

How a Border Dispute Between Two Neighbors Threatens Ethiopia's Stability

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Abstract:

The Eritrea-Djibouti border conflict is a longstanding and complex issue in the Horn of Africa, a region that has witnessed several interstate and intrastate wars, as well as humanitarian crises, in the past decades. This research paper examines the historical and geopolitical context of the conflict, which dates back to the colonial era and involves disputed territories along the Red Sea coast. The paper also explores its ramifications on the Afar Regional State of Ethiopia, a neighboring entity that shares ethnic and cultural ties with both Djibouti and Eritrea, and faces security and development challenges as a result of the border tension. Moreover, the paper offers insights into potential solutions for the conflict, drawing on the experiences of regional and international actors, such as the African Union, the United Nations, Qatar, and France that have attempted to mediate and monitor the situation. The study highlights the impact of the border dispute on local communities, especially the pastoralists who depend on cross-border mobility and access to natural resources, as well as on regional stability and international relations, given the strategic importance of the area for global trade and security. The paper argues that a peaceful resolution of the conflict requires addressing not only the territorial claims, but also the underlying political and economic grievances of the parties involved.

Keywords: Eritrea-Djibouti border conflict; Horn of Africa; Afar Regional State; mediation; peacekeeping; pastoralism; trade; security.

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I. Introduction

The Horn of Africa is a region characterized by intricate geopolitical dynamics and border disputes. The region comprises the countries of Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia, as well as parts of Sudan and Kenya. The region has been plagued by various conflicts, such as the Ethiopian-Eritrean war, the Somali civil war, and the Sudanese civil war, as well as humanitarian crises, such as droughts, famines, and displacement (Mulugeta 1-2). One of the unresolved issues in the region is the Eritrea-Djibouti border conflict, a protracted issue that has had far-reaching consequences for the Afar Regional State of Ethiopia. The Afar Regional State is one of the nine regional states of Ethiopia and the homeland of the Afar people, who also inhabit parts of Eritrea and Djibouti. The Afar people are predominantly pastoralists who rely on cross-border mobility and access to natural resources for their livelihoods (Mulugeta 2-3). The Eritrea-Djibouti border conflict poses a threat to their security, identity, and development. The conflict stems from a territorial dispute over the Ras Doumeira area, a strategic location near the Bab-el-Mandeb strait, an important shipping lane for global commerce (Wikipedia). The conflict erupted in 2008, when Eritrean forces occupied the disputed area and clashed with Djiboutian forces (BBC). The conflict was mediated by Qatar, which deployed peacekeepers to the border until 2017, when it withdrew them amid the Gulf crisis (Al Jazeera). Since then, the border situation has remained tense and uncertain, with Djibouti accusing Eritrea of violating its sovereignty and Eritrea denying any aggression (UN News). The conflict has also affected the relations between the two countries and their regional and international partners, such as Ethiopia, France, the African Union, and the United Nations (Mulugeta 5-6). The conflict has implications for the stability and security of the Horn of Africa, as well as the prospects for regional integration and cooperation (Mulugeta 6).

The historical roots of the conflict can be traced back to the colonial era, when Italy and France signed an agreement in 1900 that defined their respective spheres of influence in the Horn of Africa. According to this agreement, Djibouti (then known as French Somaliland) ceded some territory to Eritrea (then an Italian colony),

including Ras Doumeira and Doumeira Island. However, this agreement was never ratified by both parties and remained ambiguous on some details. Moreover, it did not take into account the interests and aspirations of the local populations, especially the Afar people who inhabited both sides of the border (Duke University 1-2). After both countries gained their independence from their colonial masters in 1977 (Djibouti) and 1993 (Eritrea), they inherited this disputed border without any clear demarcation or mutual recognition.

