

# The Fact and Fiction in Eritrea's Middle East Policy

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## Abstract

This paper aims to investigate how the small African state of Eritrea manages its relations with the seemingly rival Middle Eastern states of Israel, Iran, and Saudi Arabia. Whether Eritrea pursues a consistent Middle East policy or simply employs utilitarian survival methods is suited to problematisation and can be answered with an intensive analysis. However, there is too much speculation on Eritrea's involvements in regional affairs and its putative military base diplomacy with the leading Middle Eastern states. The country's role in the recent civil war of Yemen is particularly controversial. Since most of those speculations are disaffirmed by the Government of Eritrea, there is a need to scrutinise the factual and fictional aspects of Eritrea's relations with the Middle Eastern states.

**Keywords:** Eritrea, Horn of Africa, Middle East, Israel, Iran, Gulf states

## 1. Introduction

The State of Eritrea occupies a strategic geopolitical position along one of the world's busiest shipping lanes on the Red Sea coastline. The country tries, as a matter of course, to benefit from this strategic location in bolstering its foreign relations. There is a multitude of attention-grabbing information, however, on not only the way Eritrea uses the advantages of its location, but also the overall conditions of the country. Despite the repeated disaffirmation by the Government of Eritrea, for instance, it is alleged that several military bases pertaining to Israel, Iran, and the UAE co-exist in Eritrean territory. Likewise, considering the country's authoritarian government and relative isolation from the international community, it is quite common to depict Eritrea as "Africa's North Korea" (Pogrud, 2016). Such depictions may be stereotypical and inaccurate, as Norway's Minister of Justice Jøran Kallmyr also noted during his visit to Eritrea in June 2015. Kallmyr said he got a far better impression of the country than he had expected, so "it is wrong to compare Eritrea with North Korea" (NRK, 2015; Madote, 2015). It is more reasonable to evaluate Eritrea in the context of a political culture peculiar to the regional sub-system of Africa, as the structural-historical conditions and leadership patterns demonstrate multiple similarities between post-colonial Eritrea and post-colonial African states (Mengisteab and Yohannes, 2005).

After achieving de jure independence from Ethiopia in 1993, Eritrea encountered a challenging foreign policy environment due to the unstable texture of the Horn of Africa. The young country has also contributed to the regional instability by not being on good terms with its neighbours. Eritrea's disputes with and alleged involvement in neighbouring countries brought about the UN sanctions in 2009 and 2011. The UN Security Council imposed arms embargo, travel restrictions, and assets freeze on some Eritrean political and military leaders (UN Doc. S/RES/1907; UN Doc. S/RES 2023). Whereas these sanctions have not made Eritrea as isolated as North Korea, there exists a reported relationship between Eritrea and North Korea. Eritrea is listed among the African countries violating the international arms embargo by buying military material from North Korea. Lastly in July 2016, a United Nations panel found that Eritrea imported 45 boxes of encrypted military radios and accessories from North Korea. In response, the United States of America banned all equipment sales or interactions with Eritrean navy (Solomon, 2017).

Notwithstanding the growing international pressure and because thereof, Eritrea has recently established partnerships and signed important agreements with a range of countries, including China, Cuba, Germany, Finland, Japan, Russia, and Turkey (Amahazion, 2016). Eritrea has pursued a practical policy of rapprochement with the leading Middle Eastern nations as well, which is not exceptional in essence given the country's proximity to the Arabian Peninsula. Yet, its role in the Middle Eastern rivalries is a highly speculative issue. The present paper aims to discuss this issue by analysing the factual and fictional aspects of Eritrea's relations with the leading Middle Eastern states, starting from what affects the country's foreign policy approach.

