

# Briefing Paper

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## CONFLICT AND COOPERATION

### Transitions in Modern Ethiopian–Sudanese Relations

John Young



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## Cover photo

Men stand behind an Ethiopian flag and wave Sudanese flags as protesters from Atbara arrive at Bahari station in Khartoum, 17 August 2019.

Source: Ahmed Mustafa/AFP Photo

## About the author

**John Young** has a PhD in Political Science from Simon Fraser University in Vancouver and has worked in the Horn of Africa in various capacities since 1986. He has authored three books: *Peasant Revolution in Ethiopia: Tigray People's Liberation Front, 1975–1991* (Cambridge University Press, 1998); *The Fate of Sudan: Origins and Consequences of a Flawed Peace Process* (Zed Books, 2012); and *South Sudan's Civil War: Violence, Insurgency and Failed Peacemaking* (Zed Books, 2019); as well as 35 articles and book chapters on conflict, armed groups, and peace processes in the Horn. The co-authored book *The Nation State: A Wrong Model for the Horn of Africa* is forthcoming from the Max Planck Institute of Social Anthropology.

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## Overview

This Briefing Paper discusses relations between Ethiopia and Sudan from the post-colonial period to the present, focusing on internal and external factors that have influenced bilateral relations over the past three decades. In the waning years of the cold war and after the coming to power of the National Islamic Front (NIF) in Sudan and the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) in Ethiopia, relations between the two countries have oscillated between political harmony and ideological tension. Among this study's findings, it highlights the roles of President Omar al-Bashir of Sudan and his Ethiopian counterpart, Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, during a notable period that included good relations between two countries of very different ideological orientations in a region characterized by considerable instability. Positive relations continued after Meles' death in 2012, but with the 2018 rise to power in Ethiopia of Abiy Ahmed and the coming to power of a joint military–civilian government in Sudan in August 2019 after al-Bashir's overthrow, these countries' ties are once more uncertain.

## Key findings

- Overlapping peoples, contested borders, enormous economic disparities, and weak states have led to cycles of conflict between Ethiopia and Sudan for some 40 years. The cold war exacerbated these conditions. Reflecting both foreign and local interests, Khartoum and Addis Ababa supported each other's dissidents, which proved to be instrumental in the secession of Eritrea from Ethiopia and South Sudan from Sudan.
- Following the NIF's role in an attempt to assassinate Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak in Addis Ababa in June 1995, an alliance was formed between neighbouring states and the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) against the NIF. The outbreak of the Eritrean–Ethiopian war in 1998 likely prevented the overthrow of the NIF regime.
- Ethiopian–Sudanese tensions generated by Ethiopia's development of its water resources from the Nile were diffused by Sudan's announced support for Ethiopia's Renaissance Dam in 2012. Interstate relations in north-east Africa were reordered as a result, adversely affecting Sudan's relations with Egypt in particular.
- President Omar al-Bashir, by marginalizing Hassan al-Turabi, the author of Sudan's disruptive foreign policy towards Ethiopia, began a process of reconciliation and good neighbourly relations that continued for two decades. But the coming to power of Abiy Ahmed in Ethiopia in 2018 and al-Bashir's overthrow in April 2019 have made relations between the two countries increasingly unpredictable. External actors—including the Gulf States, Egypt, China, and the United States—continue to influence relations between the two countries in complex ways.

## Introduction

Relations between Ethiopia and Sudan have their own dynamic, but from ancient times they have been powerfully shaped by the two countries' location on the Nile and their respective relations with Egypt. Ethiopia is the source of the lion's share of Nile water, while Egypt is the region's largest consumer of that water. The two countries have long struggled for dominance over the Nile's water, although most often these have been symbolic struggles, because until recently Ethiopia did not have the capacity to restrict Egypt's access to Nile water (Carlson, 2013). Historically, Sudan's closest relations have been with Egypt, because the Nile encouraged similar forms of economy and trade, as well as the spread of the Arabic language and Islam. Sudan also shares the Blue Nile with Ethiopia, but the river's upper reaches are too turbulent to facilitate comparable trade and linguistic/religious linkages. Moreover, unlike the similar geography and climate of Sudan and Egypt, the marked differences between the hot lowland plains of Sudan and the rugged highlands of Ethiopia have led to the development of dissimilar cultures and economies in these countries. For example, while Christians only constitute a small minority in Sudan, they have dominated Ethiopia since its inception, although the country also has a large Muslim minority (Erllich, 2010).

Throughout much of the cold war (1946–91) relations between Khartoum and Addis Ababa were marred by the support they provided to each other's armed opposition groups. The Ethiopian-led regional assault on Sudan in the wake of the 1995 attempted assassination of Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak in Addis Ababa led the al-Bashir regime to conclude that Ethiopia, and not Egypt, was the primary threat to its existence, and this necessitated reconciliation (African Studies Center, 1995). Giving primacy to conciliatory relations with Ethiopia also served to check the over-riding influence of Egypt and its opposition to the Islamist NIF. Together with Sudan, Ethiopia was

also a leading member of the regional Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), while Egypt was not a member (IGAD, 2019). IGAD conducted the negotiations between the Government of Sudan and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), which ultimately led to the secession of southern Sudan and also produced agreements on Abyei, Blue Nile, and South Kordofan (Kuol, 2018), while the African Union led unsuccessful negotiations to resolve the conflict in Darfur (Pantuliano, 2007).

Regional conflict over the distribution of the Nile's waters led to the formation of the Nile Basin Initiative to reach agreement on fairly allocating the river's benefits. In this slowly simmering conflict, Sudan found itself in an increasingly indefensible alliance with Egypt, which claimed priority rights to the Nile's water over those of the other nine countries of the Nile basin. Sudan's rejection in 2012 of the 1929 and 1959 agreements that had given Egypt and Sudan a disproportionate share of Nile water and its endorsement of Ethiopia's Renaissance Dam improved its regional relations, while undermining relations with Cairo (Dessu, 2019). Despite Sudan's strong trade and cultural linkages with Egypt, Ethiopia's prime minister, Abiy Ahmed, was accepted as a mediator by the Sudanese Transitional Military Council (TMC) and the opposition Forces for Freedom and Change (FFC) in June 2019, when the latter would never have accepted Egyptian president Abdel Fattah el-Sisi for this role.

Two decades of positive relations between Khartoum and Addis Ababa are not a guarantee of a cordial future, however, given the multiple challenges that the two countries face. This Briefing Paper argues that the biggest threat to harmonious relations between Ethiopia and Sudan is internal instability, which has three elements: firstly, the rise to power of new governments in both countries without a history of working together and unsure of each other; secondly, a lack of complete control by both countries over their shared border areas; and,

thirdly, uncertainties about the unity of the governments in both Khartoum and Addis Ababa. Added to this are two destabilizing external factors. Firstly, the many-faceted Gulf conflict between Qatar (aligned with Turkey) and Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) (who are in turn allied with Egypt and backed by the United States) and their demand that countries side with one or the other camp have exacerbated existing tensions in the Horn since mid-2017 (Young, 2018). Secondly, the Trump administration's announcement in December 2018 of a new Africa strategy that involves stemming the influence of China and the Russian Federation in the continent (National Security Council, 2018) is challenging for Sudan, which has developed good relations with both countries, and for Ethiopia, whose remarkable economic advance of recent years would not have been possible without Chinese support.

Sudan's relations with Egypt have been the subject of a large number of studies because of historical links going back to the time of the pharaohs, and figured prominently during the colonial period, when Egypt nominally ruled Sudan in the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium<sup>1</sup> and less so in the post-colonial period (Beshir, 1981). In contrast, there have been few studies of Sudan's modern relations with Ethiopia, despite their growing importance in the post-colonial era. This Briefing Paper therefore aims to shed light on this unique relationship and to understand the background to the current challenges facing it.<sup>2</sup>

To begin, this requires Ethiopian–Sudanese relations to be placed in a historical and regional context. The Horn of Africa has long been a region of instability and war, as has been made clear by recurring famines and intra- and interstate conflict (Alemu, 2014; Plaut, 2013). The region was a major secondary area of conflict during the cold war, when the Eastern bloc and the US-led West politically and militarily backed different governments. That the region continued to be unstable after the cold war is apparent from the secession of Eritrea and South

Sudan, the only post-colonial examples of secession in Africa. The Horn has also been a major focus of the belligerents in the Gulf conflict.<sup>3</sup> The UAE and Saudi Arabia also played a key role in reconciling Eritrea and Ethiopia, and the same two countries, together with Egypt, played a critical role in both the course and outcome of the 2018–19 Sudanese uprising against the regime of Omar al-Bashir. Lastly, if Ethiopia and Sudan, which together constitute the lion's share of the population of the Horn, were to enter a new period of tensions, it would threaten the well-being of millions of people and have wider implications for countries in East and Central Africa and the Middle East.

