohammed Hussein, 29, fled his village of Afambo in 2010 when faced with a call-up for national service, but he, too, had specific grievances. He said that six men from his family—uncles and older brothers—had already been conscripted. Two had been killed; none had yet come back. "They are lost to the family," he said. When his notice came, he went into hiding and then fled, crossing the border at a remote spot in the Danakil desert near the long dormant Afdera volcano and a nearby salt mine and then made his way to Assaita.

"I didn't know where I was or where I was going," he said, but strangers along the way directed him to the camp. Five years later, he has no work and survives "day by day," getting his clothes, food and shelter from donations and UN distributions. His life to that point had revolved around tending animals, and he saw no options now. He said he hopes for work at the new sugar factory under construction nearby, but he has no skills.

Abdalla Mohammed Abdalla, 45, had just come from Yemen when I met him in Assaita town with 17 members of his extended family in a mud brick building that ARRA had rented there for new arrivals. The women and children were spread out on mats in two rooms in the otherwise unfurnished house. A dozen soldiers, most of them non-Afars from the Eritrean highlands, some still in their uniforms, occupied two other rooms in the rear, also unfurnished.

Abdalla had been an underground cadre of the EPLF in the 1980s during the independence war and was elected to the Afar regional assembly in the 1990s. He said he did his national

service as an organizer for the party-sponsored youth union and in the Afar administration. But after he refused to withdraw from Assab during the border war when most highlanders in the city fled—"I was born in Assab—I would never leave"—he was accused of "accepting" a potential Ethiopian occupation if the city had fallen (which it did not), and he was jailed. He said he was sent to a prison near the Assab oil refinery and kept there for five years, beaten frequently and repeatedly called a traitor for not leaving his post with the other officials. Upon his release, he used personal connections to get a boat to Yemen and left immediately, settling in the small Yemeni port of Mukha, where he found work with local fishers and did day labor. His family soon followed.

When the civil war broke out in Yemen in 2014 and Houthi militiamen captured Mukha, Djibouti Afars came with boats to evacuate the many Eritrean Afars there, including some who had lived there for decades. But Abdalla said he feared staying in Djibouti due to the threat of Eritrean security services kidnapping him, as had happened to other high-value refugees—he said they had come twice to Yemen for him—so he brought his family to Assaita, determined to stay close enough to Eritrea that he could return if the political situation changed.

"I will not come back to Assab without peace," he told me. "But if we have our democratic rights, if the Afar people get their rights, I will go back."

National service did not factor into the decision to leave Eritrea for Mohammed, 50, another new arrival from Yemen. He said he was nearly 30 when the first cohort was called up in 1994, and he was not on the list. At that time, his father, an EPLF cadre, worked in the Afar regional administration and was the second highest official in the economic affairs department. Mohammed had grown up within the liberation movement and had himself been an EPLF fighter. But in 2004 he found he was losing the use of his left leg, and he was diagnosed with diabetes, so he requested leave to go to Asmara for treatment. When he was refused, he went on his own but still lost his leg. Upon his return, he was fired for going without permission. Angry, disabled and impoverished, he decided to flee the country.

"I had served this organization [the EPLF] since my childhood in the field," he said. Rebuffed by the authorities, he turned to the Afar sultan to plead his case and received financial support for a boat trip to Yemen that October. Like Abdalla, he settled in Mukha, fleeing the town when it came under siege by the Houthis and coming to Ethiopia. He said he has no idea about his future at this point: "Just I am here."

Another man, Mohammed, told me he had left school early to support his parents and had avoided national service until the age of 28, when officials finally came looking for him. He said he fled immediately, fearing not only conscription but risk to his life after Eritrean security forces had killed a neighbor suspected of supporting RSADO guerrillas, who frequently passed through the area. He walked across the border near Bada, and his family followed shortly after, joining him at Assaita.

Since then he has not had a consistent job, but he improvises by selling things he collects (wood, discarded goods) and getting occasional work on the new sugar plantation.

Yusef, 54, was from Sobelale, a small village near Wade. A prominent tribal leader, he was the head of the village administration when he came under suspicion for supporting RSADO in 2014 soon after a neighbor was accused of harboring members of the organization and executed. Once he heard he was on a list for arrest, he fled to Assaita, telling no one he was leaving. A third, from the same village, said he, too, fled to Assaita in 2014 when he was tipped off that he was suspected of aiding RSADO. All three said they were happy to be surrounded by Afars and had no plans to go anywhere until the situation changed at home.