## 2. Eritrea's Foreign Policy Approach

Eritrea was established as an autonomous region within the Ethiopian Federation in 1952 following the Italian colonial rule and a transient British administration. Ethiopia's annexation of Eritrea as a province in 1962 sparked a three-decade struggle for independence. During this struggle, Eritrean diplomats routinely visited many capitals worldwide to seek political and material support against the Ethiopian domination. They became acclimatised apace to world views of potential supporters and tried to capitalise on divergent religious and ideological perspectives, such as Zionism, Islam, Pan-Arabism, Nasserism, Ba'athism, etc. Eritrean diplomats asked for the US support for their independence as well, but failed to outweigh Ethiopia's international standing. Following the inconclusive diplomatic efforts, Eritreans ventured a military confrontation with Ethiopia (Weldemichael, 2013:868). Their independence struggle only attracted diplomatic interest in the late 1980s when the forthcoming end of the Cold War began to change the international dynamics. The end of the Soviet Union's massive military support to the Ethiopian communist regime in 1988 precipitated the fall of Mengistu Haile Mariam government in 1991 and the subsequent recognition of the Eritreans' right to self-determination (Global Security, 2017). After a two-year de facto independence, Eritrea became de jure sovereign in 1993. Isaias Afwerki has been governing the country since then. Although the 1997 constitution prescribed multi-party politics, it has not been implemented yet (Stalker, 2007: 99).

Upon independence, Eritrea immediately became a member of the United Nations and the Organization of African Unity. The country also enjoyed good relations with its neighbours for a while. However, within a decade, Eritrea's relations with Ethiopia, Sudan, Djibouti and Yemen were strained by territorial and political disputes. In 1995, Eritrean and Yemeni forces clashed over an island group in the southern Red Sea. According to the Government of Eritrea, the islands had been part of Eritrea since the period of the Ottoman Empire (Dzurek, 1996: 70). Eritrea's relations with Ethiopia and Djibouti have been strained in a similar way due to the border disputes since the late 1990s (Nur, 2013: 73). Albeit the recent improvement, Eritrea-Sudan relations were also troubled over the claims of supporting each other's opposition groups (Sudan Tribune, 2015). Moreover, Eritrea allegedly supported Al-Shabaab in Somalia and was involved in smuggling weapons through several countries (Shinn, 2012).

Why Eritrea gravitated to those actions may be rooted in the country's previous experiences of diplomacy and war. The perceived inconclusiveness of diplomatic efforts to get international support and some military gains against Ethiopia may have consolidated Eritreans' belief in the primacy of using force as a means to achieve political change (Reid, 2009: 16). The country may have ipso facto inclined to pursue a muscular foreign policy. This tour de force in the already-unstable region of the Horn of Africa resulted in Eritrea's gradual isolation (Bereketeab, 2009).

In order to move out of the isolation, Eritrea tried to cooperate with the USA in the global war on terror. Eritrean government even hired a Washington-based lobbying firm to be made the location of an American permanent military base in 2002. However, the USA preferred to move its task force to Djibouti. According to Müller (2016: 9), this led to a feeling of betrayal in Eritrean side.

The feeling that "the whole world is against us" in Eritrean political psychology was consolidated with the Western countries' predilection to side with Ethiopia under all circumstances. In such a self-justifying way, Eritrea increased its support to Ethiopian opposition groups, as did Ethiopia to Eritrea's. Both countries stepped up their efforts to counter each other's influence in the region, but this vicious cycle of regional destabilisation has exacerbated the isolation of Eritrea rather than Ethiopia's (Müller, 2016:9).

