

**Ethiopia: and The Realignment and Buildup of Forces in  
The Horn of Africa.**

**By Dawit Giorgis**

The most militarized zone in the world is Kashmir, Northern India. India and Pakistan claim the land. That is one of the time bombs Britain left when it was forced to leave its colonies. It has been one of the most volatile regions on earth for over 50 years. After being partitioned between the two countries in 1947, a boundary and a ceasefire was agreed and a border dividing the two parts established what is known as The Line of Control. China also administers part of the state. The place is known as a major flash point and dangerous, particularly because it involves three nuclear powers (China, Pakistan and India) and all the others who have a stake in the region. (Ethiopian Forces have been in Kashmir in 1950 as UN Military Observers.) The Guinness world record also calls Kashmir region as “ the largest militarized territorial dispute on the planet, worlds highest battlefield, highest military base.”

This record is being broken in the Horn of Africa today, as the most militarized and complex security region and a region with the largest number of foreign military bases in the world, except that none of the countries of the region have nuclear capacities. However three of the countries with military bases in the region are nuclear powers. (China, USA and France)

The key to regional instability in the Greater Horn is Ethiopia. Instability in the other countries can be contained but continued instability and civil unrest in Ethiopia will destabilize the entire region and Africa in an unprecedented way. Internal conflict can easily spill over to neighboring countries. Mass exodus from Ethiopia and the affected regions can bring about the worst humanitarian crisis the world has yet to see. Europe, the Middle East and the USA will be affected in more than one way. Civil unrest and collapse of the state in Ethiopia could invite a proxy war. It could create crisis in the Red Sea coastal countries. Extremists can take this opportunity and take actions that would further destabilize the country and the region. Once a country submerges into this kind of sinkhole it will be extremely difficult to restore peace like we have seen in Somalia Syria, Yemen and Iraq. That is why all eyes in the region are on Ethiopia. The Ethiopian people and the regime should be aware of

the consequences of failing to bring about peaceful change. No body else should and can do this for them. The forces around them have their own agendas.

The Greater Horn is known to have 7 countries (Ethiopia, Kenya, Sudan, Southern Sudan, Eritrea, Somalia and Djibouti) Ethiopia used to be seen as a regional powerhouse because it has the second largest population in Africa and next to Algeria and Egypt it has the third largest army in Africa<sup>1</sup>.

Though Egypt and Yemen are not part of the Greater Horn they are however part of the security complex. They are all connected through the Nile (Sudan, South Sudan, Egypt and Kenya) or the Red Sea, which is the strategic body of water linking the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean through Bab Al-Madeb, a Strait, which connects the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden and the Arabian Sea. They call it the “choke point”; because much of the world’s commerce goes through this maritime route. At one point, when Somali pirates ruled the sea, the area was called the most dangerous maritime zone in the world. Now it has been replaced by the Gulf of Guinea. Those who control the Horn of Africa control a major chunk of the world’s economies. “How long would the EU economies be able to hold out without the energy supplies from the Persian Gulf or the vital Asian imports?” asks the Foreign Policy Journal<sup>2</sup>

The importance of Yemen in this cannot be understated. Yemen lies along the Red Sea with a coastline of 1900 kms. Saudi Arabia’s interest in the region is controlling the Red Sea through the coastal states. If it can control Yemen it controls the entire western coastline of the Red Sea. For Egypt, if it can have influence on Sudan and Eritrea it would mean controlling much of the Eastern Coast of the Red Sea, which means greater influence on Ethiopia. Israel also has a stake in all this and for good reasons related to its security.

In the early 70s and 80s there was great energy spent in establishing a pan Arab ideology with the aim of unifying the Arab nations. Since then religious and nationalist factions within the Arab world have defeated Arab nationalism and the idea of making the Red Sea an Arab lake is no

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<sup>1</sup> [www.globalfirepower.com](http://www.globalfirepower.com)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.foreignpolicyjournal.com/2011/11/19/choke-point-bab-el-mandeb-understanding-the-strategically-critical-horn-of-africa/>

more realistic. Instead Saudi Arabia is playing that role together with the new Gulf alliance that it has created; hence we see today that alliance deeply involved in the proxy war in Yemen. The actual war is between Iran and the Gulf Alliance; between Sunni and Shias for control of the strategic region.

