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Eritrea breaks west's Red Sea chokehold, pivots to Iran, Russia, China

Tel Aviv loses another Red Sea partner: Eritrea emerges as a critical node in the rising Eurasian multipolar nexus, defying US-Israeli plans for regional control.

Photo Credit: The Cradle

Eritrea, a small African state on the Red Sea, is coming under renewed western scrutiny. In January, Michael Rubin of the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) called for regime change in what he dubbed "the North Korea of Africa." A similar *Haaretz* piece labelled Eritrea an Iranian proxy and a threat to the US. Israeli outlet *Ynet* even accused the Ansarallah-aligned forces in Yemen of expanding into Eritrea.

These sudden alarms have little to do with human rights – after all, no such criticisms are leveled at Saudi Arabia, which sits just across the Red Sea from Eritrea's coast. Rather, the panic stems from a fear that western control over the Red Sea is slipping.

Once a close partner of Israel, Eritrea has since 2020 pivoted toward China, Russia, and Iran. And it is not alone. Sudan is reportedly permitting Russian and Iranian military access to Port Sudan, while Djibouti is collaborating with China. So any attempt to destabilize Asmara could reverberate across the Horn of Africa, threatening Washington's already dwindling influence.

Eritrea and the US

Since gaining independence in 1993, Eritrea has maintained tense ties with Washington. Early cooperation – including participation in the US-led Front Line States initiative against Sudan, which Asmara accused of arming the Eritrea Islamic Jihad – waned after Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki proposed closer alignment, which was rebuffed.

At the time, the US, already aligned with Djibouti and Yemen, saw no strategic need for another Red Sea partner and opted to back Eritrea's rival, Ethiopia.

A brief war with Yemen in 1995 over the Hanish Islands drew accusations that Israel backed Eritrea. While ties with Tel Aviv flourished, relations with Washington frayed. By 2005, Asmara had expelled USAID, reacting to Washington's growing embrace of Ethiopia during the so-called War on Terror and its failure to uphold the Algiers peace agreement. Nonetheless, Eritrea still offered to host a US base and even dispatched troops to Iraq.

But the US, then firmly entrenched in Djibouti, saw Eritrea as expendable. In 2009, the UN Security Council imposed sanctions on Eritrea over its failure to withdraw troops from Djibouti and its alleged support for Al-Qaeda's ally, Al-Shabaab. These persisted even after Eritrea ceased such support and withdrew.

In isolation, Asmara turned to Tehran, backing Iran's civilian nuclear program and granting the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) access to Port Assab, a strategic location near Yemen. This allowed Iran to monitor western naval movements and purportedly provided Eritrea with financial support.

Yet, Eritrea continued to court Israel quietly. In 2012, US risk analysis think tank Stratfor confirmed that Tel Aviv operated surveillance facilities in Eritrea, with a second base added in 2016 to track Yemen's Ansarallah movement. But the 2015 Saudi-UAE-led war against Yemen saw Eritrea sever ties with Iran, aligning instead with the UAE against the resistance government in Sanaa. Assab became a logistical hub, and Eritrea even deployed 400 troops – contributing significantly to the UAE's battlefield gains.

Break with the west

Sanctions were lifted in 2018 following Eritrea's peace deal with Ethiopia, but reconciliation with the west was short-lived. In 2020, Asmara rejected Israel's new ambassador without

explanation. That same year, US President Donald Trump's administration included Eritrea in its “Muslim ban,” and the UAE wound down the overt aspects of its Yemen military campaign, exiting Eritrea in 2021.

China, meanwhile, stepped in. A longtime backer of Eritrean independence, Beijing ramped up investment even as COVID-19 disrupted global trade. Bilateral trade hit record highs, and Eritrea began reorienting toward Eurasian powers.

The shift accelerated as western aggression continued in the region. In 2021, Israel violated Eritrean sovereignty by striking an Iranian vessel in its waters. Washington reimposed sanctions – this time, ostensibly over Eritrea’s role in the Tigray war.

In 2022, Israel closed down its Asmara embassy, and the Knesset passed legislation targeting Eritrean migrants supportive of their government for deportation. Meanwhile, Israel and Ethiopia held high-level talks to deepen ties.

Eritrea has now doubled down on its pivot, becoming one of just five countries to oppose the 2022 UN resolution condemning Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov visited Asmara in January 2023, and by 2024, Russian naval forces had docked at Massawa. Bilateral trade with Moscow still remains modest, but its growth is steep.

China’s footprint is far larger. It now accounts for one-third of Eritrean imports and two-thirds of its exports, with significant investment in mining and infrastructure. A 2021 agreement brought Eritrea into the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI); in 2022, the two states became “strategic partners.”

The most seismic shift, however, lies in Asmara’s revived ties with Tehran. Eritrea, which once deployed troops against Ansarallah, now refuses to condemn their Red Sea blockade. In 2024, Eritrean Foreign Minister Osman Saleh attended the inauguration of Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian. When Tel Aviv assassinated Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh during the ceremony, Eritrea condemned the strike.

Tehran has reportedly agreed to supply drones and other military technology to Eritrea, which has since seized Azerbaijani vessels – linking its actions to Iran’s broader axis. If the IRGC regains access to Assab, Iran would be positioned to support Ansarallah from both sides of the Red Sea and expedite arms transfers to Palestinian resistance groups. Eritrea could once again become a regional launchpad, this time not for Abu Dhabi, but for Tehran’s strategic ambitions.

The Horn’s complexity

Backing Eritrea is not without risk. Ethiopia, with 40 times Eritrea’s population and an economy 80 times larger, is also realigning eastward. China is its top trade partner, while

Russia and Iran are increasing cooperation, particularly in the security sector. Iranian drones were instrumental in crushing the Tigrayan rebellion.

With both countries now BRICS members, an Eritrea–Ethiopia conflict would place China, Russia, and Iran in a potentially difficult position. Yet this shared influence also creates an opportunity. Late last year, Turkiye brokered peace between Ethiopia and Somalia; the same could happen here. Playing peacemaker serves both the economic and strategic interests of the three Eurasian powers.

As the Iran-backed Axis of Resistance in West Asia begins to recover from a series of strategic setbacks, Washington's grip slips. Its Djibouti base – once a symbol of dominance – has lost operational freedom. Djibouti blocked US airstrikes on Ansarallah and is trying to oust the UAE's foothold, and Sudan has tilted toward Iran and Russia.

After Djibouti's refusal, Washington floated the idea of recognizing the breakaway region of Somaliland and establishing a base there – signaling desperation as its Red Sea options narrow.

Eritrea's shift from Tel Aviv to Tehran has triggered a backlash. Unsurprisingly, calls for regime change have intensified – not coincidentally – as western leverage weakens. Rubin, writing for the neoconservative AEI, invokes human rights before accusing Eritrea of threatening former US allies. *Haaretz* is blunter, describing Eritrea as an Iranian proxy and "strategic threat."

This narrative sets the stage for intervention. Rubin even compares Afwerki to Saddam Hussein, foreshadowing what regime change could unleash. In a multi-ethnic state like Eritrea, chaos would follow – just as it did in Somalia post-1991. Worse for Washington, the outcome may not be pro-US. After the fall of Saddam, Iraq moved closer to Iran.

Historical precedent rarely restrains Washington's militarism. But this time, the stakes are higher. Eritrea's alliance with China, Russia, and Iran threatens to upend the Red Sea order. Tehran's return to Assab could decisively tilt the regional balance, empowering Ansarallah and Palestinian resistance factions. If Tel Aviv and Washington push too hard, the blowback could reshape West Asia.

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