## **From conflict to cooperation and back again: a history of Ethiopian–Sudanese relations**

The colonial state of Sudan and the contemporary state of Ethiopia were largely formed in the final years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The period began with Ethiopian emperor Menelik II's defeat of Italy in 1896 at the Battle of Adwa, which ensured Ethiopian sovereignty, but led to the loss of Eritrea. Two years later the British defeated the forces of Khalifa Abdullah al-Taashi at the Battle of Karari on the outskirts of Omdurman in Sudan, which began 58 years of British colonial administration known as the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium. Britain's engagement in Sudan was based on an 'almost paranoid' concern with the Nile (Zewde, 1991, p. 73), because the river was held to be critical to protecting and controlling Egypt—including the Suez Canal, the key route to India, which was Britain's most important colony. Although Egypt had little power in the Condominium, this arrangement provided the British with quasi-legal cover and served to unify the administration of the Nile. For Egyptians the Condominium preserved the notion that Sudan was part of Egypt and would in due course return to Egyptian sovereignty.

Acting on behalf of Egypt, Britain signed an agreement with Menelik II in 1902 to demarcate the borders between Ethiopia and Sudan. Included in the English version of the agreement (but not in the Ethiopian Amharic version) was a commitment that the emperor would not develop the Nile without British permission (Okidi, 1994, p. 324). As a result, Ethiopia refused to accept such restraints on its actions and never ratified the agreement.

In 1906 Britain, France, and Italy signed the secret Tripartite Treaty, which denied Ethiopia sovereign rights over the use of its own Nile waters (Mohammed, 2013), and in a 1925 exchange of notes between Britain and Italy concerning Lake Tana—the source of the Blue Nile in north-west Ethiopia—Italy recognized the prior rights to Nile water of Egypt and Sudan. Ethiopia opposed both the 1906 and 1925 agreements. In 1929 Egypt and Anglo-Egyptian Sudan signed the first Nile Waters Agreement, which divided the waters of the Nile exclusively between themselves—to the exclusion of Ethiopia.

Sudan's independence in January 1956 was precipitated by Britain's international decline after the Second World War, increasing demands for self-government by northern Sudanese, and the Egyptian post-monarchy military government's announcement in 1953 that it was abandoning Egypt's claim to sovereignty over Sudan. Since Britain's control over Sudan legally depended on Egyptian sovereignty, this served as an impetus for the British to withdraw. The Egyptians further assumed that, with the departure of the British, Sudan would 'reunite' with the 'mother country', but the Sudanese opted for a fully independent state. Egypt, however, continued to press its claims on the Nile, and in 1959 signed the second Nile Waters Agreement with Sudan, which gave these states full control over and utilization of the Nile waters, with Sudan being allotted 18.5 billion cubic metres of water per year and Egypt 55.5 billion cubic metres (Abdulrahman, 2018). It was further agreed that any state not party to the agreement was entitled to an

“ In 1906 Britain, France, and Italy signed the secret Tripartite Treaty, which denied Ethiopia sovereign rights over the use of its own Nile waters.”

equal share between Egypt and Sudan.<sup>4</sup> Ethiopia rejects both the 1929 and 1959 agreements.

Sudan's independence was constructed around a largely forced union between northern and southern Sudan in which the mostly Arabic-speaking Muslim population dominated, particularly elites from the northern riverine core to whom the departing British effectively handed state power. These elites attempted to build national unity around an Arab Muslim identity and tried to force people from the peripheries, particularly the southern Sudanese, to accept their rule. But the southern Sudanese, whom the British had administered under a system that limited northern influence and promoted the English language and Christianity, rejected Arabization and Islamization, and instead demanded autonomy in the form of federalism. After agreeing to southern autonomy, successive northern governments failed to implement federalism. This led first to a revolt by the southern Sudanese rebel group Anyanya, and then to a fully-fledged civil war in the mid-1960s and the southern demand for independence (Young, 2012, pp. 21–22, 25).

At almost the same time Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie opposed the federal system of government that the international community had granted to Eritrea at the end of the Second World War, and this too produced a rebellion committed to achieving independence. Sudan's president, Gen. Ibrahim Abboud, did not officially support the Eritrean rebels, but most of the rebels that operated under

the banner of the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) were Muslim and based in Ethiopia's western lowlands, where they had tribal affinities with eastern Sudanese who assisted them. Moreover, the ELF drew support from Eritrean soldiers in the Sudanese army and other paramilitary Sudanese forces, most of their supplies came from Sudan and Eritrean refugees, they received backing from a range of Sudanese political forces, and they were permitted to establish a political office in Khartoum (Markakis, 1987, p. 111). After Sudan's October Revolution of 1964 removed Abboud from power, incoming prime minister Khatim al-Khalifa gave the ELF permission to transport weapons through the country (Markakis, 1987, p. 112). Abboud and al-Khalifa supported the ELF because the Ethiopian western lowland state of Gambella became an important secondary sphere in the Sudanese civil war where Anyanya mobilized the Anuak and Nuer with the tacit support of the Ethiopian regime.

The 1965 Sudanese elections brought the Umma Party to power (EISA, 2011), but, unlike previous governments, it had little sympathy for the Eritrean rebels, because its main support base was in western Sudan, and it sought to improve relations with Ethiopia. This was not successful, however, because each country found it useful to support dissidents whom it could use at the other's expense.

Col. Jafaar Nimeiri took power in Sudan in a 1969 coup and, with the backing of the Sudanese Communist Party (SCP), acquired Soviet military support.

# “ Eastern bloc support for the Derg in Ethiopia created conditions for Khartoum’s reconciliation with the United States.”

The Siad Barre regime in Somalia also received Soviet backing at this time, while Ethiopia was a major recipient of US support. The United States constructed the Kagnew communication station in Asmara and naval facilities in Massawa—both in Eritrea, and both key US cold war military facilities—for which Ethiopia received military aid worth USD 280 million between 1953 and 1977, which was used to fight Somalia and Sudan, as well as the ELF and other insurgents in Eritrea (Schmidt, 2013).

Anyanya acquired weapons and training from Israel, which was always anxious to disrupt countries allied to its Middle Eastern enemies, especially Egypt, which feared non-Arab control of the upper reaches of the Nile. Israeli support was funnelled to Anyanya through Ethiopia, where Haile Selassie also used it to fight the ELF. During its early years in office the Nimeiri regime viewed Ethiopia as a proxy of Israel and the United States, and this became the stimulus for Arab support for the regime; however, after a faction of the SCP launched a failed coup in 1971, Nimeiri turned sharply to the right, and reconciled with the sectarian parties—the Umma and Democratic Unionist parties—that dominated Sudanese politics. Together with Hassan al-Turabi’s NIF, these parties joined the Nimeiri government in 1977. With Israeli foreign assistance, bases in Ethiopia and Uganda, and vastly improved organization, Anyanya forced Nimeiri to accept a peace process under the auspices of Haile Selassie and the World Council of Churches. The result was the Addis Ababa Agreement of 1972, which provided for southern Sudan’s autonomy (Young, 2012, pp. 25–26).

Nimeiri’s shift to the right ended Soviet support to Sudan and opened the door to an alliance with the United States.

In Ethiopia Haile Selassie was overthrown in 1974 and killed a year later, and this served as the impetus for the outbreak of a number of insurgencies in addition to that in Eritrea. In an attempt to take advantage of Ethiopian insecurity during the changeover of regimes and take possession of the disputed Ogaden region, Somalia invaded Ethiopia in 1977. The rise to power of the military junta known as the ‘Derg’ in Ethiopia led the Eastern bloc to replace the United States as the main foreign influence in Ethiopia and abandon the Siad Barre regime in Somalia, which then became a US ally (Wilkins, 2019).

Eastern bloc support for the Derg in Ethiopia created conditions for Khartoum’s reconciliation with the United States, and soon Sudan became the largest recipient of US economic and military aid in sub-Saharan Africa (Nmoma, 2006, p. 51). For this largesse Sudan stood virtually alone in the Arab League with Egyptian president Anwar Sadat, after Egypt was left isolated by the US-brokered Camp David Accords with Israel in September 1978. In addition, Nimeiri played a major role in transporting Ethiopian ‘Falasha’ Jews to Israel (in a process known as Operation Moses), despite the opposition of the Islamic world. Nimeiri also supported US president Ronald Reagan’s opposition to Libyan president Muammar Qaddafi, who was aligned with the Eastern bloc; allowed the transit of US weapons through Sudan to the Chadian army of Hissen Habre, which the United States supported; and permitted the Central

Intelligence Agency (CIA) to establish a base in Al Fashir in North Darfur. Relations between Khartoum and Addis Ababa further deteriorated when Libya, South Yemen, and Ethiopia—all aligned with the Soviet Union—signed the Cooperation Treaty in 1981, which Nimeiri viewed as a threat to his regime.

In 1983 Nimeiri abrogated the Addis Ababa Agreement by dividing southern Sudan at the instigation of Equatorians, who held that the region was dominated by the Dinka (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, n.d.). This set the stage for Sudan’s second civil war, led by the SPLM/A. From the outset the SPLM/A and its leader, John Garang, accepted the Derg’s requirements of an armed struggle committed to a united reformed ‘New Sudan’ rather than southern secession. Derg leader Haile-Mariam Mengistu could not support southern Sudan’s secession while fighting Eritrean secessionists, and he wanted Sudan to close its borders to Eritrean rebels. With this Ethiopian alliance the SPLM/A acquired an enormous supply of weaponry; military bases and virtual control of refugee camps in Gambella in western Ethiopia; political offices in Addis Ababa; assistance from Cuba, Zimbabwe, and other African states; finances from Libya; and additional support from the Eastern bloc (Young, 2012, p. 49). This support did not, however, translate into many military victories, and the SPLM/A remained militarily and politically weak.

