

ISRAEL

Israel has much to gain from a stronger relationship with war-ravaged Eritrea, writes Ehud Ya'ari, after a recent visit to this strategic and surprisingly friendly rest-stop on the Red Sea

“OSLO WAS WRONG. Madrid was wrong,” pronounces the President of Eritrea, Isaias Afwerki, in an interview with *The Jerusalem Report*.

Afwerki, an amicable 53-year-old intellectual and former guerrilla commander, is sitting in his shirtsleeves in his modest office in an old, Italianate building in downtown Asmara. With only one secretary in the next room for company, and no security personnel in sight, these premises would



EFRAIT TURJEMAN

RED SEA REFUGIO
scene in the Red Sea capital
Asmara. President
Afwerki (right) with
current
a 'modest
hopes for

The Land of the Sea

ESSAY / Ehud Ya'ari Asmara

hardly pass for presidential quarters anywhere else in the African continent.

But then the president of Eritrea is different. For one thing, the ex-military leader of the Eritrean Popular Liberation Front (EPLF) that fought a bloody, 25-year war against Ethiopia until it gained independence in 1993, is the most consistent African head of state actively and openly seeking better ties with Israel. And he is the only head of state outside the Arab world who publicly rejects the Oslo process which he thinks was too hasty and half-baked.

“So did Israel start on the wrong foot with the Palestinians?” I ask.

“Of course,” Afwerki replies. “You took a short-term approach. The agreement was flawed. Peace should have been — and still should be — sought down another path.”

Afwerki supports the establishment of a Palestinian state, but he argues from personal experience that agreements that avoid the core issues, as Oslo did, are bound to fail. (He is quick to add that this is his personal opinion, and not the position of his government which, like almost all the others, supports all signed agreements.)

SINCE GAINING INDEPENDENCE, the half-Muslim, half-Christian former Ethiopian protectorate has been indicating its desire to strike a closer alliance with Israel. The advances are bearing fruit. More and more Israelis within the security establishment, the business sector

and the political community, even at cabinet level, are waking up to the potential of this northeast African republic. Strategically located on the Red Sea, and bound on the west by Sudan, on the south by Ethiopia and on the east by Djibouti, this Afro-Semitic country is seen by an increasing number of influential Israelis as a sought-after ally and friend.

The traditional “Ethiopian lobby” in the Foreign Ministry in Jerusalem warns that cosying up to Eritrea may have a negative impact on relations with Addis Ababa. But the advocates of closer ties with Eritrea argue that Israel’s interests in Ethiopia center around the ongoing issue of the Falas Mora, the thousands of Ethiopian Jewish converts to Christianity still waiting in Addis Ababa for Israel to allow them to immigrate — something they say doesn’t compare with the potential strategic benefits of an alliance with Asmara.

Eritrea is the only friendly rest-stop for Israeli planes or boats in the Red Sea en route to Africa and the Far East. The 1,300 kilometers of Eritrean coastline, the country’s two ports, Massawa and Asab, and the airport at Asmara are the only refuges in all the Red Sea where Israeli vessels and planes could both or land in an emergency.

Eritrea recently reestablished diplomatic relations with Sudan despite ongoing tension along the border, and offers a back door through which Israel can keep an eye

on that country, as well as on Saudi Arabia and Yemen across the water. More than a few Israeli officials believe today that nurturing close ties with the administration in Asmara would be more worthwhile than stressing the relationship with landlocked Ethiopia. And though the Foreign Ministry in Jerusalem thinks otherwise, the business community, as usual, is taking no notice.

So far, there is only a tiny Israeli embassy in the Eritrean capital. A couple of dozen Israeli company reps, and agricultural and medical experts fly in and out by private jet. The Eritreans, to their regret, have no budget for an embassy in Israel just yet.

The friendly relations are far from a given. For years, mainly during the 1970s, Israel helped Afwerki’s enemy, the Ethiopian army, dispatching military advisers from Tel Aviv to assist the divisions fighting the Eritrean rebels. At the time, Afwerki was a protégé of Dr. George Habash, head of the radical Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine who was based in Beirut. EPLF fighters trained in Lebanon and were sponsored by Yasser Arafat in the framework of the PLO’s assistance to liberation movements all over Africa. That cooperation ended with the 1977 revolution in Ethiopia and the establishment of Col. Mengistu Haile Maryam’s Marxist regime there.

“The PLO told me that the torch of freedom had passed from the highlands of Eritrea to the offices of the administration in Addis Ababa,” the President relates. “We

replied that we would carry on, and win, without them," he recalls, "and that's how it was. Ever since, our relations with them have been cool."

Once the EPLF had been deserted by the PLO, and Addis Ababa had turned pro-Soviet, Israeli contacts with Afwerki and his rebels began. They were facilitated by some Jewish aides on Capitol Hill who took a special interest in African affairs.

In fact, Afwerki owes his life to Is-

conflict may be put to rest once and for all.

Meanwhile, Afwerki has faced and almost completely eliminated a terrorist threat from the Eritrean Islamic Jihad organization, which was sponsored by and operated from Sudan. Made up of Eritrean refugees, and backed by the same people who used to give shelter to Osama Bin Laden, the terrorists-cum-bandits were routinely crossing the border, laying land mines and attacking Eritrean installations. Afwerki has managed to seal the border and isolate the groups that had infiltrated.

Now he is extending refuge and assistance to Sudan's mainly Christian African opposition groups operating against the Muslim-Arab Khartoum government. Relations with Sudan are understandably tense.