In 2003, Eritrea withdrew from the Africa Union in protest for the organisation's backing of Ethiopia. The country reoccupied its seat in 2010 in an attempt to relieve the international pressures on it (Global Security, 2017a). Notwithstanding the country's efforts, Ethiopia claimed that Eritrea planned a massive attack on the African Union summit in Addis Ababa in January 2011. Ethiopia's claim was supported by the UN via its US State Department affiliate, the Somalia and Eritrea Monitoring Group (SEMG). According to a SEMG report, Eritrean intelligence service planned an operation to detonate a car bomb at the African Union headquarters in Addis Ababa when 30 of the continent's leaders were meeting there (Rice, 2011). Eritrean sources disaffirmed the claim by putting forward a previous Wikileaks cable according to which Ethiopian security forces planted bombs in Addis Ababa on September 2006 and then blamed Eritrea for the blasts. This information was propounded to question the credibility of the claims made by Ethiopia and the SEMG which blames Eritrea for the foiled bombing attempt at the African Union summit in 2011 (Mountain, 2011). It is beyond the purpose of this paper to adjudicate on whether Ethiopian or Eritrean allegations are cogent. Yet, the international community appeared to give more credence to the claims of Ethiopia and the SEMG, which has possibly justified the efforts

of Ethiopia to evoke some sort of change in Eritrea. Ethiopian Minister of Foreign Affairs reportedly declared that they would carry out a more active policy using all means to force Eritrea “to change its ways or to change its government” (Berhane, 2011).

This sort of external threats, whether they are real or perceived, is one of the reasons why Eritrean government has created a militarised society through a program of mandatory conscription into national military service, sometimes of indefinite length. Even though the program has enhanced Eritrea’s military might in terms of increasing the number of combat-ready personnel, it has adversely affected the country’s economy. Like the economies of many African nations, a large share of the Eritrean population is engaged in subsistence agriculture. The sector produces a small share of the country’s total output, however. The country’s economic growth and government revenues are driven mainly by copper, potash and gold production (CIA World Factbook, 2017).

Seeing that the country’s development is hindered by its partial isolation on the regional and international scene, Eritrean government has looked for alternative ways to cushion the blow. To this end, it has created a free trade zone in the port of Massawa and begun attracting foreign investors especially in the mining sector. Three new mines are expected to be operational by 2018, in addition to the Bisha gold, copper and zinc mine, a joint venture between the Eritrean government and Canada’s Nevsun Resources Ltd. The mine opened in 2011 and generated nearly 2 billion dollars of revenue in its first four years of operation. Owing to the mine’s production, Eritrea’s exports rose dramatically to 261 million dollars, up from only 23 million dollars in 2010. By 2014, the country’s exports climbed to about 500 million dollars. Prior to this uptrend, Eritrea had one of the lowest ratios of exports to GDP in the world, which is a measure of the country’s integration with the international economy (Kaplan, 2016: 7).

In line with the efforts to attract foreign investors, Eritrea pursues a utilitarian foreign policy in a greater sphere so as to diversify its foreign relations and to set up rewarding partnerships with new actors (Mosley, 2014). Eritrea’s close relations with the competing states of the Middle East region are not anomalous in this regard. How it manages these relations is a good question, however.

### **3. Eritrea’s Relations with Israel**

During the independence struggle, Eritrea was supported mostly by Arab countries, whereas the Ethiopian central government was supported mainly by the USSR and Israel. However, this did not prevent Eritrea and Israel from establishing a pragmatic relationship. Upon Eritrea’s de facto independence, Israel wasted no time in courting this strategically-significant fresh state by making the then seriously-ill Eritrean President Afwerki grateful to Israel for life. With the suggestion of the US representative in Eritrea, he was transferred to Israel for medical treatment of cerebral malaria in January 1993. Following Afwerki’s recovery from illness, Israel opened its embassy in Asmara in March 1993, one month before the official declaration of Eritrean independence. In the face of perturbation among many Arab countries, Afwerki said Eritrean interests would determine how and when they choose their friends (Carol, 2012: 361).

Eritrean-Israeli relations thrived in a variety of fields, including the introduction of drip irrigation farming and demobilisation of the ex-liberation movements. Besides, in 1995-1997, Israeli Ministry of National Infrastructure, formerly the Ministry of Energy, carried out geological surveys in collaboration with the Eritrean Department of Mines. These surveys mapped the country’s mineral, energy and water reserves (Carol, 2012: 363-364). In the military field, according to some reports (Tazari, 2017), Eritrea agreed to host an Israeli naval base and received logistical support from that base during its conflict with Yemen over Hanish islands in the late 1995.

