

# Eritrea: Coming In from the Cold

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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The Horn of Africa, long recognized as one of the world's most unstable regions, is undergoing a round of seismic shifts. Massive and sustained anti-government demonstrations in Ethiopia have laid bare the fundamental brutality and instability of the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front, which is Washington's major security partner in the region. Tiny Somaliland and Djibouti are on high alert, bracing for a tide of Ethiopian refugees that—particularly in the midst of drought—could easily overwhelm those territories. South Sudan, the youngest nation on earth, has become a killing field. And the Western-funded peacekeeping coalition in Somalia, which has been fighting the al-Qaeda linked terror group al-Shabaab since 2007, is critically fatigued and losing ground. These multiple nodes of instability pose a significant and immediate threat to US interests in the region.

Eritrea has long been stigmatized as a “spoiler” by Washington and stands accused of supporting terrorism. In 2009, at Washington's urging, Eritrea was sanctioned by the United Nations for supporting al-Shabaab and for refusing to settle a border dispute with Djibouti. However, years of scrutiny by the United Nations Somalia and Eritrea Monitoring Group (UNSEMG) have yielded no evidence that Eritrea continues to be involved in Somalia, and the Djibouti conflict is mediated by Qatar.<sup>2</sup>

A number of surprising developments have recently occurred in Eritrea, suggesting that the country is determined to throw off isolation for positive engagement in its foreign policy since the sanctions were applied. An engaged Eritrea would be very good news for the region

1 This issue brief draws on congressional testimony given by the author to the US House of Representatives Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations hearing, “Eritrea: A Neglected Regional Threat,” September 14, 2016, <https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/hearing/subcommittee-hearing-eritrea-neglected-regional-threat/>.

2 In March 2016, and after negotiations mediated by Qatar, Eritrea released four Djiboutian prisoners of war, who had been imprisoned since their capture in June 2008. Both countries were optimistic that the act would be part of a broader warming of relations between Eritrea and Djibouti. See Salem Solomon, “Eritrea Releases Four Djiboutian Soldiers After Eight Years Imprisonment,” *VOA News*, March, 20, 2016, <http://www.voanews.com/a/eritrea-releases-4-djiboutian-soldiers-after-eight-years-imprisonment/3246435.html>. While UNSEMG has had little access to Eritrea, it has monitored Eritrean activities in Somalia and Djibouti and found no evidence of Eritrea's continued meddling in Somalia. See footnote 21 for further information.





Former US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld shakes hands with Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki during his visit to the country in 2002. Photo credit: US Department of Defense/Wikimedia.

at a time when Washington's status quo approaches to Ethiopia, Somalia, and South Sudan are visibly failing.

If the United States can encourage Eritrea on a trajectory of re-engagement, it should. But to do that, Washington must drop outdated notions about the threat that Eritrea poses. At a time when the Kenyan army has annexed parts of southern Somalia and is trafficking with al-Shabaab,<sup>3</sup> when the Ugandan army is taking sides in South Sudan,<sup>4</sup> and Ethiopian forces have killed hundreds and detained tens of thousands of protestors calling for government reform,<sup>5</sup> Eritrea truly

ranks among the least of the United States' security concerns.

A disordered Ethiopia will make Eritrea more important to US security interests. By virtue of its geographic position between Ethiopia and Yemen, Eritrea is bound to serve either as a bridge or a barrier to the passage of terrorists between the Persian Gulf and the Horn of Africa. Thus far, Eritrea has repelled jihadists and proven immune to radical ideologies. This is a role for which it has received little credit. But Washington cannot afford to take Eritrea's implicit cooperation in its counterterror efforts for granted.

If Eritrea is overwhelmed with refugees, or otherwise sucked into the Red Sea region's growing unrest, the United States could find itself facing instability and perhaps a terror threat on both sides of the Mandeb Strait, which is a critical chokepoint for the \$700 billion dollars of trade passing annually between the European Union (EU) and Asia. Threats to this trade route have in recent years led the United States to pour millions of

3 Aislinn Laing and Ilya Gridneff, "Kenyan Army Profiting from Illicit Trade that Props Up al-Shabaab," *Telegraph*, November 12, 2015, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindian-ocean/kenya/11991497/Kenyan-army-profiting-from-illicit-trade-that-props-up-al-Shabaab.html>.

4 Patrick McGroarty, "South Sudan's Kiir Says Uganda Helping to Fight Rebels," *Wall Street Journal*, January 16, 2014, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702303465004579324240269459308>.

5 Human Rights Watch, "Ethiopia: State of Emergency Risks New Abuses," October 31, 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/10/31/ethiopia-state-emergency-risks-new-abuses>.

dollars into combating Somali piracy—an indication of the Strait’s importance to US interests.<sup>6</sup>

For these reasons, the United States ought to be concerned about its inability to project influence in Eritrea. This paper aims to assist the incoming US administration in securing US interests by offering a blueprint for improving relations with Asmara.

## US Relations with Eritrea

### Historical overview

In 1991, after thirty years of trench and mountain warfare, Eritrean rebels overthrew the Communist Derg regime and won independence from Ethiopia. The tenacity and bravery of the Eritrean rebels captured the hearts and imaginations of people across the globe. The period between 1991 and 1998 were watershed years for the country: a referendum establishing Eritrea’s independence was held, a democratic constitution was written (though never enacted), and Eritrea’s economy prospered.

