

Horn of Africa: Global Actors between Past and Present

Undoubtedly, the horn of Africa, comprising Eritrea, Ethiopia, Djibouti, and Somalia, is currently undergoing massive socioeconomic and political reconfigurations. Compared to the past two or three decades, the conditions of these countries are not the same for good reasons. This could be observed both at local and international levels. Locally, countries like Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Somalia largely remain unstable, economically and politically, as ever. Even worse, the levels of poverty, famine, drought, terrorism, interethnic clashes and human right violations in the Horn today are unprecedentedly high. It should be confessed, however, that this condition in the Horn is notwithstanding some of these states' relentless deployment of what might be styled as "statistically informed confusion campaigns" of economic "growth" and "development" in their respective countries. Put differently, the horn of Africa is in as much underdeveloped as ever before. On top of this is its protraction in these two decades. All in all, this could be related, in some ways, to historical circumstances, interethnic and interreligious violence, bad governance and policies, foreign actors and their interventions.

The horn of Africa is also passing through changes revolving around the realignment of global actors in keeping with their strategic interests in the region. This has, obviously, significant ramifications for the countries involved, economically and politically. In the past, it was the Ethiopian Empire, which had historically played significant roles in the region. As the Aksumite Empire lost its civilizational vitality in the sixth and seventh centuries due to internal and external factors, some three-to-five centuries elapsed before the advent of the Ethiopian Empire under various charismatic kings with relatively similar ideological and territorial ambitions. Rulers of the empire with these tendencies, inter alia, included Zara Yaqob, Amda Seyon, Libne Dingle, Tewodros II, Yohannes IV, and Menelik II. As the Ethiopian Empire gained significant momentum, partly with the lending hand of Europe, it had fought against, for instance, the Ottoman Empire, Egypt, and Sudan. Not to mention the victory of Adwa in 1896 when Ethiopia gave a massive blow to the invading Italy, and this, in turn, made Ethiopia the emblem of resistance and colonial independence in the whole of Africa. Yet, the ideological and territorial expansion of Abyssinia from the Northern part of today's Ethiopia to the larger Horn of Africa created massive chaos and accumulated grievances. Two of these which are yet to be reckoned with are the "questions" of the Oromo and Muslim Ethiopians. To be fair, relatively similar, despite being rare, actions were taken by "non-northern" societies as well.

While this appears to be the overall condition for centuries, European's intrusion often served to cause, and sometimes worsened, problems in the Horn. The colonial interests of Italy, France, and Britain facilitated the subsequent disintegration of the relatively similar group of people living in the region. Today's Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti, and Somali share many things in common, inter alia, racial and cultural features and conditions. These societies have long been living together through interethnic marriages; speaking languages, principally belonging to the Semitic and Cushitic groups; and relatively distinguishable body features from the rest of Africa. Due primarily to foreign intrusion, however, this was radically altered when the above three came to have a country of their own. The other unresolved legacies of European and other countries' interferences included territorial disputes and intra-and-inter ethnic conflicts. This applies especially to Ethiopia vis-à-vis Eritrea, and Ethiopia vis-à-vis Somalia. Yet, these conditions did not necessarily restrain the multifaceted role of Ethiopia in the region. Ethiopia, which is essentially the downsized representative country of the whole Horn of Africa, for it is composed of linguistic and ethnic groups which are now countries on their own, remains as the most powerful actor. This was reinforced by the Ethiopian EPRDF regime's close diplomatic, political, and strategic ties to Israel and the USA.

For years, the Ethiopian government has been the closest ally of the USA in its fight against "terrorism" in Africa, especially in the Horn. This was also accompanied by USA's huge foreign aids to Ethiopia. The alliance of the Ethiopian government with these countries obviously made it involve in the creation of South Sudan and recurring military interventions in Somalia. As of now, although the existing EPRDF regime in Ethiopia still plays an important role in the region, its capacity for leadership and overseeing the region is markedly diminishing. Among other things, the government is internally experiencing a massive economic crisis coupled with unsettling protests all over Ethiopia, on the one hand, and the disengagement-decision of the US government in the region due to the ineffectiveness of its counterterrorism efforts, on the other. This does not necessarily mean that the Ethiopian government will eventually lose its dominance in the Horn. To the contrary, as more than 85% of Nile River originates in Ethiopia, engaging and supporting statesmen and politicians assuming power in Ethiopia will probably remain as one of the most perennial interests of Israel and the USA for years to come. Simply stated, control over the Nile means a lot in Africa and beyond-including the Middle East. Both the USA and Israel

know this very well, especially in their respective unpredictable relations with Egypt. Given this, foreign countries will likely to continue supporting any government assuming power in Ethiopia, and the usual foreign clients, obviously, will remain Israel and the USA.

As of recently, it could be easily observed that the involvement of Israel and the USA in the Horn has relatively been much less direct than ever before. Among other things, "Terrorism" driven state-to-state relation may have faced crisis, partly because it has miserably failed to yield any fruits for all the parties involved. Again, the relation between these countries and the Horn of Africa has always been diplomatic and aid-centered. This, of course, does not include the various military bases established by USA, France, and China, for instance, in Djibouti alone. However, without necessarily understating the enduring presence of the USA and closely related actors in the region, it could be seen that other new and competing global actors are also joining the party. Of these forces are Turkey and the GCC countries. The GCC countries under the leadership of Saudi Arabia are in the processing of or already have established military bases in Eritrea, Djibouti, and Somaliland. Qatar is also an important actor, but relatively different from the GCC in its approach to engaging the Horn.

However, unlike many of these countries, Turkey's approach to the Horn remains exceptional on many grounds. Contrary to the egocentric national interest-driven pursuits of USA, Israel and the GCC countries, Turkey appears to engage the Horn in its entirety. Unlike many of these, Turkey seems to clearly understand that genuine development entails give-and-take in the different facets of life. While the USA and GCC countries like Saudi Arabia provide aid, directly or through various NGOs, to the countries in the Horn, their engagement misses the very purpose of interstate relations, strong cultural and economic foundations facilitating lasting diplomatic and political relations. In other words, while Turkey invests most in the economy of the region, others like Saudi Arabia has been busy in spreading its state-sponsored religious ideology in the region through establishing mosques and related centers. Interestingly, Saudi is one of the least investors, in terms of economic activities, in the Horn. Appearing worried about the spread of this Saudi-based ideology in Somalia and Ethiopia, the USA government has been financing counterterrorism efforts the results of which have been constantly counterproductive. On top of this is Turkey's ongoing reconstruction of Somalia, which is another relevant instance of genuine engagement. Similarly, Turkey's humanitarian activities in the region are also becoming very indispensable. It was built on these and other historical legacies in the region that subsequently paved the way for Turkey's decision to establish the largest military camp in Somalia. This will, undoubtedly, accord massive power and influence, in economic, political, and cultural terms, to Turkey in the region and beyond. Strengthening this, no doubt would be in the best interest of the great majority of the Horn's population as well.

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