Israel prioritised its relations with the regional power, Ethiopia, in cases of frictions. For example, when Eritrea and Ethiopia conflicted over the precise border line in the region of Badme in May 1998, Eritrea appealed to Israel not to refurbish Ethiopian fighter jets lest it could affect the outcome of the border war. Despite the pleas from Eritrea, Israel supplied 10 upgraded MiG-21 fighter jets to the Ethiopian Air Force (Carol, 2012: 365). Israeli military supply contributed to the eventual occupation of Badme by Ethiopian troops. In 2002, the Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission decided that Badme and the surrounding area formed part of Eritrea. In defiance of the decision, Badme continues to be under Ethiopian occupation (Rulac, 2017).

Following the mentioned border war (1998-2000), Eritrea’s relations with the Western states have been deteriorated to a further extent. In parallel, Eritrean-Israeli relations gradually went off the boil as well. Especially the migration of Eritreans to Israel has been a serious problem between Eritrea and Israel. Israeli Interior Minister Meir Sheerit cited Eritrea’s “oppressive regime” as the reason why Israel issued work visas to Eritreans. In this way, Eritrean ambassador to Israel Tesfamariam Tekeste said, Israel turned itself into a destination for Eritrean citizens fleeing from army service or looking for work. Tekeste protested against Israel’s failure to repatriate the Eritreans and expostulated about the portrayal of Eritrea by Israeli officials as a

dictatorship (Carol, 2012: 369).

Despite such discrepancies in bilateral relations, Eritrea and Israel continue to be seen as close military partners. Eritrean government is claimed to have allowed Israel to build intelligence gathering stations and monitoring centres on the Red Sea coasts to oversee the activities of Iran, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and Yemen in the region (IBP, 2004: 132). The docks in Dahlak are reportedly used by Israeli navy submarines and ships taking part in Israel's covert war against the networks smuggling weapons to Hamas and Hezbollah (Pfeffer, 2012). Eritrean Ministry of Foreign Affairs denied those claims and accused Israeli intelligence sources of spreading such rumours (Connell and Killion, 2011: 320).

There can be adequate causes for deeming Eritrea geostrategically important in the eye of Israel, but it is a challenge for the latter to sustain its military engagement with a state considered as "rogue" by the USA. Although Israel maintains diplomatic relations with more than 40 African states, it is apparently closer to the pro-Western states, such as Ethiopia, Kenya, and South Sudan. They buy Israeli defence equipment amounting to hundreds of millions of dollars a year (Degani, 2017). Besides, Israeli firms are active in the fields of agriculture, medical industry, communication systems and transportation infrastructure throughout Africa. In brief, the significance of Eritrean-Israeli relations does not transcend the context of Israel's Africa policy.

From the Eritrean point of view, Eritrean-Israeli relations may be important for numerous reasons. First, it is probable and desirable for Asmara to benefit from Israel's capacity to influence the USA in decisions regarding Eritrea on the international stage. Second, Eritrea may aspire to improve its defence capabilities with Israeli arms. Third, rapprochement with Israel can be a way for Eritrea to balance its controversial relations with the other Middle Eastern states, notably Iran (Pfeffer, 2012).

Those probabilities would make sense if Eritrean-Israeli relations were effectual enough. It has been quite difficult for Eritrea and Israel to maintain ties in an all-weather amicable manner due to the changes inside and outside both countries. They continue to have resident ambassadors in each other's capital, but their investment and trade ties are not significant. To what extent they are still close to each other in political and military fields is questionable in that regard.