Meanwhile, the Derg was not able to defeat the Eritrean rebels, and its security forces’ brutality spawned dissent in many parts of Ethiopia, where multiple civil insurgencies began breaking out. The result was that by the late 1970s large numbers of Ethiopian refugees were settling in eastern Sudan and were followed by armed opposition groups who viewed the refugees as a source of fighters and funds. The Sudanese government permitted the armed groups to operate unhindered in the refugee camps, move freely in the country, cross the Ethiopian–Sudanese border, set up welfare and service organizations, and establish

political offices in Khartoum and centres such as Gedaref. Sudanese governments largely gave free reign to the rebel groups because they did not have the capacity to stop them. In addition, the Eritrean rebels had public support and they served as a counterweight to the much more significant support the Derg provided to the SPLA. The Eritrean rebels who were resident in Sudan also did not carry weapons or interfere in the country's internal affairs (Collins, 2008, p. 181). Before the final stages of the Ethiopian civil war after 1989, when the Eritrean and Ethiopian armed groups received military aid from Sudan, the only group that acquired military assistance—from Saudi Arabia and the CIA—was the short-lived Ethiopian Democratic Union, which was dedicated to reinstating the overthrown imperial regime (Young, 1997, p. 125).

By the early 1970s the ELF was being displaced by the Marxist Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), which was largely based in the highlands and led by secular Christians. The overthrow of Haile Selassie spawned many Ethiopian rebel groups, but by the early 1980s the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) was the most successful (Connell, 2001). While the EPLF and TPLF looked similar, they had serious ideological differences, which came to the surface during the 1984–85 famine, when the EPLF prevented Tigrayan peasants fleeing the highlands from using the only road through Eritrea to Sudan (Gebremichael, 1988).

The security agencies were the primary interface between the Sudanese government and the Ethiopian and Eritrean armed movements, and they—and in particular Osman el-Sayid, who served as a senior official of the National Security Service—developed a close affinity with the TPLF. Osman had served under Nimeiri and later under the NIF, and together with his deputy, Fatih Erwa, became close to the TPLF's leaders, especially Seyoum Mesfin, the group's chief diplomat and future long-term minister of foreign affairs. These personal ties would have a major influence on relations between Sudan

and the subsequent TPLF-dominated EPRDF government of Ethiopia. Osman attributes his closeness to the leaders of the TPLF (which he refers to as 'my baby') as being due to their honesty, seriousness, and simple living, in contrast to the leader of the EPLF, Isaias Afwerki, who also lived in Khartoum at this time and whom Osman considered to be a drinker and not serious.<sup>5</sup> Despite the Marxism of the TPLF and the political Islamism of the ruling Sudanese party, the former Ethiopian chief of defence staff, Lt. Gen. Tsadkan Gebretensae, believes that the organizations found common ground in nationalism and anti-imperialism.<sup>6</sup>

The overthrow of the Nimeiri regime in April 1985 brought a transitional military government to power in Sudan for one year, after which the elected coalition government of Sadiq al-Mahdi took over. These developments were viewed with alarm in Cairo and Washington, because Sadiq's Umma Party had a long and close relationship with Muammar Qaddafi, whom the incoming government hoped would stop providing weapons to the rebel SPLA and instead support the government (Rule, 1986). Egypt considered Libya to be an enemy, and they were on different sides in the cold war. Also upsetting Cairo and Washington was Sadiq's appointment of the Islamist leader Hassan al-Turabi as justice minister (Taylor, 2016). In contrast to Egypt and the United States, the Ethiopian Derg viewed the Sadiq-led government as a continuation of past right-wing governments, and Sadiq confirmed this with his frequent claim that the Derg was using its puppet, John Garang, to establish a Marxist government in Sudan or in the south (Collins, 2008, p. 180). In this context improved relations between Ethiopia and Sudan depended on stopping support for each other's rebels. But as the Eritrean and Ethiopian armed groups became increasingly powerful, by the mid-1980s Sudanese governments were unable to restrict their activities, while Derg support for the SPLA was so extensive it could also not easily be stopped.

## The rise of the Islamists in Sudan: Ethiopia and Sudan clash (again)

In Sudan Sadiq al-Mahdi's unstable coalition government was unable to revive the faltering economy or contain—much less defeat—the SPLA insurgency, which had spread from southern Sudan to the Nuba Mountains, southern Blue Nile state, and eastern Sudan. With the moderate Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) out of the coalition and the government increasingly driven by the NIF, a peaceful settlement of the conflict was not a realistic option until the DUP reached an agreement with SPLM/A leader John Garang in November 1988 that provided a framework for achieving peace (Young, 2012, p. 81). After Sadiq refused to accept the proposal, the DUP launched demonstrations that made clear the widespread Sudanese support for the agreement. At the same time the army added to the pressure by demanding increased resources to fight the war. In very quick order this led to the DUP joining the government, the NIF leaving the government, and the NIF together with supporters in the army led by Gen. Omar al-Bashir carrying out a coup that would keep the NIF and the National Congress Party (NCP, the successor to the NIF) in power for the next 30 years.

The NIF not only introduced totalitarian measures, but ramped up the civil war and began directly supporting the Ethiopian and Eritrean rebel groups (Young, 2007, p. 24). The NIF wanted to eliminate the Derg (which was the main SPLM/A backer), confront communism (which represented the principal ideological challenge to its political Islam), and influence the EPRDF and EPLF when they assumed state power in Ethiopia (which the NIF was confident would soon occur). By the time Ethiopian and Eritrean rebels were receiving support from Sudan, however, the war against the Derg was well advanced and Eastern bloc support for the latter was winding down, so this Sudanese support was not decisive to

“ Initially Sudan’s relations with both Eritrea and Ethiopia were amicable, and in the case of Ethiopia were cemented by the appointment of Osman el-Sayid as Sudan’s ambassador to Addis Ababa. ”

the ultimate victory of the rebels, but it quickened their victory.<sup>7</sup>

In late May 1991 the US secretary of state for African affairs, Herman Cohen, invited leaders of the EPLF, TPLF, Oromo Liberation Front, and officials of the rapidly disintegrating Derg to a conference in London (Krauss, 1991); however, the EPLF’s military wing captured the Eritrean capital of Asmara on 24 May and the EPRDF and EPLF seized Addis Ababa on 28 May, which marked the Derg’s collapse. Of interest to this paper was the attendance at the London conference of Sudanese intelligence officials Osman el-Sayid and Fatih Erwa, at the insistence of the TPLF. They were the only foreigners at the conference apart from the US representatives, which made clear their stature and the support that Sudan provided in the final phase of the war.

Asmara’s capture by the EPLF (which was subsequently renamed the People’s Front for Democracy and Justice) put Eritrea on the road to independence, which was proclaimed two years later after an overwhelming vote, and the capture of Addis Ababa brought the TPLF-dominated EPRDF to power in Ethiopia.

Initially Sudan’s relations with both Eritrea and Ethiopia were amicable, and in the case of Ethiopia were cemented by the appointment of Osman el-Sayid as Sudan’s ambassador to Addis Ababa. For their part, Eritrea and Ethiopia moved rapidly to reduce their armed forces,

devote resources to internal development, and improve regional relations. The incoming EPRDF government expelled the SPLM from Ethiopia and turned over captured opposition files to the Sudanese government, reasserted sovereignty over Gambella, and took a leading role in the IGAD peace process between Sudan and the SPLM (Young, 2012, pp. 83–84).

Sudan’s assistance to the incoming regimes in Eritrea and Ethiopia convinced al-Bashir that they would be sympathetic to Khartoum in its war with the SPLA. Al-Bashir was thus shocked when Ethiopian president Meles Zenawi and his foreign minister, Seyoum Mesfin, together with Eritrea, proposed a Declaration of Principles (DoP) in March 1994 that acknowledged the right of southern Sudanese to self-determination, but made it contingent on the NIF government’s willingness to introduce democracy and secularism, which was a position similar to that of the SPLM (Young, 2012, p. 84).

The NIF walked out of the negotiations, increased the war effort in the south, and under al-Turabi’s influence began destabilizing neighbouring states with the aim of creating a chain of Islamic states from Khartoum to the Indian Ocean, including Ethiopia. In meetings with the author during this period it became clear that NIF members were under the misconception that the majority of Ethiopians were Muslim, and further that they were suffering at the hands of a Christian lead-

ership and yearned for an Islamist revolution. However, Ethiopia’s only significant Muslim border community was in Benishangul and Disa, north-east of Damazin in the Sudanese border state of Blue Nile, and this region became a centre for Sudan Armed Forces’ efforts to train and supply various dissident groups, the most significant being the Islamist Benishangul People’s Liberation Movement (Young, 1999, p. 344). According to the former Ethiopian chief of defence staff, Lt. Gen. Tsadkan Gebretensae, he and Meles Zenawi repeatedly visited Khartoum during this period and pleaded with their Sudanese military and political counterparts to stop these efforts, knowing that there was no appetite in Ethiopia for Sudanese political Islam and that the Sudanese army was no match for the Ethiopian army,<sup>8</sup> but the al-Turabi-inspired militants did not back down.