The UAE has been building its military infrastructure in Eritrea's port of Assab and it has conducted operations against Yemen from this base. This military base goes beyond its interest to launch operations on Yemen. It indicates UAE's ambition in the region. It includes naval docking facility, renovations of the airport and barracks for the personnel. Saudi Arabia is also using this base.

The UAE's has also established controversial military base in Somaliland, which could become operational within the very near future. Somaliland is officially part of Somalia but has been seeking recognition since it declared independence. The base is in Berbera, 100km North East of the capital, Hargeisa, and UAE ships have already started docking at its deep-water port.<sup>3</sup>

Qatar has pulled out its troops from Eritrea-Djibouti border where it was acting as peacekeeping force, because of the dispute it has with UAE and Saudi Arabia. Eritrea has sided with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Alliance fighting in Yemen.

Unconfirmed reports state Egyptian troops have arrived in Eritrea according to Middle East Monitor even though the Eritrean government has fiercely denied this. . Sudan is clearly disturbed by this move. "Sudan's national army has sent forces to this area to protect Sudan's security. We have information that some entities are targeting us," he said after meeting his Ethiopian counterpart in Khartoum. Sudan closed its border with its eastern neighbor Eritrea and sent troops to the frontier amid reports that Egypt had deployed troops in Eritrea. Khartoum also recalled its ambassador to Egypt following the reports. However there have been exchange of visits by the two heads of states and there are no details. This warm relationship between Egypt and

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2017/2/13/somaliland-agrees-to-uae-military-base-in-northern-port><sup>3</sup>

Eritrea have to do a lot with strained relationships both countries have with Sudan and the worsening political situation in Ethiopia and Egypt's challenge to the construction of the renaissance dam on the Nile.

Historically Sudan has been an ally of Egypt, which had great influence both in the internal and external policies of successive governments in Sudan. The situation has changed for two main reasons; the ouster of the Muslim Brotherhood from the political scene of Egypt which Sudan has supported and Sudan's approval of the construction of the renaissance dam.

Eritrea has been supporting the Darfur opposition movements and in fact Darfur's opposition head quarters are based in Asmara. Eritrea has always participated in the international effort to bring peace in Darfur. Eritrea and South Sudan have a good relationship and to this extent the respective governments have made many public statements. There are many Eritrean entrepreneurs operating in South Sudan.

South Sudan and Egypt have reached a military cooperation agreement. As a result Egypt has began sending its troops to South Sudan.<sup>4</sup> On Nov. 16, 2017, after four consecutive meetings with all concerned parties, the Cairo "[Declaration of Unification](#)" of Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) was signed at the headquarters of the Egyptian General Intelligence under the auspices of Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi and President of Uganda Museveni. The parties agreed that the General Intelligence would follow up on the implementation of the items included in the agreement, without disclosing more details.<sup>5</sup>

This alliance with Egypt worries Sudan and should worry Ethiopia as well. It is more directed against Ethiopia because on two occasions before and after the signing of this declaration the president of Egypt stated " ...we are capable of protecting our national security and water which to us is a

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.almonitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/12/egypt-foreign-policy-south-sudan-africa-arab.html>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.almonitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/12/egypt-foreign-policy-south-sudan-africa-arab.html>

question of national security...water is a matter of life or death and no one can touch Egypt's share of water.”

It seems now that Egypt, South Sudan, Uganda and Eritrea have a common agenda. Egypt's interest is the uninterrupted flow of the Nile from Ethiopia, South Sudan and Sudan. The waters of the White Nile that flow through South Sudan do not affect the dam under construction like all the other upstream states (Burundi, DR Congo, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda) because they have their own hydro electric ambitions and therefore cannot oppose Ethiopia's project. But there are other issues that concern Ethiopia. The 883 kms stretch of border, where there are illegal firearms trafficking, cross border activities and the influx of refugees from South Sudan which has frequently triggered disputes between South Sudan and Ethiopia. There are 5000 Ethiopian peace keeping forces in Sudan, in the region of Abei, the disputed area between South Sudan and Sudan where there is regular cross border raids and refugee flow.