However, separation from Ethiopia proved impossible. By 1996, a collection of small, unavoidable disputes between the two countries (over such matters as the regulation of cross-border trade, the creation of an Eritrean currency, and the demarcation of the border) had piled up, adding tension to a more substantive disagreement between Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki and Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi over Ethiopia’s decision to pursue a model of ethnic “federalism.”<sup>7</sup> In 1998, only seven years after the end of Eritrea’s thirty-year battle for independence, these many differences escalated into a full-scale war between the countries that lasted for two years and killed some 90,000 people.

The Ethiopian-Eritrean border war ended when both sides agreed to sign the Algiers Agreement, which established a cease-fire and an independent border commission in The Hague (called the Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission, or EEBC). The United States, the EU, the Organization of African Unity (now the African Union), and the United Nations signed the Algiers Agreement as witnesses. As it was desperately

attempting to broker a peace, the United States allegedly made closed-door promises to both sides that it would serve as guarantor to the EEBC’s ruling.<sup>8</sup> However, when the EEBC eventually awarded most of the disputed border territory to Eritrea—including the flashpoint town of Badme—Ethiopia reneged on the agreement, and the witnesses to the treaty did nothing. Indeed, for the past fifteen years, Ethiopian troops have been permitted, by a silent international consensus, to flout the treaty and occupy Eritrean territory. In consequence, the border between the two countries is heavily militarized and skirmishes occasionally claim lives. And Eritrea has been trapped in a painful stasis known as “no peace, no war.”

Ethiopia’s refusal to comply with the firm and final ruling of the Boundary Commission is a major source of instability in East Africa. In efforts to destabilize each other’s territory, both Ethiopia and Eritrea have supported armed rebel groups, which inflame conflicts across the region. Eritrea has exhibited especially poor judgment in its choice of proxies. As noted earlier, one of the groups that it supported early on was the al-Shabaab militia group in Somalia. Eritrean support of al-Shabaab appears to have been short-lived and relatively insubstantial.<sup>9</sup> There has been no evidence of Eritrean support for al-Shabaab since 2011. Eritrea has, nonetheless, remained under sanction by the United Nations (UN) Security Council since 2009.

Ethiopia’s invasion of Somalia in late 2006, and the Ethiopian army’s subsequent occupation of Mogadishu, by contrast, has done immeasurable harm to US security interests.<sup>10</sup> Ethiopia’s invasion destroyed an innocuous and potentially constructive Somali grassroots governance movement called the Union of Islamic Courts. At the time, Ethiopia falsely alleged that the Union of Islamic Courts was a proxy of al-Qaeda and persuaded Washington to back this interpretation. When Ethiopia invaded Somalia and destroyed this moderate Union of Islamic Courts, it cleared the field for the rise of al-Shabaab. Al-Shabaab—which before the invasion was unpopular in Somalia—was able to rise to power on a wave of public fury against the atrocities

6 Through its involvement in the multinational Combined Task Force 151, in coordination with NATO, the European Union, and unilateral counter-piracy efforts, the United States has been a key player in reducing the number of piracy incidents off the coast of Somalia.

7 Federalism is a controversial system of government in both Ethiopia and Somalia; it is effectively a system of ethnic segregation.

8 Author interviews with Eritrean and former US officials.

9 Aaron Maasho, “Exclusive: Eritrea Reduces Support for al-Shabaab - UN Report,” Reuters, July 16, 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-eritrea-somalia-un-idUSBRE86F0AK20120716>.

10 Bronwyn Bruton, “Somalia: A New Approach,” Council on Foreign Relations Special Report, No. 52, March 2010, [http://www.cfr.org/content/publications/attachments/Somalia\\_CSR52.pdf](http://www.cfr.org/content/publications/attachments/Somalia_CSR52.pdf).

that the Ethiopian army was committing in Mogadishu.<sup>11</sup> It was the rage of the Somali people against Ethiopian and US meddling in their country that permitted al-Shabaab to become a national resistance movement; to seize most of southern Somalia's territory; and to provide the long-feared sanctuary to al-Qaeda.<sup>12</sup> Worse still, outrage over the rapes and atrocities perpetrated by Ethiopian troops in Somalia sparked the transit of dozens of Somali-Americans from Minnesota to join al-Shabaab's war against the Ethiopian army in Mogadishu, creating, for the first time, a problem of homegrown radicalization in the United States.<sup>13</sup>

### Recent Developments in Eritrea

Despite the profound insecurity that Eritrea faces, the government is attempting to emerge from the economic and political stasis of the post-border war period. In the past two years, Asmara has made serious efforts to improve its relations with European countries. It has formed new alliances with Arab and African partners, has sought to reenter the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), and has ramped up its participation in the African Union. There are also positive indicators for those seeking access to Eritrea: approximately fifty foreign journalists have been permitted to enter and report on the country;<sup>14</sup> the UN Office of the High Commission for Human Rights was recently permitted to tour a prison, and several foreign NGOs have been permitted to reenter Eritrea and to open programs in the country. One of these groups, Finn Church Aid, recently visited Sawa, a school and military training camp that has been off-limits to Westerners for about a decade and is thought to be the epicenter of human rights abuses in the country.