Meanwhile, the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) had been established in 1991. It was made up of armed and unarmed northern and southern Sudanese groups—including the SPLA—that opposed the NIF. Based in Asmara, the NDA’s political cornerstone was the 1995 Asmara Declaration, which committed the signatories to struggle for a united Sudan and the right of southern Sudanese to national self-determination (Collins, 2008, p. 213). Despite its apparent widespread support, the NDA was militarily ineffective. More significant was the regional alliance of Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Uganda that was created to confront Sudan. This alliance was supported by the United States, which provided USD 20 million in military aid to what it considered these ‘front line states’ to defend themselves against Sudanese Islamist incursions (Young, 2019, p. 41). Coming in the wake of US president Bill Clinton’s imposition of sanctions on Sudan, the designation of the country as a ‘state sponsor of terrorism’ in August 1993, and Clinton’s signing of a bill authorizing the United States to directly supply the SPLA, the US administration made clear

its commitment to regime change in Sudan (Young, 2019, p. 44).

Relations between Sudan and its neighbours continued to deteriorate, reaching a new low on 25 June 1995 with the attempted assassination of Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak during a visit to Addis Ababa to attend a summit of the Organization of African Unity. The would-be assassins were Egyptian, but had arrived from Sudan, and the three that the Ethiopian security services did not kill fled back to Sudan, after which they disappeared. The Egyptian security forces concluded that al-Turabi masterminded the attack (African Studies Center, 1995). According to one well-informed source, however, Meles' own assessment laid responsibility for the attack with the head of Sudan's National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS), Nafi Ali Nafi and, to a lesser extent, Vice President Ali Osman Taha.<sup>9</sup> The source continued that Meles did not think that President al-Bashir or Ambassador Osman el-Sayid were involved. Although it does not appear that al-Turabi was part of the conspiracy, it added to the backlash Sudan was experiencing because of his disruptive foreign policies.

In such circumstances, closing the Sudanese embassy in Addis Ababa would have been automatic. Instead, all the staff were dismissed except for Ambassador Osman and one of his aides. Osman was very popular among the TPLF leadership ('we love him', said one senior TPLF official<sup>10</sup>) and, as noted, Meles was apparently convinced that he had no knowledge of the assassination attempt. According to a reliable source in the Ethiopian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Osman proved to be so successful at rehabilitating Sudan's tarnished image that a senior official urged Meles to dismiss him, but was told bluntly, 'I have known Osman since I was wearing running shoes, and he is staying [in Addis Ababa]'.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, Osman stayed a record 12 years, one year after al-Bashir ordered him to return to Khartoum because of the support he received from the Ethiopian

government. Although not an Ethiopian, Osman insisted that he was a member of the EPRDF, and attended its conferences.<sup>12</sup> Osman's ties to Meles and Seyoum also served Sudan well when the EPRDF split in 2001 and the two men remained as leaders of the regime. His popularity was boosted in Ethiopian government circles by his hatred of Eritrea's president, Isaias Afwerki, and his influence increased because of his dual role as Sudan's ambassador to the African Union, as he frequently made clear in interviews with the author.

The EPRDF was nonetheless very upset that Sudan was involved in an attempt on Mubarak's life, particularly at a time when the movement was attempting to showcase its new regime. Ethiopia thus closed the Sudanese consulate in Gambella and terminated all Sudan Airways and Ethiopian Airlines flights between the two countries. It co-sponsored with Egypt a resolution in the United Nations (UN) Security Council calling for an embargo against Sudan (Young, 2012, p. 38), a rare example of cooperation between two countries historically at odds with each other over the Nile. This cooperation did not last long, however, because although fearful of the Sudanese Islamists, Cairo did not want to unduly weaken Khartoum in its war with the SPLA, which it viewed as a threat to the integrity of the Arab world. Ethiopia overcame its aversion to the SPLA, and, together with Eritrea and Uganda, provided it with support, training, and bases, and sent its own forces deep into Sudan, capturing Menza and southern Blue Nile in 1997 (Young, 2012, p. 59). Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Uganda also sent their forces into Eritrea and turned over the captured territories to the SPLA (which often lost them in short order). Egypt could only look on with concern at these developments, particularly when the Ethiopian army approached the Roseires Dam on the Blue Nile. Were it not for the outbreak of the Eritrean–Ethiopian war in 1998 it is likely that the opposition coalition and the SPLA would have overthrown the NIF.

## Ethiopian–Sudanese reconciliation

The Eritrean–Ethiopian war encouraged the reconciliation of both sides with Khartoum, since neither Addis Ababa nor Asmara could risk Sudan supporting the other. Ethiopia proved more successful in rehabilitating relations and there were allegations that in the final stages of the war in 2000 the Ethiopian army transited Sudanese territory with Khartoum's approval to outflank Eritrean forces in the west. By 1999 Sudan had stopped supporting anti-EPRDF armed groups, but because Eritrea continued to host the NDA and Darfur armed groups, Khartoum assisted Eritrean opposition groups and oversaw the establishment of the dissident Eritrean National Alliance in 2002 (Young, 2007, pp. 30–31).

The first indication that Sudan was responding to increasing military pressures became apparent in 1998, when it accepted IGAD's DoP, which it had earlier rejected (Shinn, 2005, p. 239). In November 1999 President al-Bashir made a formal visit to Addis Ababa to improve relations (Shinn, 2002, p. 3), and in late 2000 Osman el-Sayid reported that Meles and al-Bashir had met on the sidelines of the IGAD summit and agreed to strengthen bilateral relations, and Meles announced Ethiopia's decision to import gas and petroleum products from Sudan (Relief-Web, 2000). In a move that was closely linked to the change in Sudan's Ethiopian policy, al-Bashir expelled al-Turabi from the ruling NIF/NCP and jailed him in 2001. This renewal of good relations was officially confirmed when Meles visited Khartoum in early 2002.

Eritrea did not resume diplomatic relations with Sudan until December 2005, and relations between the two countries continued to be tense (GlobalSecurity.org, 2015), because UN sanctions and an arms embargo were imposed on Eritrea on 23 December 2009 for the country's alleged support of armed groups in Somalia (UNSC, 2009). Positive relations with Addis Ababa made it difficult for Khartoum to also have good relations with

Asmara, since Asmara viewed the restored Addis Ababa–Khartoum ties as a threat in a context where it remained officially at war with Ethiopia and continued to support rebels in eastern Sudan. Indeed, Eritrea played a critical role in establishing, supporting, and directing the Eastern Front rebels, and then subsequently used this relationship to improve its relations with Sudan and end its regional isolation (Young, 2006).

One of the outcomes of the Eritrean–Ethiopian war was Ethiopia’s loss of access to the ports of Massawa and Assab, and its complete dependence on Djibouti for access to the Red Sea. Sudan was therefore quick to take the strategic step of offering Addis Ababa use of Port Sudan, and an agreement was signed to that effect in May 2001 (New Humanitarian, 2001). The use of Port Sudan in turn necessitated improving road access, and Ethiopia constructed an all-weather road from Gondar to Metamma on the Sudanese border, while Sudan built a paved road from Gedaref to Galabat on its side of the Ethiopian–Sudanese border from Metamma (Young, 2002, p. 86). By the early years of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century Sudan was becoming a significant oil producer, which also became an incentive to improve relations between the two countries. Access to Sudanese oil was very attractive to energy-deficient Ethiopia, but Sudan needed good relations with its neighbours to ensure the security of its 1,600 km oil pipeline to the Red Sea, which closely borders Ethiopia and Eritrea; and, indeed, eastern Sudanese rebels based in Eritrea repeatedly attacked the pipeline (Young, 2012, p. 60).

At the time many in the international community expressed fears that with the increased revenues derived from oil, Sudan would again attempt to export political Islam, but retired Ethiopian chief of defence staff Lt. Gen. Tsadkan Gebretensae contended that in invading Sudan and supporting the SPLA Ethiopia had given Sudan a lesson that it would not soon forget,<sup>13</sup> and his assessment proved to be correct. He also noted that

Ethiopia had a much larger population than Sudan and stronger military traditions, and while Sudan expected its military capacity to expand with the growth in its oil revenues, Ethiopia concluded that its own military capacity would increase with a rapidly developing economy. For its part, Ethiopia had no interest in displacing a now-compliant Sudanese government or supporting the SPLA.

The US-influenced International Monetary Fund regularly criticized Ethiopia for its programme of state-led development and refusal to privatize its telecommunications and banking sectors (Stiglitz, 2002, p. 86), but the country’s stellar growth rates tempered these complaints. The United States was also upset at the country’s close economic and political relations with China, but this was to some extent balanced by Ethiopia’s critical security role in Somalia, Sudan, and South Sudan, and its support for the US-led global war on terror after 11 September 2001, including—for a time—the provision to the US military of a drone base in Arba Minch in southern Ethiopia (BBC, 2016).

