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## Africa

### Eritrea moves closer to the Axis of Resistance and breaks imperialist control over the Red Sea



**AND**Eritrea, a small African state located on the shores of the Red Sea, is the subject of increasing attention from the major imperialist powers. In January, Michael Rubin called for a coup d'état in what he called the "Korea of North Africa." The Israeli newspaper Haaretz calls it an Iranian ally and a threat to the United States. The Israeli media outlet Ynet even accused Ansarollah of expanding into Eritrea.

Panic is rife with fears of a weakening of Western control over the Red Sea. Eritrea was once a close partner of Israel, but since 2020 has moved closer to China, Russia, and Iran. It is not alone. Sudan reportedly allows Russian and Iranian military access to Port Sudan, while Djibouti collaborates with China. Therefore, any attempt to destabilize Asmara could

reverberate throughout the Horn of Africa, threatening Washington's already waning influence.

Since its independence in 1993, Eritrea has maintained tense relations with Washington. Initial cooperation—including participation in the US-led Frontline States Initiative against Sudan, which Asmara accused of arming Eritrean Islamic Jihad—weakens after Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki rejected a proposal for closer ties.

At the time, the United States, already aligned with Djibouti and Yemen, saw no strategic need for another partner in the Red Sea and opted to support Eritrea's rival Ethiopia. A brief war with Yemen in 1995 over the Hanish Islands sparked accusations of Israeli support for Eritrea. While ties with Tel Aviv have strengthened, those with Washington have become strained. In 2005, Asmara expelled USAID in response to Washington's growing support for Ethiopia during the so-called "War on Terror" and its refusal to abide by the Algiers Peace Agreement. Nevertheless, Eritrea continued to offer to host a US base and even sent troops to Iraq.

But the United States, then firmly entrenched in Djibouti, considered Eritrea an expendable resource. In 2009, the UN Security Council imposed sanctions on Eritrea for its refusal to withdraw its troops from Djibouti and its support for al-Qaeda-allied al-Shabaab. These sanctions persisted even after Eritrea ended its support and withdrew. Isolated, Asmara turned to Tehran, supporting Iran's civilian nuclear program and granting the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) access to Port Assab, a strategic point near Yemen. This allowed Iran to monitor Western naval movements and provide financial support to Eritrea.

However, it continued to play both sides of the aisle and quietly court Israel. In 2012, Stratfor confirmed that Tel Aviv operated surveillance facilities in Eritrea, and that a second base had been added in 2016 to monitor Ansarallah. However, the 2015 war between Saudi Arabia and the UAE in Yemen caused Eritrea to sever ties with Iran, aligning itself with the UAE against the resistance government. Assab has become a logistical hub, and Eritrea has even deployed 400 troops, significantly contributing to the UAE's military advances.

#### **Break with the West, rapprochement with the East**

Sanctions were lifted in 2018, following the peace agreement between Eritrea and Ethiopia, but the reconciliation with the West was short-lived. In 2020, Asmara rejected Israel's new ambassador without explanation. That same year, Trump included Eritrea in his "Islamic ban," and the United Arab Emirates scaled back its open military campaign in Yemen, withdrawing from Eritrea in 2021.

Meanwhile, China intervened. The Asian country had always supported Eritrea's independence, and bilateral trade reached historic highs. Eritrea began to shift eastward. The shift accelerated with continued Western aggression in the region. In 2021, Israel violated Eritrea's sovereignty by attacking an Iranian ship in its territorial waters. Washington reimposed sanctions, this time for Eritrea's role in the Tigray War. In 2022, Israel closed its embassy in Asmara, and Parliament passed a law to expel Eritrean migrants who supported its government. Meanwhile, Israel and Ethiopia held high-level talks to deepen their ties.

In 2022, Eritrea was one of five countries that opposed the UN resolution condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Lavrov visited Asmara in January 2023, and in 2024, Russian naval forces docked in Massawa. Bilateral trade with Moscow remains modest, but its growth is solid.

China's presence is much greater. It accounts for one-third of Eritrea's imports and two-thirds of its exports, with significant investments in mining and infrastructure. A 2021 agreement included Eritrea in the Silk Road; in 2022, the two countries became strategic partners.

The most radical change was the renewal of ties between Asmara and Tehran. Eritrea, which once deployed troops against Ansarullah, now refuses to condemn the Yemeni blockade of the Red Sea. Last year, Eritrean Foreign Minister Osman Saleh attended the inauguration of Iranian President Massoud Pezeshkian. When Tel Aviv assassinated Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh at the ceremony, Eritrea condemned the attack.

Tehran is set to supply drones and other military technology to Eritrea, which has since seized Azerbaijani vessels, linking its actions to the broader Iran-led axis. If the Iranian Revolutionary Guard regains access to Assab, Iran could support Ansarullah on both sides of the Red Sea and accelerate arms transfers to Palestinian resistance groups. Eritrea could once again become a regional springboard, this time not for Abu Dhabi, but for the Axis of Resistance.

### The Horn of Africa

Supporting Eritrea carries risks. Ethiopia, with a population 40 times larger than Eritrea's and an economy 80 times larger, is also reorienting itself toward the East. China is its main trading partner, while Russia and Iran are strengthening their cooperation, especially in the security sector. Iranian drones played a key role in crushing the Tigray rebellion.

With both countries within the **BRICS**, a clash between Eritrea and Ethiopia would put China, Russia, and Iran in a difficult position. However, shared influence also creates an opportunity. In late 2018, Turkey brokered peace between Ethiopia and Somalia; the same could happen here. Acting as a mediator benefits both the economic and strategic interests of

the Eurasian powers. As the Axis of Resistance in the Middle East begins to recover from a series of setbacks, Washington will gradually lose control over the Red Sea. Its base in Djibouti, once a symbol of dominance, has lost its operational freedom. Djibouti has blocked US airstrikes against Ansarollah and is seeking to dislodge the UAE from its dominant position, while Sudan is leaning toward Iran and Russia.

After Djibouti's refusal, Washington floated the idea of recognizing the Somaliland region and establishing a base there, a sign of desperation at its dwindling options in the Red Sea.

Eritrea's relocation from Tel Aviv to Tehran has sparked a fierce reaction. Calls for a coup have intensified as Western influence wanes. Rubin accuses Eritrea of threatening former US allies. Haaretz is more direct, describing Eritrea as an Iranian ally and a "strategic threat."

This rhetoric paves the way for military intervention. Rubin even compares Afwerki to Saddam Hussein, anticipating the consequences of a coup d'état. In a multiethnic country like Eritrea, chaos would erupt, as occurred in Somalia after 1991. Even worse for Washington, the outcome might not be favorable for them. After Saddam's fall, Iraq moved closer to Iran.

Historical precedents rarely restrain Washington's militarism. But this time, the stakes are higher. Eritrea's alliance with China, Russia, and Iran threatens to break the imperialist grip that has been established in the Red Sea for decades. Tehran's return to Assab could decisively shift the regional balance, strengthening Ansarullah and the Palestinian resistance factions. If Tel Aviv and Washington push too hard, the backlash could transform the Middle East.

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