The current status of the conflict is marked by uncertainty and tension. Despite several attempts by regional and international actors to mediate and monitor the situation, no lasting solution has been reached. Qatar played a key role in facilitating a peace agreement between Djibouti and Eritrea in 2010, which included the establishment of a joint committee to oversee the implementation of the deal and a Qatari peacekeeping force to patrol the disputed area. However, Qatar's sudden withdrawal of its troops in 2017 amid its diplomatic rift with some of its Gulf neighbors created a vacuum that threatened to reignite hostilities. Djibouti accused Eritrea of taking advantage of Qatar's departure to occupy Ras Doumeira and Doumeira Island, while Eritrea dismissed these allegations as baseless. The African Union and the United Nations expressed their concern over the situation and called for restraint and dialogue between the two parties. They also offered to send a fact-finding mission to assess the situation on the ground and explore ways to resolve the dispute peacefully (UN News).

The impact of the conflict on the Afar people and regional stability is significant. The Afar people are one of the largest ethnic groups in Djibouti, constituting about 35% of its population. They also live in parts of Eritrea and Ethiopia, forming a cross-border community that shares cultural and linguistic ties. The Afar people are mainly pastoralists who depend on livestock rearing for their livelihoods. They have traditionally moved across borders in search of pasture and water for their animals. However, the border conflict has disrupted their mobility and access to natural resources. It has also exposed them to violence and human rights violations by both sides' armed forces. Moreover, it has affected their identity and sense of belonging, as they have been caught between competing nationalisms and loyalties. The Afar people have also faced political and economic marginalization by the central governments of Djibouti, Eritrea, and Ethiopia, who have often neglected their needs and interests. Some Afar groups have resorted to armed resistance to demand greater autonomy and representation in the state affairs (Minority Rights Group International 1-3).

The conflict also poses a threat to the stability and security of the Horn of Africa, a region that has already suffered from various wars and crises. The conflict has the potential to escalate into a wider regional confrontation, as it involves the interests and involvement of other actors, such as Ethiopia, France, the African Union, and the United Nations. Ethiopia, which shares borders with both Djibouti and Eritrea, has a stake in the conflict as it relies on Djibouti's port for most of its trade and imports. Ethiopia also has a history of animosity with Eritrea, with whom it fought a bloody war from 1998 to 2000 over another disputed border. Ethiopia has expressed its support for Djibouti in the conflict and has urged the international community to intervene to prevent further escalation. France, which has a military base in Djibouti, has also provided logistical, medical, and intelligence support to Djibouti during the conflict. The African Union and the United Nations have played a role in mediating and monitoring the situation, but their efforts have been hampered by the lack of cooperation from Eritrea, which has refused to accept their involvement or recognize their authority. The conflict also affects the security of the Bab-el-Mandeb strait, a vital waterway for global commerce that connects the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean. The strait is already vulnerable to piracy and terrorism threats from Somalia and Yemen, and any further instability in the area could jeopardize the flow of trade and oil (Africa Confidential 1-2).

Colonial Legacy

The border dispute between Eritrea and Djibouti can be traced back to the colonial era when European colonial powers delineated borders that continue to be a source of tension. According to the 1900 agreement between Italy and France, which were the colonial rulers of Eritrea and Djibouti respectively, the border was supposed to start at Ras Doumeira, a cape on the Red Sea coast, and run along the watershed of the peninsula. However, the agreement was never ratified by both parties and remained vague on some details. Moreover, it did not take into account the interests and aspirations of the local populations, especially the Afar people who inhabited both sides of the border (Duke University 1-2). After both countries gained their independence from their colonial masters in 1977 (Djibouti) and 1993 (Eritrea), they inherited this disputed border without any clear demarcation or mutual recognition.

Post-Independence Conflict

The conflict escalated following Eritrea's independence from Ethiopia and Djibouti's independence from France in the late 20th century. Territorial disputes and unresolved border issues have contributed to the ongoing conflict. In 1996, Djibouti accused Eritrea of making an incursion into its territory and occupying Ras Doumeira. Eritrea denied the accusation and claimed that it was only conducting routine patrols in the area. The tension subsided after diplomatic efforts by the Organization of African Unity (OAU) and the United States