Sudan’s efforts to improve relations with the United States focused on terminating the debilitating sanctions regime that had been in place since 1992 (HSBA, 2018, pp. 16–19). As part of these efforts Sudan assumed an important role in supporting Western efforts to overthrow Muammar Qaddafi during the so-called Arab Spring in late 2011 by allowing the use of its airspace for raids on Libya and providing targeting information (*Gulf Today*, 2011). It also severed relations with Iran on 4 January 2016 (*Sudan Tribune*, 2016a) and signed the various regional and international treaties on fighting terrorism. Sudan had smuggled weapons to Hamas in Gaza (Lister and Fahmy, 2012), perhaps together with Iran and Qatar (the latter due to their shared support of the Muslim Brotherhood), but after Israeli air attacks that included the bombing of the Yarmouk factory in Khartoum in October 2012 and a missile strike in 2011 on a car near Port Sudan airport that killed one person believed to be involved in the smuggling (Black, 2012), Sudan stopped

these actions. The country then became a major source of soldiers fighting for Saudi Arabia and the UAE in the US- and British-backed war against the Yemeni Houthis (*Sudan Tribune*, 2018b). With Sudan bringing its foreign policy in line with US interests in early 2017, the United States and Sudan announced the resumption of military relations and it was revealed that the CIA would open a large office in Khartoum (Middle East Monitor, 2017). Although Sudan continued to suffer from its US designation as a ‘state supporter of terrorism’, the US State Department had acknowledged in 2010 that

*no al Qaeda elements had been present in Sudan with the knowledge and consent of the Sudanese government since 2000, and also stated in its 2007 country report on Sudan that Khartoum had become a ‘strong partner’ in the global war on terrorism (Stratfor, 2010).*

Sudan’s moves to improve relations with the United States and Ethiopia were not welcomed in Egypt, in a regional context dominated by zero-sum political calculations. Cairo was also unhappy at the presence of Ethiopian peacekeepers in the White Nile basin of South Sudan, and at Addis Ababa’s leadership of the IGAD South Sudanese peace process after civil war broke out in Juba in December 2013. Based on the perception that Ethiopia favoured the rebel Sudan People’s Liberation Movement-in-Opposition (SPLM-IO) in the IGAD negotiations, Cairo began supplying the South Sudanese government with weapons, was accused of bombing SPLA-IO positions, and wanted to have its own peacekeepers in the upper White Nile basin, which caused alarm in Addis Ababa (Young, 2019, p. 123).

The Egyptian government also looked with alarm at Ethiopia’s commitment to developing its water resources on a massive scale. When Ethiopia began constructing the USD 4.8 billion Renaissance Dam on the Blue Nile near the Sudanese border in 2011, Sudan and Egypt loudly complained and repeated their adherence to the agreements of 1929 and 1959 that

divided control of the water between them (Tedla, 2017). But in March 2012 al-Bashir reversed previous policy and announced that Sudan supported the construction of the Renaissance Dam (Tekle, 2012). This dramatic twist was the product of three developments:

- 1) The Nile Basin Initiative (NBI), which was established in 1999 and comprised ten Nile basin countries, with Eritrea included as an observer, had encouraged a realignment of regional politics (NBI, 2019a). Apart from Egypt and Sudan, the other countries were united in rejecting the colonial-era treaties on the division of the Nile waters. According to the NBI, in 2010 and 2011 most of the NBI signatories—apart from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Egypt, South Sudan, and Sudan—signed the Cooperative Framework Agreement on sharing the benefits of the Nile (NBI, 2019b). In the context of the emerging regional consensus, Sudan was isolated from its neighbouring states. Meanwhile, Egyptian leaders went so far as to consider destroying the dam, as was recorded on live television during a meeting that those present thought was secret (Stack, 2013). Sudan would not want its good relations with Ethiopia to be undermined by such projects.
- 2) For reasons explained above, Sudan acknowledged that its security and economy depended more on its relations with Ethiopia than with Egypt.
- 3) Sudan increasingly came to realize that existing agreements would not serve its interests. Indeed, the EPRDF leadership in Ethiopia had long tried to convince Sudan that it would gain more access to Nile water by disavowing the 1959 agreement, since the Blue Nile, which provides 85 per cent of the total Nile water, is completely contained within the borders of Ethiopia and Sudan. Moreover, the development of Sudan's oil industry provided a revenue stream, some of which was channelled into hydroelectric projects (notably the Merowe

“ In March 2012 al-Bashir reversed previous policy and announced that Sudan supported the construction of the Renaissance Dam.”

Dam at the Fourth Cataract) and agricultural development, particularly irrigation schemes on the Blue Nile. As a result, the height of the Roseires Dam was extended to increase its water storage capacity (Cascão and Nicol, 2016, p. 562). This was not popular in Egypt, because it would no longer be able to utilize water that Sudan did not have the capacity to use. Sudan concluded that the construction of the Renaissance Dam would enable it to utilize more water from its own allocation, instead of allowing this water to flow downstream to Egypt; end the seasonal fluctuations of the river and allow the expansion of agriculture; and permit two or three crop rotations every year instead of one (Saleh and Aglionby, 2017).

However, some experts held that, on balance, Sudan would suffer from the construction of the Renaissance Dam. According to one such expert, the dam's 'very high capacity in an unsafe location along with the lack of consensual agreement between Ethiopia, Egypt and Sudan will probably lead to conflict between the three countries' (Saeed, 2018). Be that as it may, Egypt's Aswan High Dam not only provided the country with power and water security, but served as a powerful symbol of Egypt's 'hegemony over the river', and the Renaissance Dam will challenge this status quo (Dessu, 2019). Sudan could not have made its recognition of Ethiopia's rising status clearer than by deserting Egypt in favour of aligning itself with Ethiopia on the issue of the dam.

The mutual interests of Ethiopia and Sudan did not stop there, but included growing business ties as Sudan became an important source of capital, entrepreneurial talent, and technology for the rapidly growing Ethiopian economy. A major step in cementing relations between Ethiopia and Sudan was the signing of a preferential trade agreement in 2005 that abolished trade barriers between the two countries and significantly increased trade (Ventures Africa, 2013). Ethiopia and Sudan were also working together on the Ethiopia–Sudan Transmission Interconnection Project, a high-voltage transmission line connecting the two countries, which would be the first step in constructing an integrated power system in the Eastern Nile region (GlobalSecurity.org, 2016).

While figures are hard to come by, the head of the Sudanese Investors Society in Addis Ababa said in 2014 that Sudanese capital investment in Ethiopia totalled USD 2.4 billion, while the Ethiopian Ministry of Industry said that some 800 Sudanese companies operated in Ethiopia (*Sudan Tribune*, 2014). In contrast, the Central Bank of Sudan's own trade statistics indicated that in 2013 Sudan's exports to Ethiopia totalled USD 51.3 million (compared with USD 96.4 million worth of exports to Egypt), and that imports amounted to just USD 29.9 million (compared with USD 743 million in imports from Egypt) (*Economist*, 2014).

As well as the economy, ties between Ethiopia and Sudan have included agreements on security, border demarcation, and trade. Indicative of the positive

“ As well as the economy, ties between Ethiopia and Sudan have included agreements on security, border demarcation, and trade. ”

relations between Khartoum and Addis Ababa, Sudan welcomed the presence of Ethiopian peacekeeping troops—and only Ethiopian troops—in the disputed territory of Abyei under UN Security Resolution 1990 (UN Peacekeeping, 2019).

Despite their rapprochement over the allocation of Nile water, their shared border determined by the British at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century without the involvement of the Ethiopian government has proved to be a continuing irritant to relations between Ethiopia and Sudan (Teshome-Bahiru, 2009). Particularly contentious was the Al Fashaga area of Sudan, south-east of Gedaref, which has 600,000 acres of much-sought-after fertile land that was particularly attractive to frequently destitute Ethiopian peasants; however, despite periodic flare-ups, authorities on both sides of the border, as well as Ethiopia’s then state minister of foreign affairs, Takada Alemu, assured the author during visits to the area in 2002 and 2005 that relations between the countries were cordial and that the problem was being satisfactorily managed (Young, 2007, p. 49). Nonetheless, this area continued to be a source of tension.

## New leaderships and changing regional dynamics

At the core of Ethiopian–Sudanese relations were the ties between Prime Minister Meles Zenawi and President Omar al-Bashir. Meles’ death in 2012 therefore meant that the carefully constructed ties of more than 12 years faced new challenges. These challenges were not imme-

diately apparent with the appointment of Meles’ chosen successor, Hailemariam Desalegn, because his designated task was to continue Meles’ legacy, including maintaining good relations with the leaders of neighbouring states, with the exception of Eritrean president Isaias Afwerki. Although the EPRDF showed increasing signs of division after Meles’ death, the TPLF continued to dominate the formal leadership in both Ethiopia’s political and military spheres, which ensured continuity. Indeed, new trade agreements reached in 2013 led one international business media group to describe relations between Ethiopia and Sudan as ‘a model for regional integration’ (Ventures Africa, 2013).