Eritrea has also recently released all of the living Djiboutian prisoners of war, a major development that bodes well for regional stability. The judicial code has been revised, though the changes are not yet implemented.<sup>15</sup> It appears that the government is raising the salaries of National Service (NS) conscripts, which it says is the first step toward normalizing the program and converting the NS posts into civil service and private sector jobs. Implementation has been slow on many of these fronts but not unexpectedly, given Eritrea's financial and capacity problems.

Washington has determinedly overlooked these positive developments and continues to focus on human rights and exaggerated or outdated notions of Eritrean misbehavior in the region. Simultaneously, Washington has downplayed human rights violations and regional meddling by Ethiopia, presumably because of the key role that Ethiopia plays in US counterterrorism efforts in East Africa.

The asymmetry of the United States' treatment of these two countries has created the perception among Eritrean officials that Washington is "hostile" to Eritrea and directly responsible for most aspects of the country's suffering over the past eighteen years. As Eritrea's senior presidential advisor recently commented: "The problem with Eritrea is not Ethiopia: It is the United States."<sup>16</sup>

### The Risk to US Interests

Over the years, US rhetoric has helped to establish a fictional dichotomy between the "good" Ethiopia and the "spoiler" Eritrea. While this may seem expedient to US counterterror efforts in the short term, it actually creates a host of medium-term risks for Washington. The dichotomy is not supported by facts on the ground, and thus has a detrimental effect on US credibility<sup>17</sup> and counter-radicalization efforts, particularly in Ethiopia, where the government has imprisoned thousands of journalists, politicians, and bloggers under the guise of counterterrorism. Washington has consistently praised Ethiopian governance despite strong evidence of government repression. (Irreversible harm was done to Washington's credibility, for example, when President Obama visited Addis Ababa and referred to

11 "So Much to Fear: War Crimes and the Devastation of Somalia," Human Rights Watch, December 8, 2008, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2008/12/08/so-much-fear/war-crimes-and-devastation-somalia>.

12 Bronwyn Bruton and Paul Williams, *Counterinsurgency in Somalia: Lessons Learned from the African Union Mission in Somalia, 2007-2013*, report no. 14-5, Joint Special Operations University, ix-110.

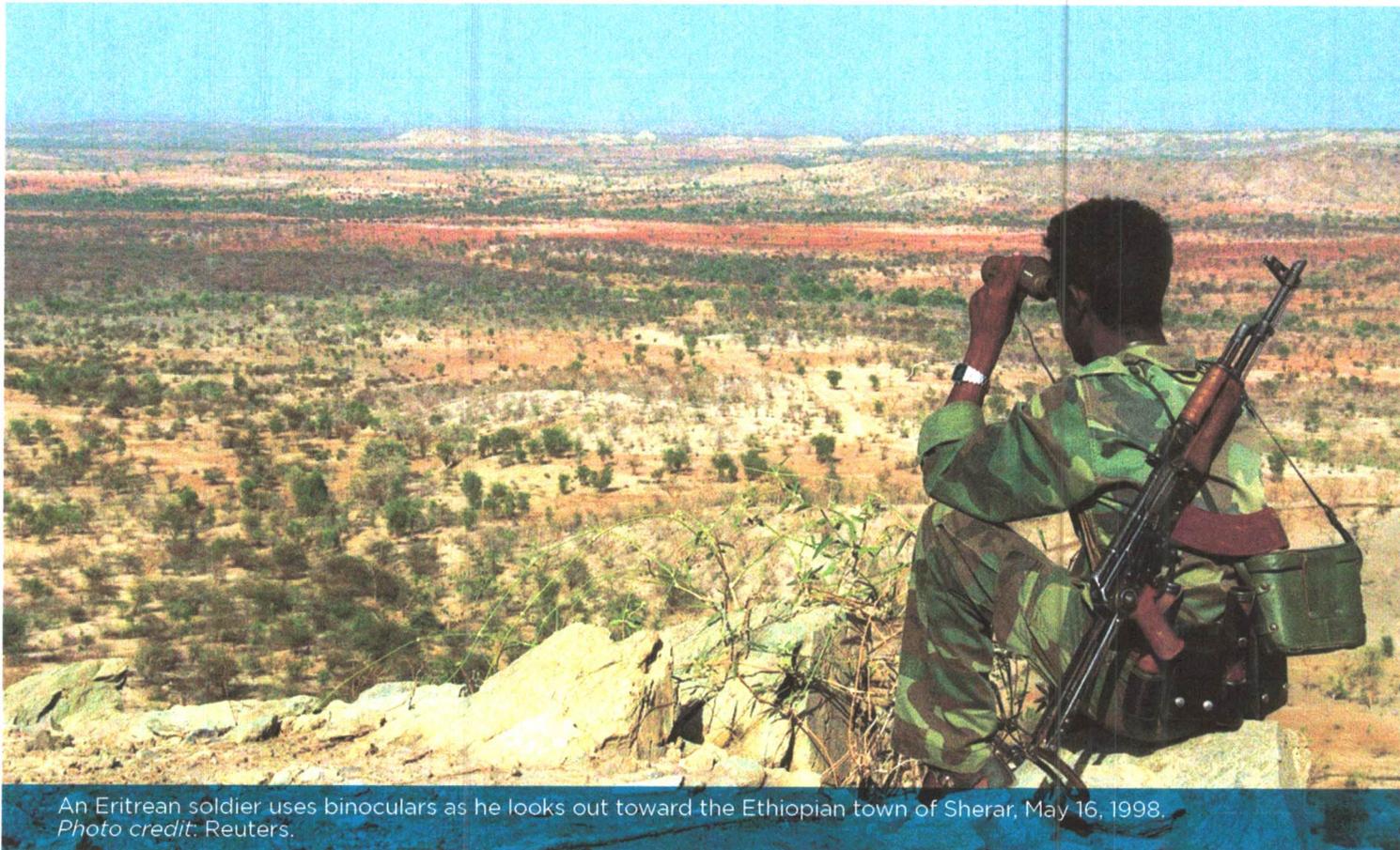
13 The United States estimates that up to forty Somali-Americans have succeeded in joining al-Shabaab. These individuals were radicalized in the United States and traveled to Somalia to join al-Shabaab, some dying there—and others returning to the United States to face prosecution for aiding a terrorist group. More recently, the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham has proven adept at radicalizing Somali-Americans and convincing them to travel abroad to Syria. See Joshua Meservey, "Exposed: ISIS' Somali-American Terrorist Pipeline," *National Interest*, March 3, 2015, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/exposed-isis%E2%80%99-somali-american-terrorist-pipeline-12352>.