#### **4. Eritrea's Relations with Iran**

Eritrea's another controversial Middle Eastern partner is the Islamic Republic of Iran. Eritrean-Iranian relations "are relatively new but constructive" in Afwerki's words. Eritrea established diplomatic relations with Iran soon after its independence, though the informal relations date back to the years before Eritrean independence when there were several contacts between Iranian officials and the liberation movements of Eritrea (Afran Institute, 2017). Eritrea approached to Iran especially after the border war with Ethiopia that strained Eritrea's relations with the West. In May 2008, Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki met with Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in Tehran to bolster cooperation between the two states in regional and international issues. The two states signed a memorandum of understanding in which they agreed to boost cultural, scientific, and educational cooperation. Moreover, Iran undertook the renovation of the Assab oil refinery, which was built by the USSR in 1968 and has not been renovated in the last twenty years. This move is interpreted within the scope of Iranian willingness to support Eritrean development projects in the fields of energy and infrastructure (Farrar-Wellman, 2017).

In parallel with the thriving relations, Eritrea has publicly supported Iran's nuclear program on several occasions. In an address to a conference of the Non-Aligned Movement in November 2007, for instance, Eritrea advocated Iran's right to enrich uranium for peaceful purposes. Eritrean Minister of Foreign Affairs Osman Saleh (2008) stated that his government's support for the legal rights of all nations to use nuclear technology for peaceful purposes is enshrined in the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. In the same vein, Eritrean President Afwerki criticised Western interference in Iran's nuclear program, asserting that the International Atomic Energy Agency and Western nations do not have the authority to interfere with Iran's nuclear development. He said "Iran's nuclear program is a source of pride for us and we support the country's stand in this regard" (Afrol News, 2009).

Eritrea's discursive rapprochement with Iran sparked off speculations on the nature of cooperation between Eritrea and Iran. The latter is reported to have leased a naval base in the Eritrean coastal city of Assab and provided military training to Yemeni Houthi militias here (Yemen Post, 2009; Iranian Diplomacy, 2017). According to a report by Stratfor (2012), Iran has been using Eritrean territory not only for arms transfer to Yemen, but also to control the water route from the Bab el-Mandab Strait to the Suez Canal. From this point of view, Eritrea manages to cooperate with Israel and Iran at the same time, functioning as a venue for Iranian-Israeli rivalry in the Horn of Africa. Eritrea hereby gets the upper hand on Ethiopia, Djibouti and Yemen (Pfeffer,

2012).

In an interview on Al-Alam Television (2009), Eritrean President Afwerki denied the claims that both Israel and Iran have military bases in Eritrea, describing it as a far-fetched paradoxical situation. Eritrean sources assert, by the same token, that the above-referred reports are largely grounded on fictional information. Eritrean Center for Strategic Studies (2012) argues that “at this age of preponderant cyberspace technology”, “the locations and details of these bases would have long been publicly available with all the required resolutions and precisions”.

If such an emic point of view is adopted, Eritrea’s relationship with Iran appears to be neither unduly special nor different from the diplomatic ties that Eritrea enjoys with the other Middle Eastern states. Actually Eritrea has resident embassies in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen, while it is represented in Iran by a non-resident ambassador. Besides, Iran has deeper economic ties and resident embassies with all other countries in the Horn of Africa, including Ethiopia, Djibouti and Sudan. Eritrea signed a loan agreement worth 25 million Euros with Iran in April 2009, during the visit of President Afwerki to Tehran, but this amount is much smaller than Iranian development assistance or investments in Ethiopia and Sudan (Eritrean Center for Strategic Studies, 2012).

### **5. Eritrea’s Relations with the Arab States of the Gulf**

Eritrea and the Arabian Peninsula are only separated by the Red Sea. The country is not far from the Arabic world in religious terms as well. Almost half (47%) of the Eritrean population is Sunni Muslim. As mentioned above, Eritrea was supported by the Arab world during the independence struggle and is represented with resident embassies in most of the Arab states.