It soon became apparent, however, that Hailemariam would only be a transitional figure. By 2014 the crisis in the EPRDF was deepening, and in October 2016 it announced a state of emergency and began to imprison thousands of people (HRW, 2016). Ethiopia’s booming economy slowed, and conflicts of various kinds produced 1.4 million new internally displaced persons (IDPs) in 2018, the highest levels of conflict-driven displaced people in the world. Of the 2.8 million total IDPs in Ethiopia, more than 2.2 million were as a result of some form of conflict (HIU, 2018). Parallel to this, Oromo and Amhara youths opposed what they held to be the TPLF’s domination of the Ethiopian government, and they blocked roads and forced Tigrayans living in the Oromo and Amhara regional states to leave (Dahir, 2016).

Hailemariam also had border problems with Sudan: in an interview with the former Sudanese ambassador to Ethiopia,

Osman Nafie, journalist Daniel Berhane asked about 25 Sudanese resident in Al Fashaga who were killed in November 2015, and about the 420,000 hectares of Sudanese land cultivated by Ethiopian farmers that were seized with the seeming connivance of the Amhara regional government (Berhane, 2015). While Osman described relations between Ethiopia and Sudan as ‘excellent’ in the early stages of the interview, he concluded that ‘Ethiopia is now under the control of a tribe [the Tigray] different from the tribe at the border [the Amhara]. So the central government [the TPLF] turn [sic] a blind eye to it’ (Berhane, 2015).

Problems continued in Al Fashaga, and in August 2018 Ethiopians who had illegally crossed the still un-demarcated border for the planting season were killed (*Sudan Tribune*, 2018c). By early 2020 and the formation of a new government in Khartoum the Al Fashaga border problem had yet to be resolved, but historic border disagreements between Ethiopia and Eritrea, and between Sudan and Egypt, suggest that such disputes only become threatening when state-to-state relations are poor, and Ethiopian–Sudanese relations remain positive. While the Al Fashaga issue has repeatedly flared up, it is part of a broader problem of border demarcation. For many years repeated announcements have been made in Addis Ababa and Khartoum about progress in demarcating the border, such as the announcement in January 2016 that the process would be completed that year (*Sudan Tribune*, 2016b), but the issue remains unresolved and this suggests that the problem is not technical, but political.

Added to the problem of Al Fashaga, in 2019 there was a movement of small arms from Sudan to Ethiopia that is believed to be due to demand in the Amhara and Oromo regions, where armed groups are operating and conditions of instability prevail. Ethiopian foreign minister Workneh Gebeyehu blamed lax controls on the Sudanese side for the proliferation of weapons (*Sudan Tribune*, 2019), but no one the author spoke to about this

issue held that either the Sudanese government or its security forces were behind the movement of these arms.

The growing internal problems undermined Hailemariam's premiership, however, and, after losing control of growing Oromo and Amhara resistance to the central government, he was compelled to resign in February 2018. On 2 April it was announced that Abiy Ahmed—an Oromo, retired lieutenant colonel in the intelligence services, and evangelical Christian—would be prime minister of Ethiopia and chairperson of the EPRDF. Abiy was able to come to power because of a tactical alliance between the Amhara and Oromo components of the four parties that made up the EPRDF (the other two are Tigray and the Southern Region) to isolate the TPLF (BBC, 2019a). As well as radically changing policies the EPRDF had pursued since 1991, he dismissed Tigrayan ministers and officials in the government, Tigrayan heads of the army and national security, and many generals. Abiy thus made clear that he viewed the TPLF as the major threat to his regime.

Abiy's role as prime minister introduced an element of uncertainty into Ethiopian–Sudanese relations, because Sudanese political and military officials had developed close relations with the Tigrayans who dominated these spheres until then. At first things looked positive: on 1 May 2018 Ethiopia and Sudan agreed to set up joint forces to protect the Renaissance Dam, which is only 20 km from the Sudanese border with Ethiopia (Middle East Monitor, 2018), and two days later Abiy made a two-day visit to Khartoum (Borkena.com, 2018); however, according to sources in Addis Ababa and Khartoum, Abiy warned al-Bashir and his government not to meet with the TPLF, which was now held to be politically defunct, and told them that failure to act accordingly would be viewed unfavourably. The Ethiopian foreign minister, Workneh Gebeyehu, further emphasized this message, saying that the Sudanese government 'should take the concern of Ethiopia very seriously' with regard to arms trafficking and that diplomatic relations would be nega-

tively affected if it failed to do so (*Sudan Tribune*, 2019).

During a diplomatic meeting between the countries in Addis Ababa, Abiy said that Salah Gosh, the head of Sudan's NISS, had met with the dismissed Ethiopian security head—and ranking member of the TPLF—Getachew Assefa, but a Sudanese official rejected the claim that such a meeting had taken place.<sup>14</sup> Abiy's concerns about a Khartoum–Tigray alliance were also likely due to a meeting that former ambassador Osman el-Sayid held with dismissed TPLF officials in Khartoum, to Osman's public espousal of the TPLF, and to his perceived concerns over Abiy's leadership. But Osman had not been a government representative for many years and his actions were those of a private citizen. According to a former high-level Ministry of Foreign Affairs official, al-Bashir convinced Abiy that Sudan's relations were with Ethiopia and not with particular officials, and that the Sudanese government wanted to deepen the already close relations between the two countries.<sup>15</sup>

The thrust of Abiy's summit with al-Bashir was lost on Asmara, which held that the meeting was devoted to planning the overthrow of the Eritrean government by supporting an unnamed Qatari-funded jihadist group based in Khartoum (Ashine, 2018). This allegation had its origins in the visit of Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan to Khartoum in late December 2017, and the announcement that Turkey would rehabilitate Sudan's historic Red Sea island of Suakin as a tourist site and a transit point for pilgrims from Turkey to Saudi Arabia's holy sites (Kucukgocmen and Abdelaziz, 2017). There was also talk of a free trade zone. Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the UAE claimed this announcement was a subterfuge to disguise the construction of a Turkish naval base (Tastekin, 2018). Amid these rising tensions Sudan claimed that Egyptian and UAE troops had taken up positions in Eritrea and in response declared a state of emergency in eastern Sudan, closed the border with Eritrea, and moved troops to the area (*Sudan Tribune*, 2018a).

There was another thread to this spat. In April 2016 Cairo had signed a controversial agreement with Riyadh to hand over two strategically important Red Sea islands, Tiran and Sanafir, to Saudi Arabia. As part of this deal the parties unilaterally recognized Egypt's sovereignty over the contested border territory known as the Hala'ib Triangle. In response to this claim, Sudan sent a letter to the UN declaring its total rejection of the deal and, as a result of various outstanding disagreements, on 4 January 2018 Sudan briefly recalled its ambassador from Cairo (Adam, 2018).

While it is difficult to disentangle these claims, there is reason to doubt there was a formal agreement between Sudan and Turkey to establish a naval base at Suakin, there was no significant assignment of Egyptian and UAE troops to Eritrea, and Ethiopia and Sudan did not agree to support a jihadi group to destabilize Eritrea. But the crisis speaks to the mistrust among countries in the region, exacerbated by the conflict between Qatar, and Saudi Arabia and the UAE; the increasing militarization of the Red Sea; Egyptian anger at Sudan for endorsing the construction of the Renaissance Dam; and uncertainty about the foreign policy of the new government in Addis Ababa.

On 9 July 2018, two months after Abiy's visit to Khartoum, it was announced that Ethiopia and Eritrea had reached a peace agreement, and in September the border that had been closed between the countries since 1998 was reopened (Otieno, 2018). In November the UN Security Council ended sanctions against Eritrea (BBC, 2018). The breakthrough in relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea was largely possible because the TPLF was no longer the dominant party in Ethiopia (Woldemariam, 2019, p. 183), and 'it is not unreasonable to think that one element of the thaw was the mutual desire of Abiy and [Eritrean president] Isaias to corral the TPLF' (Woldemariam, 2019, p. 185). This went a long way to ending Eritrea's isolation and also produced various changes in Somalia,

# “ Officials report that Abiy hopes to maintain positive relations with both China and the United States, but this may not be possible.”

although it is not yet clear if these will be truly reconciliatory. Sudan initially felt threatened by these rapid developments and claimed Eritrean interference in its domestic affairs (Woldemariam, 2019, p. 186).

On the eve of the palace coup that overthrew al-Bashir in April 2019 Eritrea accused Qatar, Sudan, and Turkey of conducting ‘sporadic acts of subversion’ in a bid to obstruct the peace process with Ethiopia (Eritrean Ministry of Information, 2019). But in late April Eritrea closed its border with Ethiopia for reasons that an Ethiopian Ministry of Foreign Affairs official could not explain.<sup>16</sup> The official noted that after a year of Ethiopian requests there was still no agreement on the value of the country’s respective currencies (a major cause of the 1998 Eritrean–Ethiopian war) or on trade relations. As a result, the optimism that had prevailed a year earlier, which was held to be a major achievement for Abiy and established his credentials as a peacemaker, was in decline.