14 Author interview in Asmara and with US, European, and African press.

15 This is perhaps not surprising, given the limited capacity and funding available.

16 Deutschlandfunk, "INTERVIEW: Mr. Yemane Gebreab with German Reporter," *RAIMOQCOM*, July 15, 2016, <http://www.raimoq.com/interview-mr-yemane-gebreab-with-german-reporter-oliver/>.

17 Meeting with Ethiopian opposition leaders, August 2016.



An Eritrean soldier uses binoculars as he looks out toward the Ethiopian town of Sherar, May 16, 1998.  
*Photo credit: Reuters.*

the Ethiopian government as “democratically elected,” directly after the ruling party won 100 percent of the parliamentary seats in an election.<sup>18</sup>) US political and financial support of the Ethiopian government is also widely viewed as instrumental to the regime’s continuing stranglehold on power—a perception that may assist al-Shabaab or other jihadist actors to foment a homegrown terror movement in Ethiopia amidst the general dissatisfaction and insecurity there. Al-Shabaab has flourished in Kenya, where police and military brutality, class grievances, and the estrangement of the Muslim community have proved fertile ground for jihadist recruitment efforts. Conditions in Ethiopia are not dissimilar.

If Ethiopia’s instability worsens, the United States may, within the next few years, be faced with a situation of

multiple state failures in the Horn: a swath of instability that stretches from Somalia, through Ethiopia, across the water to Yemen, through Sudan, and onward to the Sahel. And, in this worst-case scenario, Eritrea, Djibouti, and Somaliland will be the vital buffers between that instability and the billions of dollars of trade passing every day through the Mandeb Strait.

Furthermore, if the West does not re-engage with Eritrea, other countries will step in to fill the diplomatic void. Eritrea has already begun to form new military alliances with Gulf states and new economic partnerships with China. Prolonging the status quo does not mean that Eritrea will remain isolated, but it does mean that the United States will continue to be unable to project influence in an increasingly important region of the world. For these reasons, the United States cannot afford to continue its policy of isolating Eritrea.

Fortunately, it is not too late to repair the relationship. Despite his many concerns about US policy and the lingering bad blood between the nations, President

<sup>18</sup> Peter Baker and Jacey Fortin, “Obama, in Ethiopia, Calls Its Government ‘Democratically-Elected,’” *New York Times*, July 27, 2015, [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/28/world/africa/obama-calls-ethiopian-government-democratically-elected.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/28/world/africa/obama-calls-ethiopian-government-democratically-elected.html?_r=0).

Isaias has stated that the relationship between the United States and Eritrea is fundamentally sound,<sup>19</sup> and that he is convinced the two countries should—and will—be friends. However, concrete steps will need to be taken by the incoming US administration to move the relationship onto a more constructive footing.

### Diplomatic Disputes

Friendship between the United States and Eritrea is in the interest of both countries. But the impediments to a normalization of diplomatic relations are numerous and complex. On the US side, they include the ongoing imprisonment of four former employees of the US embassy; the restriction of US embassy personnel to a perimeter of twenty kilometers around Asmara; the opening of diplomatic pouches and the recalling of Eritrea's ambassador from the embassy in Washington; the expulsion of the US Agency for International Development (USAID); human rights abuses and the closure of participatory democratic space (including the failure to enact the constitution or convene the parliament); Eritrea's holding of Djiboutian prisoners of war (though Eritrea claims to have released all of its Djiboutian prisoners and has withdrawn from Djiboutian territory in compliance with an international ruling and the mediation process being led by Qatar); Eritrea's refusal to permit the UN Somalia and Eritrea Monitoring Group unfettered access to the country; and Eritrea's continued funding of armed groups to perpetuate its proxy conflict with Ethiopia. There is also a clear and pervasive irritation among American officials over the fact that Eritrea, despite the firm and final ruling of the EEBC in its favor, has not simply accepted the current situation, given up on Badme, and moved on.<sup>20</sup>