A series of allegations surfaced regarding Eritrea’s military cooperation with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, especially during the crises of Yemen and Qatar. Before that, Eritrean President Afwerki visited Saudi Arabia in April 2008. According to a Wikileaks cable (2008), Afwerki asked for Saudi investment in Eritrea, but Saudi officials hesitated over whether the Eritrean economy would enable a fair return on their investment (Awate, 2015). Having come up without any concrete results, Afwerki made a state visit to Iran in May 2008. Eritrea’s rapprochement with Iran yielded some concrete results, as mentioned in the preceding section. In tandem with this rapprochement, Eritrea was accused of supporting the Iran-backed Houthi militias in Yemen (Yemen Post, 2009). No sooner started the Saudi air campaign against the Houthis in March 2015 than Eritrea and Saudi Arabia got closer to each other, on the other hand. Afwerki paid a two day state visit to Saudi Arabia in April 2015, at the invitation of King Salman Bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud. Officially they discussed on issues of bilateral cooperation between the two countries and ways of enhancing and promoting them, as well as the latest international and regional developments (Tesfa News, 2015).

The armed conflict in Yemen was the most important regional development then. Eritrea reportedly allowed Saudi Arabia and the UAE to use its land, airspace and territorial waters in the anti-Houthi campaign (Solomon, 2016; Mahmoud, 2016). According to the UN Group of Experts monitoring sanctions against Somalia and Eritrea, a military arrangement was set up between Eritrea and the Gulf alliance after Djibouti declined an offer by Saudi Arabia and the UAE to use its soil in their anti-Houthi campaign. Eritrea not only allowed the Gulf coalition to use its territories, but also personally participated in their military campaign by embedding its troops with the UAE forces fighting in Yemen. Moreover, Eritrea allegedly let one of its key ports on lease to the UAE for 30 years (Fitzgerald, 2015; Gridneff, 2015). Of course, these claims were not affirmed by the Government of Eritrea (Teshamariam, 2015; Eritrea Ministry of Information, 2016).

The geopolitical intelligence platform, Stratfor (2015), asseverated an Emirati naval presence in the Eritrean port of Assab, based on the satellite imagery that appears to show some landing craft, possibly not existing within the inventory of Eritrean navy. This hypothetical presence of Emirati naval vessels is adduced as evidence that Eritrea assumed a direct military and/or logistical responsibility within the anti-Houthi campaign. From this point of view, the armed conflict in Yemen provided an opportunity for Eritrea to reposition itself in the geopolitical context of the Horn of Africa (Gardner, 2017).

The belief that Eritrea gained strength through its military cooperation with the Gulf states was, by the look of things, taken seriously by Ethiopia. Ethiopia’s relations with the Gulf states have not been as close as Eritrea’s, so it was unlikely for Ethiopia to dissuade Saudi Arabia and the UAE from engaging with Eritrea. This may account for why Ethiopia used force against Eritrea immediately after the latter got closer to the Gulf states (Gardner, 2017). The gold mine in Bisha and a military depot were targeted allegedly by Ethiopian fighter jets in March 20, 2015 (Topf, 2015; Tigrai Online, 2015). Both countries did not make any statement about the

bombardment, however.

Eritrea's relations with the Gulf countries were tested during the Qatar crisis in June 2017. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Yemen cut diplomatic ties with Qatar, accusing the tiny Gulf country of funding terrorist groups and supporting Iran. Several African nations followed the suit. Egypt, Mauritania, Senegal, and Libya's Tobruk government cut diplomatic ties, while Chad, Djibouti and Niger downgraded ties with Qatar. Ethiopia and Somalia pushed for mediation, as did Alpha Conde of Guinea, the African Union president. Eritrea was also listed among the African states siding with Saudi Arabia and its allies in Qatar crisis (Gaffey, 2017). A statement by the Eritrean Ministry of Foreign Affairs was circulated in Arabic media on June 7, 2017, declaring that Eritrea severed its diplomatic ties with Qatar. However, Eritrean Minister of Information, Yamane G. Meskel, denied the statement soon after. He said it was a forged document (RT Arabic, 2017). Eritrean foreign ministry said, in a written statement, they rejected the demand to cut ties with Qatar. According to the statement, Eritrea had "strong ties with the brother people of Qatar," so it was "impossible to cut ties" (Middle East Monitor, 2017).