Although Abiy has overseen a measure of political freedom, he has struggled to resolve the multitude of internal disputes that have made Ethiopia host to the largest number of conflict-driven IDPs in the world. Moreover, his policy of allowing the return of foreign-based armed groups to Ethiopia has increased tensions in the country. This became evident when on 22 June 2019 Brig. Gen. Asaminew Tsige, head of the Amhara Peace and Security Bureau, allegedly ordered the killing of the chief of staff of the Ethiopian army, while at least three other senior officials in different parts of the country were also killed (Endeshaw, 2019; Manek,

2019). Asaminew had previously been jailed for attempting a coup in 2009, but Abiy had pardoned him (Mandefro, 2019). He was closely associated with Amhara nationalist groups and had openly advised the Amhara to arm themselves in a video on social media (BBC, 2019b). Abiy responded to the crisis by shutting down the internet and arresting 225 suspects, only five of whom were brought before the courts (Africanews, 2019).

The states in the Horn of Africa have tried to maintain a neutral position in the Gulf conflict being played out in Yemen, but this has proved to be difficult. In the context of the conflict Eritrea was the first country in the region to take up a position: it sided with Saudi Arabia and the UAE and permitted the latter to use the port of Assab in their war against the Houthis in Yemen. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have increased their security engagement in the Red Sea and the Horn and were critical to reconciling Eritrea and Ethiopia. Since these are US-aligned states, and because Abiy appears to be reducing Ethiopia’s ties with China and moving away from the EPRDF model of state-led development, endorsing neoliberalism, and aligning Ethiopia with US allies (Saudi Arabia and the UAE), this suggests that a further realignment may be in the making, with Ethiopia moving closer to the United States. Officials in Addis Ababa report that Abiy hopes to maintain positive relations with both China and the United States, but this may not be possible.<sup>17</sup> Nor is it likely that the United States can assist Ethiopia in a similar way to that of China, which in recent years has provided soft loans for industrial parks, provided financing for

the Addis Ababa–Djibouti rail line, and constructed a light rapid-transit system in Addis Ababa (Davis, 2019).

While Ethiopia managed to assume a more or less neutral position in the Yemen war, Sudan contributed the largest component of the Saudi- and UAE-aligned ground forces fighting there, and simultaneously attempted to maintain ties with Qatar and strengthen relations with Turkey. Al-Bashir’s flirtation with Turkey was due to three things:

- 1) the failure of Saudi Arabia and the UAE to provide the finances needed to keep his tottering regime afloat;
- 2) the Sudanese president’s annoyance with Egypt’s refusal to negotiate over the Hala’ib Triangle; and
- 3) grievances with the United States, which continued to designate Sudan as a state sponsor of terrorism.

Al-Bashir also reached out to Russian Federation president Vladimir Putin, who flew him to a meeting in Sochi in November 2017, where he was quoted as saying, ‘We are in need of protection from the aggressive acts of the United States’ (Dabanga, 2017). Although there was talk of the provision of Russian Federation weapons to Sudan and the establishment of a base on the Red Sea, the only agreement reached was on the Russian Federation navy’s use of Sudanese ports, and there is no indication that this will be implemented (Middle East Monitor, 2019).

After the outbreak of civil war in South Sudan in December 2013 a peace process was organized under IGAD auspices and led by Ethiopia under the direction of former foreign minister Seyoum Mesfin. Two deputies assisted Seyoum: Kenyan general Lazarus Sumbweyo—who had led the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) peace process and disrupted Seyoum’s efforts to resolve the new crisis in South Sudan because he wanted to lead the initiative—and Sudanese general Ahmed Mustafa (Young, 2019, p. 117). Although repeated failures marked Seyoum’s mediation, Ethiopia clung to its leadership of the peace pro-

cess, which is why it was surprising that incoming prime minister Abiy agreed in June 2018 to move the IGAD process to Sudan. A Sudanese official attributed this to Abiy's confidence in Sudan,<sup>18</sup> but it may also have been a way to marginalize Seyoum. In the event, al-Bashir and his minister of foreign affairs, Dirdiery Ahmed, were able to persuade President Salva Kiir and most of the opposition to sign the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) in September 2018 (IGAD, 2018).

Although these efforts did not win the endorsement of the United States and its Western allies, they made clear the importance of Sudan to the stability of South Sudan, and that this is of vital importance to Ethiopia, which has been adversely impacted by the South Sudanese civil war, particularly in Ethiopia's border state of Gambella. As of March 2020 SPLM-IO leader Riek Machar had been appointed first vice president and Salva Kiir agreed to return the number and boundaries of states in South Sudan to their pre-war status. But the cantonment of opposition forces that were to be integrated into the armed forces; the process of unifying the national security forces; the prospects for disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration; and the appointment of governorships and county administrations all remain deeply contested. Many of these challenges have fuelled national and local conflict dynamics in the past. In 2020, even with the formation of a unity government that includes Riek Machar again serving as first vice present, the country remains highly unstable.

Moreover, with the end of the CPA process and the establishment of an independent South Sudan, Sudan became less of a priority for successive US governments, particularly the Trump administration which was not influenced by the various anti-al-Bashir and pro-SPLM lobby groups that had close links to the Clinton and Obama presidencies (Young, 2019). Also noteworthy is the position of Ethiopian prime minister Abiy, whose legiti-

macy is based on his commitment to democratic reforms, but in public statements he praised both the Sudanese demonstrators and the generals of the Transitional Military Council (TMC) for 'heeding the call' of the Sudanese people (ENA, 2019). Adopting these dual positions may have made him an acceptable mediator to the TMC, but the latter did not initially accept his proposals of 7 June 2019 that talks between it and the opposition should take place in Addis Ababa or that there should be a rapid transition to civilian rule.

The problem of achieving stable relations in the Horn of Africa has been made even more difficult with the Trump administration's new Africa Strategy. According to President Trump's then national security advisor, John Bolton, one strand of this tripartite strategy focuses on confronting China and the Russian Federation, because their practices

*stunt economic growth in Africa; threaten the financial independence of African nations; inhibit opportunities for U.S. investment; interfere with U.S. military operations; and pose a significant threat to U.S. national security interests* (National Security Council, 2018).

He also said that the United States will only provide aid to countries that advance US interests—and presumably do not partner with either the Russian Federation or China.

This proved to be constraining under al-Bashir, and will prove equally restrictive under the post-al-Bashir transitional government. Al-Bashir had gone some way to end the US state supporter of terrorism designation, but did not want to break his positive ties with China and growing links with the Russian Federation. In 2017 China was Sudan's largest trading partner, with a bilateral annual trade volume of USD 2.8 billion, accounting for 21 per cent of Sudan's total imports and exports (Li, 2018). Al-Bashir was also anxious to play a key role in China's Belt and Road Initiative (Xinhua, 2018) and had benefitted from Chinese support in

the UN Security Council (Al Jazeera, 2019). Meanwhile, the Russian Federation is a potential source of weapons for Sudan, and has been a diplomatic partner in Sudan's peacemaking efforts in the Central African Republic, while Sudan's links with it, like those with China, ensure a measure of balance to Sudanese foreign relations.

However, many people active in the Sudanese uprising viewed both China and the Russian Federation negatively because of their political association with al-Bashir (Fanack, 2019). The transitional government's approach to foreign policy is yet to be revealed, but past experience suggests that the Sudanese people would like it to be independent and balanced. Against this background it is noteworthy that, according to Ethiopia's director of regional affairs, Dawit Yirga, a high-level military delegation from Ethiopia visited Khartoum within days of the TMC being formed, and that the TMC in turn met with senior Ethiopian military officials in Addis Ababa a few days later to discuss issues such as the movement of guns across the border, to assure the Ethiopians that the Sudanese military remains committed to continuing cordial relations, and to reaffirm Sudan's support for the Renaissance Dam.<sup>19</sup> It is no secret, however, that Egypt is pressing the Sudanese transitional government to withdraw or reduce its support for the dam. There is no reason to think that, whatever the shape of the transitional government, there would be any support for upsetting the carefully constructed relations between Ethiopia and Sudan, but under the present unstable conditions in both countries and in the region the situation could quickly spin out of control.

## Conclusion

Sudan's relations with Ethiopia have been negatively shaped by internal tensions and revolts largely caused by ethnocratic governments in both countries that were unwilling to grant rights to marginalized communities. This was most graphically

illustrated by the secession of Eritrea and South Sudan. Relations have also been shaped by the involvement of foreign powers motivated by the strategic importance of Ethiopia and Sudan, including their location adjacent to the Red Sea and the Nile, their proximity to the Middle East, and Sudan's abundant natural resources. In much of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the cold war both shaped and was itself shaped by the conflicts within and between Ethiopia and Sudan. But the end of the cold war brought new conditions and very different governments than those of the past to the fore in both countries.

The NIF's rise to power in 1989 and its export of political Islam produced tense relations with Sudan's neighbours, particularly Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Uganda. After a brief period of cordial relations with Ethiopia, they reached a low in June 1995 with the attempted assassination of Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak in Addis Ababa in which Sudanese Islamists were implicated. Coming to power at the end of the cold war, the NIF failed to understand that it did not have the capacity to directly challenge a militarily superior Ethiopia or subvert regional allies of the United States, which had become the sole super-power. Although Muslims in Ethiopia were historically mistreated, this changed with the revolution of 1974, and there was no indication that they were prepared to challenge the incoming EPRDF government as the al-Turabi-inspired Sudanese Islamists believed. Not only was the attempt to export political Islam a complete failure; it also mobilized Sudan's neighbours and almost brought about the NIF's collapse. So powerful was this shock that a more moderate Islamist leadership—a leadership no less ruthless, but one that was not prepared to support adventurist foreign policies, and instead work to improve relations with Addis Ababa—assumed a dominant position in the Sudanese government.