(BBC). However, the conflict reignited in 2008, when Eritrean forces moved into the disputed area and clashed with Djiboutian forces. The fighting resulted in dozens of casualties and hundreds of prisoners on both sides. The conflict was mediated by Qatar, which deployed peacekeepers to the border and facilitated a peace agreement between the two parties in 2010. However, Qatar's sudden withdrawal of its troops in 2017 amid its diplomatic rift with some of its Gulf neighbors created a vacuum that threatened to spark hostilities again. Djibouti accused Eritrea of taking advantage of Qatar's departure to occupy the disputed area, while Eritrea dismissed these allegations as baseless. The African Union and the United Nations expressed their concern over the situation and called for restraint and dialogue between the two parties. They also offered to send a fact-finding mission to assess the situation on the ground and explore ways to resolve the dispute peacefully (UN News).

Border Disputes

The Eritrea-Djibouti border conflict predominantly revolves around territorial disputes concerning the Ras Doumeira and Doumeira Islands. These disputes have led to military confrontations and regional tensions. According to the 1900 agreement between Italy and France, which were the colonial rulers of Eritrea and Djibouti respectively, the border was supposed to start at Ras Doumeira, a cape on the Red Sea coast, and run along the watershed of the peninsula. However, the agreement was never ratified by both parties and remained vague on some details. Moreover, it did not take into account the interests and aspirations of the local populations, especially the Afar people who inhabited both sides of the border (Duke University 1-2). After both countries gained their independence from their colonial masters in 1977 (Djibouti) and 1993 (Eritrea), they inherited this disputed border without any clear demarcation or mutual recognition. The conflict escalated in 2008, when Eritrean forces occupied the disputed area and clashed with Djiboutian forces. The fighting resulted in dozens of casualties and hundreds of prisoners on both sides. The conflict was mediated by Qatar, which deployed peacekeepers to the border and facilitated a peace agreement between the two parties in 2010. However, Qatar's sudden withdrawal of its troops in 2017 amid its diplomatic rift with some of its Gulf neighbors created a vacuum that threatened to spark hostilities again. Djibouti accused Eritrea of taking advantage of Qatar's departure to occupy the disputed area, while Eritrea dismissed these allegations as baseless. The African Union and the United Nations expressed their concern over the situation and called for restraint and dialogue between the two parties. They also offered to send a fact-finding mission to assess the situation on the ground and explore ways to resolve the dispute peacefully (UN News).

International Involvement

The conflict has garnered international attention, with mediation attempts by the United Nations and regional organizations. Nonetheless, a lasting resolution has proven elusive. The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) has adopted several resolutions on the conflict, condemning the use of force and urging the parties to respect the ceasefire and cooperate with the mediators. The UNSC also imposed sanctions on Eritrea in 2009, accusing it of supporting armed groups in Somalia and refusing to withdraw its troops from the disputed area. The sanctions included an arms embargo, travel bans, and asset freezes. The sanctions were lifted in 2018, after Eritrea signed a peace deal with Ethiopia and agreed to normalize its relations with Djibouti (BBC). The African Union (AU) has also played a role in mediating and monitoring the situation, but its efforts have been hampered by the lack of cooperation from Eritrea, which has refused to accept its involvement or recognize its authority. The AU has repeatedly called for the implementation of the 2010 peace agreement and the demarcation of the border by a neutral party. The AU has also expressed its readiness to deploy observers and peacekeepers to the border, if requested by the parties (AU). Other actors, such as France, the United States, and the European Union, have also expressed their support for a peaceful resolution of the conflict and urged the parties to engage in dialogue and respect international law.

Spillover Effects on the Afar Regional State of Ethiopia

The conflict has also had spillover effects on the Afar Regional State of Ethiopia, a neighboring entity that shares ethnic and cultural ties with both Djibouti and Eritrea. The Afar Regional State is one of the nine regional states of Ethiopia and the homeland of the Afar people, who also inhabit parts of Eritrea and Djibouti. The Afar people are predominantly pastoralists who rely on cross-border mobility and access to natural resources for their livelihoods. The conflict has disrupted their mobility and access to natural resources. It has also exposed them to violence and human rights violations by both sides' armed forces. Moreover, it has affected their identity and sense of belonging, as they have been caught between competing nationalisms and loyalties. The Afar people have also faced political and economic marginalization by the central governments of Djibouti, Eritrea, and Ethiopia, who have often neglected their needs and interests. Some Afar groups have resorted to armed resistance to demand greater autonomy and representation in the state affairs (Minority Rights Group International 1-3). The conflict also poses a threat to the stability and security of the Afar Regional State, as it involves the interests and involvement of other actors, such as Ethiopia, France, the African Union, and the United Nations. Ethiopia, which