Eritrea also holds a substantial list of grievances against the United States. These include: Washington's refusal to grant Eritrean independence following the second World War, which directly necessitated the thirty-year war that killed an uncounted number of Eritreans; Washington's failure to enforce the Algiers Agreement and its apparent prioritization of Ethiopia's interests over those of Eritrea; the Washington-led effort to sanction

Eritrea for its actions in Somalia and around the region; Washington's continued refusal to lift those sanctions, despite the UN Somalia and Eritrea Monitoring Group's failure to find any evidence of Eritrean meddling in Somalia over the past four years;<sup>21</sup> Washington's travel ban and sanctions on various Eritrean officials; and finally, what is perceived as a Washington-led effort to use UN human rights instruments as a mechanism for bringing Eritrea to the International Criminal Court. (This last grievance persists, despite the fact that the United States does not appear to support the forwarding of the Commission of Inquiry's report to the UN Security Council.) Eritrea resents the United States' refusal to hold Ethiopia accountable for its continued military aggressions, including the assaults on the border and the bombings of Eritrean territory.

Eritrea is also stung by Washington's willingness to turn a blind eye to Ethiopian abuses. Despite the Ethiopian regime's role in the rise of al-Shabaab, Washington has repeatedly praised it for supporting US counterterrorism efforts.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, the Ethiopian regime's abysmal record on human rights and democracy notwithstanding, Washington has, since 2006, provided it with billions of dollars in economic, budgetary, and humanitarian assistance.<sup>23</sup> Despite the Ethiopian army's long and alarming record of regional and domestic human rights abuses, the United States also provides extensive financial and military support (via the African Union) to Ethiopian troops deployed in Somalia.

### Recommendations

These multiple grievances cannot be rectified overnight. However, a couple of key actions could quickly put US relations with Eritrea on a positive trajectory.

#### 1) Lift the UN sanctions on Eritrea

President Isaias was explicitly clear during our meeting in February 2015 that he considers the lifting of the UN Security Council sanctions on Eritrea to be a precondition of any serious effort to improve relations

19 Author interviews in Asmara, February 2015.

20 Author interviews with State Department officials. In his memoirs, former US Ambassador to the United Nations John Bolton describes the efforts of Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Jendayi Frazer to overturn the border ruling in Ethiopia's favor. See Michela Wrong, "America's Latest African Blunder," *Slate*, November 29, 2007, [http://www.slate.com/articles/news\\_and\\_politics/foreigners/2007/11/americas\\_latest\\_african\\_blunder.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/foreigners/2007/11/americas_latest_african_blunder.html).

21 The UNSEMG has been denied access to Eritrea since 2009. Instead, it conducts research from neighboring Ethiopia, Djibouti, and Somalia, the latter of which is the alleged location of Eritrean meddling.

22 Mehari Tadele Maru, "The Secret to Ethiopia's Counter Terrorism Success," *Al Jazeera*, July 31, 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2015/07/secret-ethiopia-counterterrorism-success-150728112317438.html>.

23 "Ethiopia," *Security Assistance Monitor*, last accessed on November 22, 2016, <http://securityassistance.org/africa/ethiopia>.



An Eritrean refugee in Ethiopia gathers water. *Photo credit: European Commission/Flickr.*

between the two countries. These sanctions should have been lifted years ago—as noted, the UN Somalia and Eritrea Monitoring Group has found no substantial violations by Eritrea of international law. Washington should consider, too, that the arbitrary continuation of sanctions on Eritrea, in the absence of any visible wrongdoing by Asmara, will diminish the credibility of sanction regimes in general, and at a time when the impartiality of international justice mechanisms (the International Criminal Court in particular) is widely questioned in Africa.

Lifting the sanctions will, of course, require cooperation from Asmara. But numerous discussions in Asmara have suggested that a visit from the SEMG to Eritrea is not beyond the realm of possibility—provided that Washington makes clear that it is open to the possibility of lifting the sanctions. Washington's threat to veto the removal of sanctions on Eritrea effectively precludes any attempt by other UN member states to do so.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Author's interviews with representatives of UN member states and UN diplomats and staff.

Moreover, sanctions do not work. In this multipolar global environment, it is not possible for the United States to isolate Eritrea. Sanctions, verbal condemnations of the government, the United Nation's Commission of Inquiry on Eritrea, and other such devices have simply compelled the government to give up on the United States and to pivot toward China and the Gulf for support. Indeed, the success of that pivot is the primary political development of the past eighteen months in Eritrea. Asmara has formed strong strategic alliances with the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia, providing a base for their counterterrorism efforts in the Red Sea basin.<sup>25</sup> It has also scaled up its relations with Egypt, deepened ties to South Africa, and secured a series of new Chinese mining investments.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>25</sup> United Nations Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea, "Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 2182 (2014): Eritrea," October 19, 2015, [http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s\\_2015\\_802.pdf](http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_2015_802.pdf), p. 3.

<sup>26</sup> Edmund Blair, "Eritrea Looks to Build Mining Sector to Kick-Start Economy," Reuters, February 26, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-eritrea-mining-idUSKCN0VZ13S>.