In December of last year Sudan and Russia signed a military cooperation agreement stating that Sudan needs protection from an American “hybrid war “by upgrading its armed forces and perhaps installing a Russian military base along Sudan's coast line on the Red Sea. The setting up of a base in the Red Sea would give Russia a regional stake and balance the forces, which are increasingly more aligned with the West and enable Russia to position itself incase there is conflict between any of the parties with Ethiopia.<sup>6</sup>

Turkey has been consistent in its relationship with Somalia since 2011 when the President visited Somalia. Turkey's business in Somalia has flourished since then and its relationship with successive governments in Mogadishu has been solid. “Turkey has opened its largest overseas military base in Somalia, cementing its relationship with the war-torn nation and strengthening its strategic place in the African continent. The \$50 million base .....will train more than 10,000 soldiers. The move is part of an effort to institutionalize and restructure the police and military services, battle the terrorist group al-Shabaab, and help expand the government's authority into more towns and regions.” The

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<sup>6</sup> <https://qz.com/1093011/turkey-opens-its-largest-overseas-military-base-in-somalia-to-train-somali-soldiers/>

involvement of Turkey is welcome by Somalia since the deadline for the withdrawal of African Union Forces is scheduled for 2020.<sup>7</sup>

Turkey is the new player in the region. Turkish relationship with Saudi Arabia and UAE has been strained since the Arab Spring, which Turkey had supported. Egypt and Turkey's relationship have soured since the ouster of the Muslim Brotherhood from Egyptian politics. Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan received the high order of State of Sudan medal from President Omar al-Bashir in Khartoum on December 24, 2017. This new relationship between Sudan and Turkey is seen as a setback to the ongoing efforts to normalize relationships between the two countries. Latest tension between Sudan and Egypt was sparked by an agreement between Khartoum and Ankara during this visit. Sudan has entered an agreement with Turkey to work together in the fight against terror in East Africa. The agreement signed allows Turkey to have military base in the Red Sea, in Sudanese territorial waters.

Djibouti has suddenly become the most attractive strategic location for the major powers. The reasons being:

- Djibouti's geo strategic position and its stability in a very unstable environment
- Djibouti handles 90% of landlocked Ethiopia's maritime trade
- Djibouti is close to multiple conflict zones in Africa and Middle East including Somalia, Yemen...Syria, Iraq.
- Djibouti is a major hub for counter terrorism operation
- Djibouti is close to Suez Canal, world's busiest maritime route
- Djibouti is a member of the Saudi led coalition fighting in Yemen.

Today Djibouti is the home of several military bases. The USA has the largest base in Africa at the former French Base Camp Lemonnier. France remains with a strengthened contingency. China has its first military base outside its region. Japan has its first military base since the Second World War. Recently Djibouti welcomed the construction of Saudi military base on its territory, which has been in progress since 2016.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://qz.com/1093011/turkey-opens-its-largest-overseas-military-base-in-somalia-to-train-somali-soldiers/>

Amongst all these developments Ethiopia is a simple spectator as it loses its position as a regional power. The regime has become a paper tiger, consumed with its internal rebellion and fighting for its very survival. The Arabs and particularly Saudi Arabia have become the regional power brokers in the Horn of Africa, fulfilling their dreams since their establishment as states.

“ Worried that the United States was withdrawing from its role as security guarantor for the wider region, it (Saudi Arabia) resolved to build up its armed forces and project its power into strategic hinterlands and sea lanes to the north and south. In practice, that has meant winning over less powerful countries along the African coast of the Red Sea — Sudan, Eritrea, Djibouti, and Somalia — a region that Ethiopia has sought to place within its sphere of influence.