Survival was the main incentive for Khartoum's dramatic change in foreign policy, but economic links with Ethiopia—

which had one of the fastest growing economies in the world—also proved to be an important impetus. Developing relations with Ethiopia served to curb the influence of Egypt, and this upset Cairo, which had long viewed Sudan as an extension of Egypt, and Ethiopia as its strategic enemy, because of the two countries' competition over the Nile. Sudan's close relations with Addis Ababa also made it difficult for Khartoum to have positive relations with Asmara, which viewed Ethiopia as an existential threat. There were many peaks in relations between Ethiopia and Sudan, but what stands out was Sudan's 2012 rejection of the 1959 agreement (which had effectively given Egypt and Sudan a monopoly over the Nile's water allocation), and its endorsement of Ethiopia's Renaissance Dam.

Egypt has never accepted these decisions, and it continues to press Sudan to change its position. A senior member of the FFC, which assumed joint power with the military in August 2019 (see Dabanga, 2019), said that all major decisions of the previous government, including support of the dam, will be reviewed.<sup>20</sup> If they continue to limit Egypt's influence over Sudanese policy, al-Bashir's successors in the weak transitional government may conclude—or be pressured to conclude—that by maintaining close relations with Addis Ababa they would unwisely and unduly upset Cairo. Moreover, even basic assumptions about long-term hydroelectricity imports from Ethiopia after the completion of the Renaissance Dam are now open to question, given the instability in that country and the rapid and unexpected development of what appears to be very large gas deposits in Egypt, creating expectations that the latter will become a gas exporter (*Egypt Today*, 2019; TRT World, 2019). As a result, plans are afoot for Sudan to import electricity from Egypt.<sup>21</sup>

The efforts of al-Bashir and Meles to develop positive relations between their two countries during the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century deserve recognition and made the Horn a less dangerous region

than it could otherwise have been. While civil servants are rarely recognized for political achievements, Ambassador Osman el-Sayid was also 'instrumental'—in the words of a regional diplomat—in achieving a long period of constructive relations between Ethiopia and Sudan,<sup>22</sup> even if his TPLF/EPRDF partisanship briefly threatened relations between Khartoum and Addis Ababa after the dismissal of TPLF officials from Abiy Ahmed's government. While Meles' legacy is mixed, al-Bashir will be most remembered for the virtual destruction of his country, and his success in achieving cordial relations with Ethiopia may be one of his few accomplishments during 30 years in power. Both leaders have departed the scene, and their successor governments are very different in character, which adds to the difficulty of predicting how relations between the two countries will unfold.

The increasingly unstable environment in the region and beyond poses new challenges to Ethiopian–Sudanese relations. Although both countries have benefitted from investment and loans from the wealthy Gulf states, and Ethiopia's long, tense relations with Eritrea have improved with assistance from Saudi and Emirati mediation, Gulf engagement has not been motivated by altruism, but is aimed at gaining political and military advantage and undermining competitors in the Middle East. Moreover, Saudi, Emirati, and Egyptian support for Sudan's generals during the country's recent uprising was geared towards halting the democratic tide, weakening the Muslim Brotherhood, and backing conservative authoritarian governments cast in their own mould. Sudanese and Ethiopians are aware of the real interests of these countries, but their own countries are politically weak and face major economic crises, so despite a long history of defending their national sovereignty, it is very difficult for them to reject the advances of their powerful neighbours. Indeed, according to one regional diplomat, 'the Gulf and the Horn of Africa are becoming one geopolitical unit'.<sup>23</sup> Ethiopia appears to have accepted the

embrace of Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and although Sudanese demonstrators during the uprising opposed these countries and Egypt for their support of the generals, political and economic necessity may well bring Sudan into their orbit, the more so because they are key regional allies of the United States, whose backing the fledgling Sudanese government believes is needed to address Sudan's many economic and political problems.

Also of concern is the competition between the United States, on the one hand, and China and the Russian Federation, on the other, which will be played out in Africa, and the United States is unlikely to permit countries such as Ethiopia and Sudan to be neutral. Working their way through this morass will prove a major challenge for those in both countries tasked with managing Ethiopian–Sudanese relations.

Finally, the great unknown is the shape of the Sudanese transitional government. The question remains as to whether the civilians and generals who make up the government can work constructively with each other, and there are doubts as to whether the government will survive its designated 39-month period. Ethiopia is also vulnerable to internal ethnonationalist conflict and undergoing unprecedented political and economic change. Its economic boom has ended, its internal displacement problems have not been overcome, and in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic the August 2020 national elections have been postponed. The roughly 20 years of cooperative and stable relations between Ethiopia and Sudan have come to an end, and both countries are entering unpredictable territory that will also have a marked impact on the wider region. ●

## Abbreviations and acronyms

<b>CIA</b>	Central Intelligence Agency
<b>CPA</b>	Comprehensive Peace Agreement
<b>DoP</b>	Declaration of Principles
<b>DUP</b>	Democratic Unionist Party
<b>ELF</b>	Eritrean Liberation Front
<b>EPLF</b>	Eritrean People's Liberation Front (later the People's Front for Democracy and Justice)
<b>EPRDF</b>	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front
<b>FFC</b>	Forces for Freedom and Change
<b>IDP</b>	Internally displaced person
<b>IGAD</b>	Intergovernmental Authority on Development
<b>MFA</b>	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
<b>NBI</b>	Nile Basin Initiative
<b>NCP</b>	National Congress Party
<b>NDA</b>	National Democratic Alliance
<b>NIF</b>	National Islamic Front
<b>NISS</b>	National Intelligence and Security Service
<b>R-ARCSS</b>	Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan
<b>SCP</b>	Sudanese Communist Party
<b>SPLA</b>	Sudan People's Liberation Army
<b>SPLM</b>	Sudan People's Liberation Movement
<b>SPLM-IO</b>	Sudan People's Liberation Movement-in-Opposition
<b>TMC</b>	Transitional Military Council
<b>TPLF</b>	Tigray People's Liberation Front
<b>UAE</b>	United Arab Emirates
<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>USD</b>	United States dollar(s)

## Endnotes

- 1 See, for example, Fabunmi (1960); Woodward (1979); Daly (1991).
- 2 The research presented here draws on the extensive experience of the author, who has worked and periodically lived in Sudan and Ethiopia since 1986, and uses data gathered during recent field trips carried out in Addis Ababa and Khartoum from late April to early June 2019. Primary

and secondary sources have also been used to triangulate the data.

- 3 See, for instance, de Waal (2019); Nyabola (2018).
- 4 The terms of the agreement did not specify how 'an equal share' was to be calculated, and this concept was never determined.
- 5 Author interview with Osman el-Sayid, former Sudanese ambassador to Ethiopia, Khartoum, 9 May 2019.
- 6 Author interview with Lt. Gen. (ret.) Tsadkan Gebretensae, former Ethiopian chief of defence staff, Addis Ababa, 6 May 2019.
- 7 Author interview with Lt. Gen. (ret.) Tsadkan Gebretensae, former Ethiopian chief of defence staff, Addis Ababa, 26 May 2001.
- 8 Author interview with Lt. Gen. (ret.) Tsadkan Gebretensae, former Ethiopian chief of defence staff, Addis Ababa, 6 May 2019.
- 9 Author interview with a well-informed source, Khartoum, date withheld.
- 10 Author interview with a senior TPLF official, Addis Ababa, date withheld.
- 11 Author interview with reliable source in the Ethiopian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), Addis Ababa, 10 March 1997.
- 12 Author interview with Ambassador Osman el-Sayid, Khartoum, 23 November 2018.
- 13 Author interview with Lt. Gen. (ret.) Tsadkan Gebretensae, former Ethiopian chief of defence staff, Addis Ababa, 26 May 2001.
- 14 Author interview with a former high-level Sudanese MFA official, Khartoum, 10 May 2019.
- 15 Author interview with a former high-level Sudanese MFA official, Khartoum, 10 May 2019.
- 16 Author interview with an Ethiopian MFA official, Addis Ababa, 4 May 2019.
- 17 Author interview with a regional diplomat, Addis Ababa, 4 May 2019.
- 18 Author interview with a senior Sudanese diplomat, Khartoum, 12 May 2019.
- 19 Author interview with Dawit Yirga, director of regional affairs, Ethiopian MFA, Addis Ababa, 5 May 2019.
- 20 Author interview with a senior member of the opposition FFC coalition, Khartoum, 15 May 2019.
- 21 Author interview with Mubarak el-Fadl, businessman, politician, and former Sudanese minister of industry, Khartoum, 22 May 2019.
- 22 Author interview with a regional diplomat, Addis Ababa, 4 May 2019.
- 23 Author interview with a regional diplomat, Addis Ababa, 4 May 2019.

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