## The Berahle Camp

To get to Berahle from Assaita, we drove almost straight north through the Danakil depression, historically one of the lowest and hottest places on earth. Today, it and the surrounding area are also among the driest, due to a drought that is being compared to the one that ravaged Africa in the mid-1980s. Water holes and wells are drying up, grasses are withering and sheep, goats and cattle are dying, both in eastern Ethiopia and across the border in southern Eritrea, though apparently not to the same degree in the densely populated highlands where the small number of expatriates live, which renders the drought and its victims largely invisible to outside eyes. But with new arrivals pouring in every day, this camp virtually shouts the news.

Abdella Mousa Ali, 50, arrived ten days earlier with a sister and a brother. “Our animals were dead and people were dying,” he said. “There was no food, and no help from Asmara [the Eritrean capital] or the UN. Nothing.” The grueling three-day journey over the parched mountains took its toll, too; some died on the way, he said.

Nearly all the newcomers spoke of drought as a factor in their flight, the more so if they lived largely or partially from livestock. But there were other pressures that multiplied drought’s impact—intensified government controls on fishing, the civil war in Yemen and a growing military presence, which felt to them like an occupation.

Half a dozen young men from the Tio area had arrived that week. “The government stopped us from fishing and the fighting in Yemen stopped us from trading,” said 20-year-old Mohammed Idris, a tenth-grade student, adding that all he saw in his future was forced labor in the country’s national service. Mohammed Ibrahim, 26, who had come with him, said he had been working as a fisher while hiding from the authorities for years, but the recent arrival of an army battalion in his village to enforce the ban on artisanal fishing made this impossible: “My choice was to die or to leave.”

Ali Mohammed, 48, came alone after seeing his carpentry and furniture making business collapse. “There was no work

and no money,” he said. “Even if you’re making things, no one can buy.”

The oldest person I met was Hussein Ali who at 70 had decided there was nothing left for him in Eritrea. He had worked in salt mines along the border until the war with Ethiopia in 1998 shut that down. Then he turned to petty trading, going from village to village to buy and sell grain and other basic goods, but the collapse of the economy had caught up to him. “There is no profit in this now,” he said. “No jobs, no resources, no way to support myself.” So he packed up what he could carry and set off to find a son living in the city of Mekele, in the nearby Tigray Regional State. “Many elders want to leave, too, but the journey is too difficult on foot,” he added, showing open blisters on his feet, still raw after four days at the camp.

## Harrowing the Ground

The Afar refugees describe an economy and a society in deep crisis, with conditions in Eritrea resembling foreign rule by administrators and security forces who neither speak their language nor respect their culture. Many, rightly or wrongly, are convinced that the regime sees them and their pastoral way of life as an obstacle to development strategies hatched in Asmara to serve the political and economic interests of the Tigrinya-dominated elite. This point of view is reinforced by the use of Afar territory to house numerous military bases and prisons but only two secondary schools and no post-secondary institutions. The absence of assistance for the resident population in the face of economic strangulation on all sides adds to this perception. Some say their flight may be just what the regime seeks.

Their insistence on remaining close to home, coupled with the depth and breadth of their shared grievances, which are seen through the lens of ethnic domination, harrows the ground for active resistance to what most perceive as the source of their problems—the government in Asmara—especially among young men who have seen other options disappear. The failure of a viable pan-Eritrean opposition to emerge has strengthened the view among many that only an Afar-led resistance can be trusted to act in their interests, only other minorities with similar experiences and grievances can be counted on as allies, only regime change in Asmara will suffice, and only armed conflict will achieve that outcome, a position that resonates with the Afars’ warrior culture.

That context helps to explain why the Afar region has been the site of the highest number of reported violent incidents in Eritrea over the past decade, numbers that have risen in recent years. Should the Afars in Ethiopia, both existing communities and newcomers, experience a significant falloff in resources and support, many will be ripe for the appeal of more radical alternatives than those offered by RSADO or traditional leaders. Such alternatives are close at hand, with both the Islamic State and al-Qaeda gaining ground across the Bab al-Mandab strait in Yemen. ■