## 2) Reject Ethiopian irredentist claims on Eritrea

The threat to Eritrea from Ethiopia is genuine; the Eritrean government does not simply use it as an excuse to crack down on dissent. The failure of the international community to appreciate the extent to which Ethiopia's actions have destabilized Eritrea is a serious flaw in our analysis of the Horn. The military threat from Ethiopia is real and pressing. Indeed, Ethiopian aggression toward Eritrea has been steadily escalating over the past eighteen months, and the increased threat of an Ethiopian annexation of Eritrean territory is a major threat to regional stability.

In March 2015, Ethiopia bombed Eritrea twice, striking a military depot in Asmara and killing eight people, and striking the perimeter fence of the Bisha mine (causing no casualties and little damage). Ethiopia's bombing of the Bisha site, a civilian target and a foreign-owned investment, is a clear violation of the Geneva Convention. However, neither Washington nor the UN Security Council so much as commented on the attack. Meanwhile, Ethiopia's prime minister, Hailemariam Desalegn, has repeatedly announced—both on the floor of the parliament and in Ethiopia's government-controlled press—that Ethiopia intends to attack Eritrea.<sup>27</sup> In June 2016, Ethiopia did exactly as it had announced, initiating a major conflict on the Eritrean border (at the area known as the “Tsorona front”)<sup>28</sup> that killed hundreds of soldiers and displaced an unknown number of civilians. Despite Ethiopia's admission that it initiated the assault, Washington merely called for “both parties” to exercise restraint.<sup>29</sup>

Since 1998, Eritreans have lived with the threat of a hostile army within its borders. The presence of Ethiopian troops on Eritrean soil has created conditions of constant insecurity and a limbo in which economic and political development have proved all but impossible. The continued closure of the Ethiopia-Eritrea border has done serious damage to Eritrea's economy: prior to the border war, the vast majority of Eritrea's trade was with Ethiopia. Since the war, that portion of Eritrea's

gross domestic product has entirely disappeared. And the resulting effort to maintain Eritrea's defenses has continuously consumed an inordinate amount of its budget, which in turn diminishes Eritrea's ability to develop its schools, hospitals, and industries.<sup>30</sup> The need to maintain a large standing army remains partially responsible for the extension of Eritrea's program of mandatory military conscription far beyond its intended duration of eighteen months. This practice of mandatory, indefinite military conscription in Eritrea (known as the “National Service”) is the primary objection from international human rights activists.

Asmara does not expect Washington to send troops to its border to enforce the Algiers Agreement. But it would be tremendously helpful for Washington to signal its continuing commitment to the “firm and final” nature of the EEBC ruling on the border and to clearly condemn Ethiopian aggressions when they occur. A Congressional resolution or a simple statement from the State Department could help to accomplish that.

## 3) De-personalize US policy toward Eritrea

US policy has been derailed by disapproval of President Isaias and his proxies. US officials, from the very top down, have been scalded by their interactions with the Eritrean regime. (For example, even the current US assistant secretary of State for African Affairs, Linda Thomas-Greenfield, was rebuffed when she sought to extend an olive branch to Asmara at the beginning of her tenure—and many other diplomats have fared worse.) These experiences have created widespread antipathy toward President Isaias and his representatives. In interviews, US officials regularly describe the regime as “recalcitrant,” “irredeemable,” and “impossible” and insist that no engagement with Eritrea is possible as long as President Isaias remains in office. Of course, 3.5 million Eritreans<sup>31</sup> would benefit from a different point of view—but policymakers and analysts continue to insist that in Eritrea, *l'État, c'est lui*.

Change in Eritrea is clearly possible, as evidenced by its small but significant warming with Europe, Arab partners, and the increased access it has granted to international journalists and NGOs.

27 “Ethiopia Threatens Action against Eritrea,” *Sudan Tribune*, July 8, 2016, <http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article55622>.

28 Bronwyn Bruton, “A Frightening Flare-up on the Ethiopia/Eritrea Border, and Another Resounding Silence from Washington,” *AfricaSource*, June 14, 2016, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/africasource/a-frightening-flare-up-on-the-ethiopia-eritrea-border-and-another-resounding-silence-from-washington>.

29 US Department of State, “The United States Calls for Restraint on the Ethiopia-Eritrea Border,” June 14, 2016, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2016/06/258489.htm>.

30 For more on Eritrea's economy, see Seth Kaplan, *Eritrea's Economy: Ideology and Opportunity*, Atlantic Council, December 2016, <http://www.publications.atlanticcouncil.org/eritrea-economy/>.

31 Estimates of the size of the Eritrean population vary widely, but Eritrean government officials regularly cited a population size of 3.5 million during the author's interviews in Asmara.

Given the government's limited finances and bureaucratic capacity, progress has indeed been frustratingly slow. Nevertheless, there are positive steps. Eritrea is undertaking these measures of its own accord—not as a result of foreign pressure, nor in pursuit of foreign funding, which it has often refused. Because the changes are voluntary, they have a better chance of being sustainable.

Eritrea is an authoritarian state, and President Isaias inarguably exerts disproportionate control over national and civic affairs. However, there are factions and differences of opinion within the Eritrean regime—as there are in every government. As in Ethiopia, most of these differences of opinion are carefully contained. But the Eritrean government is not monolithic and is certainly not uniformly evil, incompetent, or intransigent.