As for the short, armed row with Yemen over the Hanish islands, the issue has been sent to arbitration, with Saudi participation. In short, Afwerki has established

himself as a regional player, despite the fact that he heads a country ravaged by 40 years of strife.

Now, the Eritrean president wants closer ties with Israel. Asked how he contends with the pressure from the Arab states, he replies: "We made it absolutely clear: We let nobody choose our friends for us. We do it ourselves. No dictation."

THE ERITREANS, WHO SPEAK A variety of—languages including Tigrinya, Afar and Arabic — the last being a remnant of the Egyptian occupation of the land in the last century — are particularly keen for Israelis to come to the country's offshore islands as tourists and investors. The vast coral reef of Dahlak is considered by experts to be the most impressive diving site in the Red Sea, a pristine Garden of Eden rich with sea life and rare underwater views.

The problem is that Eritrea doesn't have any tourism infrastructure to speak of. Dahlak has one small resort hotel, but it is far too basic for the tastes of most European and Israeli vacationers. It has no phones, and the electricity supply is unreliable.

The journey from the airport in the mountaintop capital of Asmara down to the coast takes two hours. The mountain-sides lining the one-lane route are densely covered with prickly pear plants and packs of wild baboons roam between them. The

higher parts of the road take you above the clouds. Then there's still an hour-plus boat ride from Massawa out to the island.

Israel and Eritrea signed their first civil aviation agreement in mid-February. That is meant to pave the way for charter flights from Israel to an airport that is being built near Massawa. The flight takes two and a quarter hours.

The director of Israel's domestic airline Arkia, Prof. Issy Borovitz, is considering an Eritrean request to establish a new, luxury tourist resort, and to fly Israeli groups in. Borovitz, for his part, believes that given the development of a proper infrastructure, Eritrea could become a popular Israeli tourist attraction, replacing more expensive destinations such as Mombasa and Zanzibar, and certainly Sharm el-Sheikh, which the Israelis have in any case abandoned since the beginning of the current intifada.

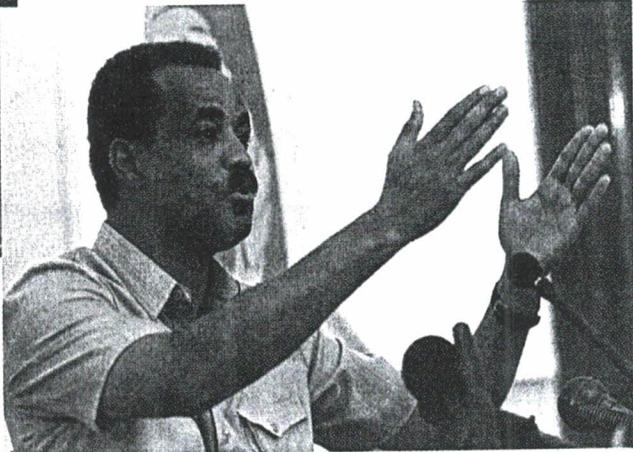
So far, Israel is helping Eritrea with aerial mapping and with building a pressure chamber for divers on the coast, and is dispatching medical and a few agricultural specialists. (Eritrea's main export commodities include sorghum, livestock and cotton.) An Israeli company is licensed to fish in the waters off the Eritrean coast, and there is talk of Israeli experts helping preserve and restore archaeological sites in the west of the country, including obelisks from the days of the medieval Ethiopian kingdom of Axum. Israel is also negotiating setting up programs in vocational training for the tens of thousands of soldiers coming out of the Eritrean army after their battles with Ethiopia.

Afwerki calls all this a "modest beginning." He would like to see the promotion of much wider dealings in the spheres of investment and trade. One idea is to export Eritrea's agricultural produce to Europe on cargo flights via Ben-Gurion airport. The country doesn't have a national airline of its own, and for now, its export capability is extremely limited.

What is needed is a quick decision in Jerusalem: whether Israel should continue to spread its efforts over the whole African continent, as is the case now, or whether it ought rather to concentrate on a few choice countries, according to strategic concerns.

Nigeria, Angola and South Africa are clearly top priorities. But there are an increasing number of officials as well as business people in Israel, who believe that aid should be injected into Eritrea before other, lower priority countries such as Kenya or Ghana, where Israel invests a fair amount of effort today.

"Since we are not doing very much anyhow," comments one Israeli official, "let's at least do it in the right place." ●



JEAN-MARC BOUJU/AP

rael. In 1995, he and a few of his senior ministers came down with malaria of the brain. With the help of then health minister Ephraim Sneh, a veteran advocate of nurturing ties with Eritrea, the president and his aides were secretly flown to Israel and nursed back to health at the Sheba medical center at Tel Aviv's Tel Hashomer Hospital. "At first," Afwerki's personal doctor remarks, "we didn't trust you (Israelis). I stayed by his bedside day and night."

Paradoxically, Afwerki is at one and the same time considered a close friend of Libya's Col. Qadhafi — whom he sees as now preferring the "African jungle" over the "Arab quagmire" — and is accused by the Arab press of being an undeclared strategic partner of Israel. The Arab press occasionally prints allegations that Eritrea provides the Israeli navy with a hiding place for its vessels on the Dahlak archipelago, off the port of Massawa, and that the Israelis have supposedly set up an intelligence post there. There's no truth to these reports. A helicopter tour, and later a boat and land tour of the area reveal only an old Israeli navy landing craft that was sold long ago to the Eritrean army.

Right now, Afwerki is busy licking his wounds from the latest, not particularly successful border campaign he waged against Ethiopia last year. There are hopes that with the arrival of an international commission to demarcate the border, the