The Saudi presence along the African Red Sea coast has grown more sharply pronounced since its March 2015 military intervention in Yemen, which drew in Egypt as part of a coalition of Sunni Arab states battling Iran-backed Houthi rebels. The coalition obtained combat units from Sudan and Eritrea, and scrambled to secure the entire African shore of the Red Sea. Then in January of this year — under pressure from Saudi Arabia — Djibouti, Somalia, and Sudan all cut diplomatic ties with Iran. By far the most significant of these was Sudan, which has had long-standing political and military ties with Tehran. For years, Iranian warships called at Port Sudan, and Iranian clandestine supplies to the Palestinian militant group Hamas passed freely along Sudan’s Red Sea coast (occasionally intercepted by Israeli jet fighters). Now Sudan is part of the Saudi-led coalition pummeling the Iran-backed Houthis.

But the most important geopolitical outcome of the Saudi-led Yemen intervention has been the rehabilitation of Eritrea, which capitalized on the war to escape severe political and economic isolation. After it gained independence from Ethiopia in 1993, Eritrea fought wars with each of its three land neighbors — Djibouti, Sudan, and Ethiopia. It also fought a brief war with

Yemen over the disputed Hanish Islands in the Red Sea in 1995, after which it declined to reestablish diplomatic relationships.<sup>8</sup>

Poverty ridden, insecure, unstable and dysfunctional states with strategic location or resources are usually the ones that ignite regional conflict and proxy wars. In the Greater Horn it is going to be Ethiopia. Unlike the Western countries which have anointed Ethiopia as a stable country with the fastest growing economy in the continent, the facts are clearer now than ever: ***Ethiopia is a failed state nearing complete collapse.*** The failed states index, now known as fragile states index shows consistently, since 2007 that Ethiopia is one of the least dysfunctional states in the world. The failed states index prepared by the reputable Fund for Peace institute shows: 2007-17<sup>th</sup>, 2008-16<sup>th</sup>, 2009 16<sup>th</sup>, 2010 -15<sup>th</sup>, 2011-20<sup>th</sup>, 2012-17<sup>th</sup>, 2013-19<sup>th</sup>, 2014-19<sup>th</sup>, 2015-19<sup>th</sup>. 2017-15<sup>th</sup>

According to Fund for Peace, “Failed state or fragile state means that the central government is weak, ineffective and has little control over its territories.” All the major indicators show that Ethiopia has consistently been one of the most fragile states (failed states) in the world. All other indexes including the United nations (UNCTAD) and Business Insider rank Ethiopia one of the 15<sup>th</sup> poorest countries on earth. The UNDP human development index still ranks Ethiopia 173<sup>rd</sup> of the 186 in the latest human development index. Over 77 % of the people live below the poverty line and over 44% live in less than 2 dollars a day with a 30% illiteracy rate. Unemployment in the cities is as high as 80% and 38 % of children are underweight. It has experienced severe political instability for several years now and the government has lost control of its people. It has one of the largest number of political prisoners in Africa and it has the largest number of journalists in person in the world next to Iran. It is the most censored country in Africa. In internet use Ethiopia is one of the four least users in the world (the rest are Somalia, Niger and Eritrea) with only 11.6 % of the people using internet.<sup>9</sup> Ethiopia is among the 9

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<sup>8</sup> <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/03/17/africas-700-billion-problem-waiting-to-happen-ethiopia-horn-of-africa/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://photius.com/rankings/2017> of June 30, 2017



least mobile telephone users in the world <sup>10</sup> Djibouti does better than Ethiopia in proportion to its population.

Let us ask ourselves now, and we don't have to be economists, degree holders or highly educated people. **How can a country be all the above and at the same time be the fastest growing economy in the world or in Africa?** It just does not make sense. Those who give this fake reports and tell it and retell it on the media are those western powers who have a stake in the status quo not in the truth or in the well being of the people. They know the method they use to reach to their conclusion is flawed and that they are using the fake numbers that government is providing them. This so called growth has not affected the great majority of Ethiopians who are as poor as they were for hundreds of years. The only difference is that they are more oppressed now than ever. Now the truth is catching up and Ethiopia is unraveling.