Most important, villainizing the regime does not reflect the political realities on the ground. There is no organized opposition inside Eritrea to President Isaias or his government, and little, if any appetite for revolt. There is certainly unhappiness and unspoken dissent inside Eritrea; increasingly, that dissent is voiced aloud. Yet, Eritreans are very much aware that there is no viable alternative to the present government and that lack of alternatives has produced a tangible sense of resignation. As in Ethiopia, the lack of political alternatives is caused by the government's imprisonment and exile of the best and brightest of the political opposition. However, it remains a fact that the Eritrean opposition is not perceived as more credible than the government, and in the case of any government collapse, a protracted and violent power struggle would likely occur.

#### 4) Let Europe lead

Eritrea has made great progress in improving its relations with individual European nations and with the EU. Because of migration, the EU has a vested interest in Eritrea's development. That makes Europe an inherently better partner for Eritrea, and Washington would be wise to let Brussels and other European capitals lead the way on development assistance. It would also be prudent for Washington to resist any action that may spoil EU efforts to normalize relations with Eritrea as part of a broader strategy to ease immigration concerns.

The US should be especially supportive of European efforts to support development in Eritrea, since direct

development support from the United States to Eritrea would be difficult to achieve and politically problematic. In the first place, delivering US support to Eritrea would likely need to be preceded by negotiations to reestablish an office in the country for the US Agency for International Development. USAID's preference for high-visibility projects is likely to clash with the Eritrean government's insistence on self-reliance. (For example, Eritrean officials have frequently expressed horror at the idea of allowing a fleet of the shiny white sports-utility vehicles [SUVs] associated with foreign aid workers into the country. The SUV is a symbol that is regarded with derision across Africa, even more so in Eritrea, where they are politically toxic.) Moreover, negotiations over the form of development assistance would be likely to drag out for years. Even when Eritrea has relatively good relations with a donor—as it does with the EU, for example—the negotiation of aid packages has been a lengthy and fraught affair. In the case of the United States, discussions of aid would likely aggravate diplomatic tensions, not assuage them. However, the United States could and should make smaller gestures—such as lifting travel restrictions on Eritrean officials in the United States—that would encourage reciprocal actions from Asmara.

#### 5) Insist on improvements in the human rights situation in Eritrea—but do not single out Eritrea for criticism

It is inappropriate and counter to US interests to single out Eritrea for criticism on human rights concerns. The situation there is not demonstrably worse than it is in the other nations of the Horn.

Though extensive human rights violations occur in Eritrea, the country is extremely stable and appears to have very low rates of crime or chronic hunger. The populations of Somalia, Sudan, and South Sudan experience far higher levels of violence. In terms of repression, Eritrea is on par with two privileged US allies, Ethiopia and Djibouti.<sup>32</sup> A recent UN Human

32 In Freedom House's annual "Freedom in the World" survey, for example, Ethiopia rates as "Not Free" (ranking a seven, the worst possible score, on political rights and a six on civil liberties). Djibouti also ranks "Not Free," with a six on political rights and a six on civil liberties. Eritrea, by comparison, is "Not Free" with a seven on both political rights and civil liberties. See Freedom House, "Freedom in the World 2016," <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2016>; in its "Freedom on the Net" index, Freedom House ranks Ethiopia as behind only China, Syria, and Iran for its restrictions on access to information and the internet (Eritrea and Djibouti were not rated). Lily Kuo, "Only China, Syria, and Iran Rank Worse in Internet Freedom Than Ethi-

Rights Council Commission of Inquiry on Eritrea entirely failed to make the case that Eritrean human rights abuses were either systemic or the result of deliberate government policy, and the report's allegations have not been pursued by the Human Rights Council.<sup>33</sup>

This is not to minimize the human rights abuses that do take place in the country, but the narrative of Eritrea as singularly evil, as in the moniker, the “North Korea of Africa,” is not only too simplistic but could also mislead Washington into policy errors.

Eritreans are passionately nationalistic. Despite the virulent tribal and ethnic conflicts plaguing the rest of the region, the Eritrean government appears to have been exceptionally successful in its own nation-building project. Eritreans seem largely unified across tribal and religious categories. Eritreans across the world, whether or not they support the government, demonstrate a strong sense of national identity and display pride in their country.

Given this dynamic, the United States should consider the possibility that international criticism of Eritrea—reflected in the shrill condemnations of the Isaias regime, the imposition and continuation of sanctions, the failure to enforce the Algiers Agreement, and continued silence regarding the presence of Ethiopian troops on Eritrean soil—may have counterproductive effects on the ground. Many Eritreans take the insults directed at their government personally, and many are prone to blame Washington rather than Asmara for the current state of affairs in their country. Sanctions and other punitive devices may actually lend credence to government narratives that Eritrea is being persecuted by the international community. Such perceptions can

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opia,” *Quartz Africa*, November 16, 2016, <http://qz.com/838908/internet-freedom-in-ethiopia-is-the-fourth-worst-in-the-world-after-iran-syria-and-china/>; Freedom House, “Freedom on the Net 2016,” 2016, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/freedom-net-2016>.

33 Bronwyn Bruton, “It’s Bad in Eritrea, but Not That Bad,” *New York Times*, June 23, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/24/opinion/its-bad-in-eritrea-but-not-that-bad.html>.

easily lead to increased support for the government, both inside Eritrea and in the diaspora.