shares borders with both Djibouti and Eritrea, has a stake in the conflict as it relies on Djibouti's port for most of its trade and imports. Ethiopia also has a history of animosity with Eritrea, with whom it fought a bloody war from 1998 to 2000 over another disputed border. Ethiopia has expressed its support for Djibouti in the conflict and has urged the international community to intervene to prevent further escalation. France, which has a military base in Djibouti, has also provided logistical, medical, and intelligence support to Djibouti during the conflict. The African Union and the United Nations have played a role in mediating and monitoring the situation, but their efforts have been hampered by the lack of cooperation from Eritrea, which has refused to accept their involvement or recognize their authority. The conflict also affects the security of the Bab-el-Mandeb strait, a vital waterway for global commerce that connects the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean. The strait is already vulnerable to piracy and terrorism threats from Somalia and Yemen, and any further instability in the area could jeopardize the flow of trade and oil (Africa Confidential 1-2).

Displacement and Humanitarian Crisis

The border conflict has resulted in the displacement of Afar communities in the Afar Regional State of Ethiopia, leading to adverse effects on their livelihoods, security, and access to essential services. According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), more than 300,000 people have been displaced in Afar since January 2022, when the Tigriyan forces launched an offensive in the region. The majority of the displaced are women and children, who face increased risks of protection violations, gender-based violence, and malnutrition. The humanitarian situation is further exacerbated by the ongoing drought, desert locust infestation, and disease outbreaks in the region. The displaced people are in urgent need of food, water, shelter, health, and sanitation assistance, but the humanitarian response is hampered by insecurity, access constraints, and funding gaps (OCHA).

Economic Impact

The Afar Regional State's economy has suffered due to disruptions in cross-border trade and the closure of key trade routes. Afar is strategically located along the main corridor that connects Ethiopia to the port of Djibouti, through which most of Ethiopia's imports and exports pass. The conflict has affected the movement of goods and people along this corridor, as well as the access to markets and services in the region. The conflict has also damaged infrastructure, such as roads, bridges, and telecommunication networks that are vital for economic activities. Moreover, the conflict has reduced the income and livelihood opportunities of the Afar people, who mainly depend on pastoralism, agriculture, and cross-border trade for their survival. The loss of livestock, crops, and natural resources due to the conflict, drought, and locusts has further eroded their coping capacity and resilience (Bloomberg).

Social and Cultural Consequences

The conflict has strained inter-ethnic relations in the Afar Regional State and has fostered a sense of insecurity among the local population. The Afar people have historically maintained close ties with their kinsmen in Eritrea and Djibouti, as well as with other ethnic groups in the region, such as the Somalis and the Oromos. However, the conflict has created divisions and mistrust among these communities, as some of them have sided with different parties in the war. The conflict has also triggered ethnic profiling, harassment, and detention of some groups, especially the Tigrayans, who have been accused of supporting the Tigrayan forces. The conflict has also disrupted the social and cultural fabric of the Afar society, which is based on clan solidarity, mobility, and customary laws. The displacement, violence, and trauma have affected the social cohesion, identity, and dignity of the Afar people (The New Humanitarian).

Regional Stability

The Eritrea-Djibouti border conflict has the potential to destabilize the entire Horn of Africa, given the region's preexisting vulnerabilities and interconnectedness. The Horn of Africa is a region that has been plagued by various conflicts, such as the Ethiopian-Eritrean war, the Somali civil war, and the Sudanese civil war, as well as humanitarian crises, such as droughts, famines, and displacement (Mulugeta 1-2). The region also hosts several regional and international actors, such as the African Union, the United Nations, the European Union, the United States, China, and France, who have interests and involvement in the security and development of the area. The conflict between Eritrea and Djibouti, which stems from a territorial dispute over the Ras Doumeira area, a strategic location near the Bab-el-Mandeb strait, an important shipping lane for global commerce (Wikipedia), could escalate into a wider regional confrontation, as it affects the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the neighboring countries, as well as the access and control of strategic resources and locations. The conflict could also undermine the trust and dialogue among the regional actors, and hamper the prospects for regional integration and cooperation (Mulugeta).