What are all these bases around Ethiopia doing? They are the eyes and the ears of the stakeholders. If Ethiopia implodes or explodes every country in the Horn, plus their neighboring countries, and the Arab world, the Red sea, Indian Ocean Bab Al Mandeb and Israel are going to be directly affected. That is why we see realignment of forces unfolding in the region Every alliance will want to influence the development of events in Ethiopia to its favor. If there is a smooth transition Ethiopia can come out glorious once again. But if the TPLF/EPRDF does not see a way out then it may chooses to dig deep in and Ethiopia may unravel with possible proxy war. The manner in which the struggle is being conducted in the country will determine this.

The US does not seem to get the point yet. It seems to be pleased with the release of political prisoners and sees this gesture as a path way to transformation. As always, it is making a grand mistake. It is not reading the people. The people are not asking for reform of this government. They want to get rid of this government and thorough a fair and free election with neutral international observers establish a democratic government which guarantees all the freedom that they have lost for 27 years. They want a transitional government established to oversee a smooth transition. If we hear the people, their message is loud and clear. The time when reform was possible is long gone. The US and Europe don't quiet get this. And then when the situation goes into

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<sup>10</sup> [www.worldatlas.com/articles](http://www.worldatlas.com/articles)

uncharted territory and the conflict escalates to affect their interest they start scrambling and end up in a hotchpotch arrangement like the one done in London by Herman Cohen, which ended up with not far sighted decision that brought this country to the situation we are in. ( Mr. Cohen admitted that it was a mistake after the damage has been done) Ethiopian people will not allow this to happen again. The people are taking full control of the unfolding events in Ethiopia. No one faction is in control. It will be a change that will come on the peoples terms and **not** the terms of any faction or the European and American politicians.

The countries around Ethiopia will interfere and fight amongst themselves and with Ethiopians only if they realize that people are disunited and the country as a whole is not rallying around one banner and one political agenda. If Ethiopians can hold on to the kind of unified pressure that people see to day, there is a possibility that a transitional government can be established under the terms of the people. The option of not doing so will be grave, with all friends and foes developing strategies of intervention in their own interest. If this is allowed to happen Ethiopians will be fighting not their own wars but the wars of the foreign stakeholders.

Next to Algeria and Egypt Ethiopia has the third largest army in Africa<sup>11</sup> It is the most populated country in the Horn of Africa with a history of having never been colonized. It has 40% of the area of Djibouti, Eritrea and Somalia and 85% of the population of the region. Yet Ethiopia to day is not the regional power. It has lost any respect it had in the region. Even Djibouti whose economy entirely depends on Ethiopia is flexing its muscles and asserting independence. Its relationship with Ethiopia is based on its own terms. It seems that Ethiopia is more dependent on Djibouti than vice versa. Somalia is slowly coming out of it civil war and has kicked out Ethiopian forces as its alignment with Arab world gives it more confidence. Eritrea is slowly coming out of its cocoon and as we see these days, it has already started preparing for transition in Ethiopia. Egypt and the Arab world are strongly behind it. Egypt has never been as belligerent as it has been. It is beating the war drums and in diplomacy it is ahead by taking away all the influence Ethiopia had in the region. South Sudan despite its proximity to Ethiopia and the support it got from Ethiopia in the struggle for its independence, is aligning itself with adversaries of Ethiopian regime. Ethiopia is at its weakest. Battered by

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<sup>11</sup> [www.globalfirepower.com](http://www.globalfirepower.com)

years of rebellion, corruption and ethnic politics and a fake economic growth that is now unraveling, it is most vulnerable to its enemies now than ever.

Ethiopia has a history behind it. It has a resilient people who can fight back and control their own destiny. Ethiopia has a youth that will not allow the agenda of a minority government to destroy its country. It has a sturdy and angry youth population that has defied the 27 year Ethiopian style apartheid policies of TPLF and united the fractured ethnic groups. It is a youth that is fired up and determined to prove once again that nothing comes between it and victory. With a unified peaceful struggle Ethiopians can establish freedom and democracy, repel any external aggression and guarantee peace and stability in the region. Let it be.

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