Washington must learn to be more even-handed in its response to human rights abuses in the Horn. That is certainly not to say that Washington should stop pressing for human rights reforms in Eritrea—US outrage simply needs to be spread more proportionately around the Horn (louder criticism of Ethiopia’s human rights abuses would also help). And Washington needs to do this regardless of whether it wishes to improve relations with Eritrea, in order to combat the common African perception that the United States dismisses human rights and democracy concerns whenever more important counterterrorism objectives are in play.

## Conclusion

Washington has a strategic interest in repairing relations with Asmara, and the upcoming change in administration offers a convenient opportunity for a reset in relations. Nevertheless, Eritrea has already pivoted successfully toward new alliances in the Gulf and a new economic partnership with China, and its leaders are reluctant to invest scarce diplomatic resources in a hopeless cause. In order to improve relations, a strong signal needs to be sent from Washington to Asmara.

President Isaias and his advisers will not swivel back toward Washington unless they have good reason to do so. However, numerous conversations and meetings in Asmara lead to the conviction that President Isaias would very much like to put his relations with Washington on a more constructive footing. Given the high stakes in the Horn of Africa, and very low level of effort that would be required to set the stage for a much better relationship in the future, it is surely in Washington’s interest to try.

**Bronwyn Bruton** is deputy director of the Africa Center and author of many reports, journal essays, and special reports on the Horn of Africa, including the widely-read 2010 Council on Foreign Relations special report *Somalia: A New Approach* and the recent *New York Times* op-ed “It’s Bad in Eritrea, but Not That Bad.”

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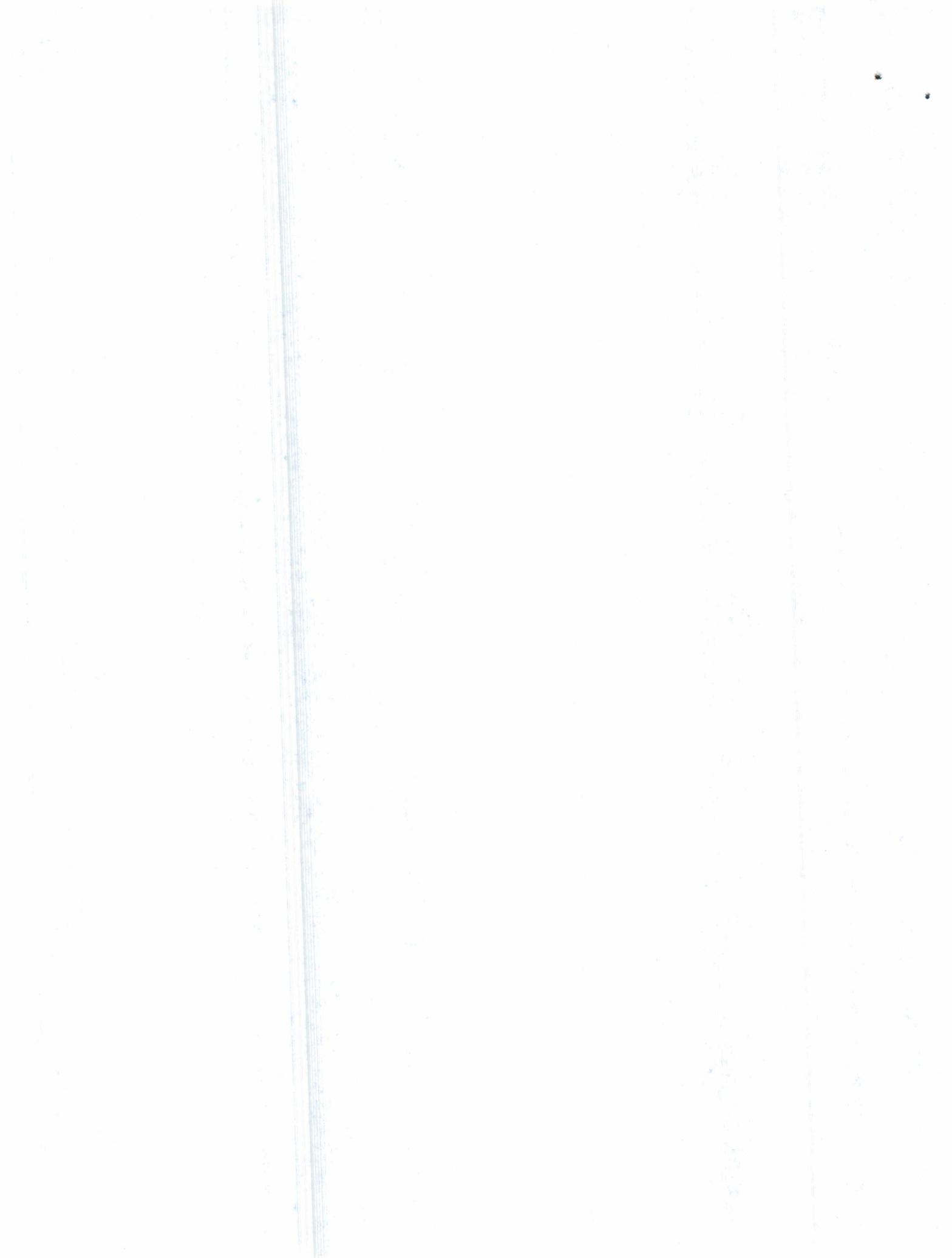
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