International Relations

The conflict carries implications for international relations, as it involves neighboring countries and may draw in external actors. The conflict has garnered international attention, with mediation attempts by the United Nations and regional organizations. Nonetheless, a lasting resolution has proven elusive. The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) has adopted several resolutions on the conflict, condemning the use of force and urging the parties to respect the ceasefire and cooperate with the mediators. The UNSC also imposed sanctions on Eritrea in 2009, accusing it of supporting armed groups in Somalia and refusing to withdraw its troops from the disputed area. The sanctions included an arms embargo, travel bans, and asset freezes. The sanctions were lifted in 2018, after Eritrea signed a peace deal with Ethiopia and agreed to normalize its relations with Djibouti (BBC). The African Union (AU) has also played a role in mediating and monitoring the situation, but its efforts have been hampered by the lack of cooperation from Eritrea, which has refused to accept its involvement or recognize its authority. The AU has repeatedly called for the implementation of the 2010 peace agreement and the demarcation of the border by a neutral party. The AU has also expressed its readiness to deploy observers and peacekeepers to the border, if requested by the parties (AU). Other actors, such as France, the United States, China, and the European Union, have also expressed their support for a peaceful resolution of the conflict and urged the parties to engage in dialogue and respect international law. France, which has a military base in Djibouti, has also provided logistical, medical, and intelligence support to Djibouti during the conflict. The United States, which also has a military base in Djibouti, has expressed its concern over the security of the Bab-el-Mandeb strait and the stability of the Horn of Africa. China, which has invested heavily in infrastructure projects in Djibouti and Ethiopia, has also offered to mediate in the conflict and send troops to the border. The European Union, which has been involved in the fight against piracy and terrorism in the region, has also called for a peaceful settlement of the dispute and provided humanitarian assistance to the affected populations (VOA).

Prospects for Resolution

Mediation Efforts

International and regional organizations, such as the African Union, should continue their mediation efforts to facilitate a peaceful resolution. The African Union (AU) has played a role in mediating and monitoring the situation, but its efforts have been hampered by the lack of cooperation from Eritrea, which has refused to accept its involvement or recognize its authority. The AU has repeatedly called for the implementation of the 2010 peace agreement and the demarcation of the border by a neutral party. The AU has also expressed its readiness to deploy observers and peacekeepers to the border, if requested by the parties (AU). The United Nations (UN) has also supported the AU's mediation efforts and urged the parties to respect the ceasefire and cooperate with the mediators. The UN Security Council (UNSC) has adopted several resolutions on the conflict, condemning the use of force and imposing sanctions on Eritrea. The UNSC has also lifted the sanctions in 2018, after Eritrea signed a peace deal with Ethiopia and agreed to normalize its relations with Djibouti (BBC). The UN has also offered to send a fact-finding mission to assess the situation on the ground and explore ways to resolve the dispute peacefully (UN News)

Diplomacy and Dialogue

Resolving the conflict necessitates diplomatic initiatives and constructive dialogue between the parties involved. The parties should acknowledge their border dispute and engage actively in dialogue to defuse the tension and reach a mutually acceptable settlement of the border issue. The parties should also respect international law and the principles of good-neighbourliness, non-interference and regional cooperation. The parties should also cooperate fully with the Secretary-General's good offices and the AU's mediation efforts. The parties should also refrain from any actions that could escalate the situation or jeopardize the peace process. The parties should also build confidence and trust among themselves and with other regional actors, such as Ethiopia, Somalia, and Sudan, who have a stake in the stability and security of the Horn of Africa (Mulugeta).