Though Eritrean-Qatari relations seemingly remained intact, Qatar announced that it pulled troops from the border of Djibouti and Eritrea in June 2017. Qatari troops were in the region to help mediate the territorial dispute between the two countries. According to Barakat and Milton (2017), maintaining the 500-strong presence of troops in a remote area was a costly and largely thankless endeavour for Qatar. That was a significant investment of military manpower for an armed forces of around 12,000 during the most urgent crisis it has faced in its history. Besides, the reported military presence of Saudi Arabia and the UAE in Eritrea was rendering the Qatari troops stationed thousands of miles away in an isolated area a soft target for direct or indirect retaliation. In conclusion, Qatar's military withdrawal from the region does not represent a substantial deterioration in Eritrean-Qatari relations. But it clearly indicates the challenges of maintaining stable diplomatic relations in a fluctuating region.

## 6. Conclusion

Instead of being famous for exemplifying the notion that "states have neither eternal friends, nor perpetual enemies, they have only eternal and perpetual interests", Eritrea is notorious for its suppleness to set up alliances with Israel, Iran, and Saudi Arabia at the same time. This notoriety needs clarification.

First, too much unfavourable and fictional information may appear about authoritarian and non-transparent governments especially if they are "out of favour" on both regional and international scenes. Thus, it is almost impossible to distinguish the verity from the fallacy in the absence of transparency.

Second, it is not extraordinary for small states like Eritrea to behave in a relatively more flexible way when maintaining relations with competing regional powers. Whether Eritrea pursues a consistent Middle East policy or not and whether its ties with the mentioned Middle Eastern states can be called as "alliance" or not are questionable in that regard. Furthermore, it is neither viable nor advantageous to follow a steady policy towards an unsteady region like the Middle East. Eritrea capitalises accordingly on the rivalries between the Middle Eastern states, establishing transient ties based on *rebus sic stantibus*, rather than *pacta sunt servanda*.

Third, Eritrea's rapprochement with those states happened sequentially, not simultaneously. Eritrea seemed quite close to Israel in the beginning, but Eritrean-Israeli relations have gradually deteriorated since the late 1990s. Afterwards, Eritrea approached to Saudi Arabia in mid-2000s. When this attempt of rapprochement did not yield desired results, Eritrean government developed a rapport with Iran. Eritrean-Iranian relations were effective until the Saudi Arabia's approach to Eritrea during the anti-Houthi campaign in Yemen. In brief, Eritrea came close to the leading Middle Eastern states at different times.

Fourth, Eritrea lies in a transitive position between the Horn of Africa and the Middle East. Both regions are frequently exposed to conflagrations. Hence, it is difficult for Eritrea not to be affected by those conflagrations and the resultant pall of smoke. Whether Eritrea hosts military bases and to what extent it was involved in the civil war in Yemen should be understood in consideration of this fuliginous environment. On several occasions, Eritrea has stated that it is not home to foreign military bases, nor has it sent any troops to Yemen. The official statements emphasise that Eritrea is averse to dependency and polarised alliances in accordance with the principles of the Non-Aligned Movement; therefore, it does not subscribe to the notion of providing military bases to regional or great powers, though it has every right to establish military and economic partnerships with any country of its choice in accordance with its national interests. In spite of the emphasis on its right to run the gamut of partnerships, why Eritrea disavows any military engagement with the Middle Eastern states may be seen as a realistic deliberation both to keep the balance in its relations with competing regional powers and to obviate the imposition of additional international sanctions.

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