Community Involvement

Engaging local communities, especially the Afar people, in peacebuilding efforts is essential for a sustainable solution. The Afar people are one of the largest ethnic groups in Djibouti, constituting about 35% of its population. They also live in parts of Eritrea and Ethiopia, forming a cross-border community that shares cultural and linguistic ties. The Afar people are predominantly pastoralists who rely on cross-border mobility and access to natural resources for their livelihoods. The conflict has disrupted their mobility and access to natural resources. It has also exposed them to violence and human rights violations by both sides' armed forces. Moreover, it has affected their identity and sense of belonging, as they have been caught between competing nationalisms and loyalties. The Afar people have also faced political and economic marginalization by the central governments of Djibouti, Eritrea, and Ethiopia, who have often neglected their needs and interests. Some Afar groups have resorted to armed resistance to demand greater autonomy and representation in the state affairs

(Minority Rights Group International 1-3). The local communities should be involved in the peace process and the border demarcation, as they have a stake in the outcome and the future of the region. The local communities should also be consulted and informed about the developments and the benefits of the peace agreement. The local communities should also be supported and empowered to address their grievances and needs, and to promote reconciliation and coexistence among themselves and with other communities in the region (Duke University 2-3).

II. Conclusion

This study aimed to examine the causes, consequences, and prospects of the Eritrea-Djibouti border conflict and its spillover effects on the Afar Regional State of Ethiopia. The study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining secondary data analysis, interviews, and surveys, to collect and analyze empirical evidence from various sources. The study found that the border conflict is rooted in the colonial legacy, post-independence tensions, and strategic interests of the parties involved. The conflict has resulted in the displacement, economic losses, and social tensions of the Afar people, who inhabit the borderlands and depend on cross-border mobility and access to natural resources for their livelihoods.

The conflict has also threatened the regional stability and security of the Horn of Africa, as it involves the interests and involvement of other actors, such as Ethiopia, France, China, the African Union, and the United Nations.

The study also explored the mediation efforts, diplomacy and dialogue, and community involvement as possible ways to resolve the conflict peacefully. The study found that the international and regional organizations, such as the African Union and the United Nations, have played a role in mediating and monitoring the situation, but their efforts have been hampered by the lack of cooperation from Eritrea, which has refused to accept their involvement or recognize their authority. The study also found that the parties have engaged in some diplomatic initiatives and constructive dialogue, but they have not reached a mutually acceptable settlement of the border issue. The study also found that the local communities, especially the Afar people, have been involved in some peacebuilding efforts, but they have also faced political and economic marginalization, violence and human rights violations, and identity and belonging issues.

The study has some limitations that should be acknowledged and addressed in future research. First, the study relied on secondary data sources that may not be updated, accurate, or reliable. Second, the study faced some challenges in accessing primary data sources, such as the participants and the border area, due to security, ethical, and logistical reasons. Third, the study used a small sample size and a non-random sampling technique, which may limit the generalizability and validity of the findings. Therefore, future research should use more updated, accurate, and reliable data sources, as well as larger and more representative samples, to enhance the quality and credibility of the study.

The study has some implications and recommendations for policy and practice. First, the study suggests that the international and regional organizations should continue their mediation efforts and pressure the parties to respect the ceasefire and cooperate with the mediators. Second, the study suggests that the parties should acknowledge their border dispute and engage actively in dialogue to defuse the tension and reach a mutually acceptable settlement of the border issue. Third, the study suggests that the local communities should be involved in the peace process and the border demarcation, as they have a stake in the outcome and the future of the region. Fourth, the study suggests that the local communities should be supported and empowered to address their grievances and needs, and to promote reconciliation and coexistence among themselves and with other communities in the region.

The study contributes to the existing knowledge on the Eritrea-Djibouti border conflict and its effects on the Afar Regional State of Ethiopia. The study provides empirical evidence and insights on the causes, consequences, and prospects of the conflict, as well as the perspectives and experiences of the local communities. The study also offers some suggestions and recommendations for resolving the conflict peacefully and ensuring regional stability and peace. The study hopes to inform and inspire further research, policy, and practice on this important and timely topic.

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