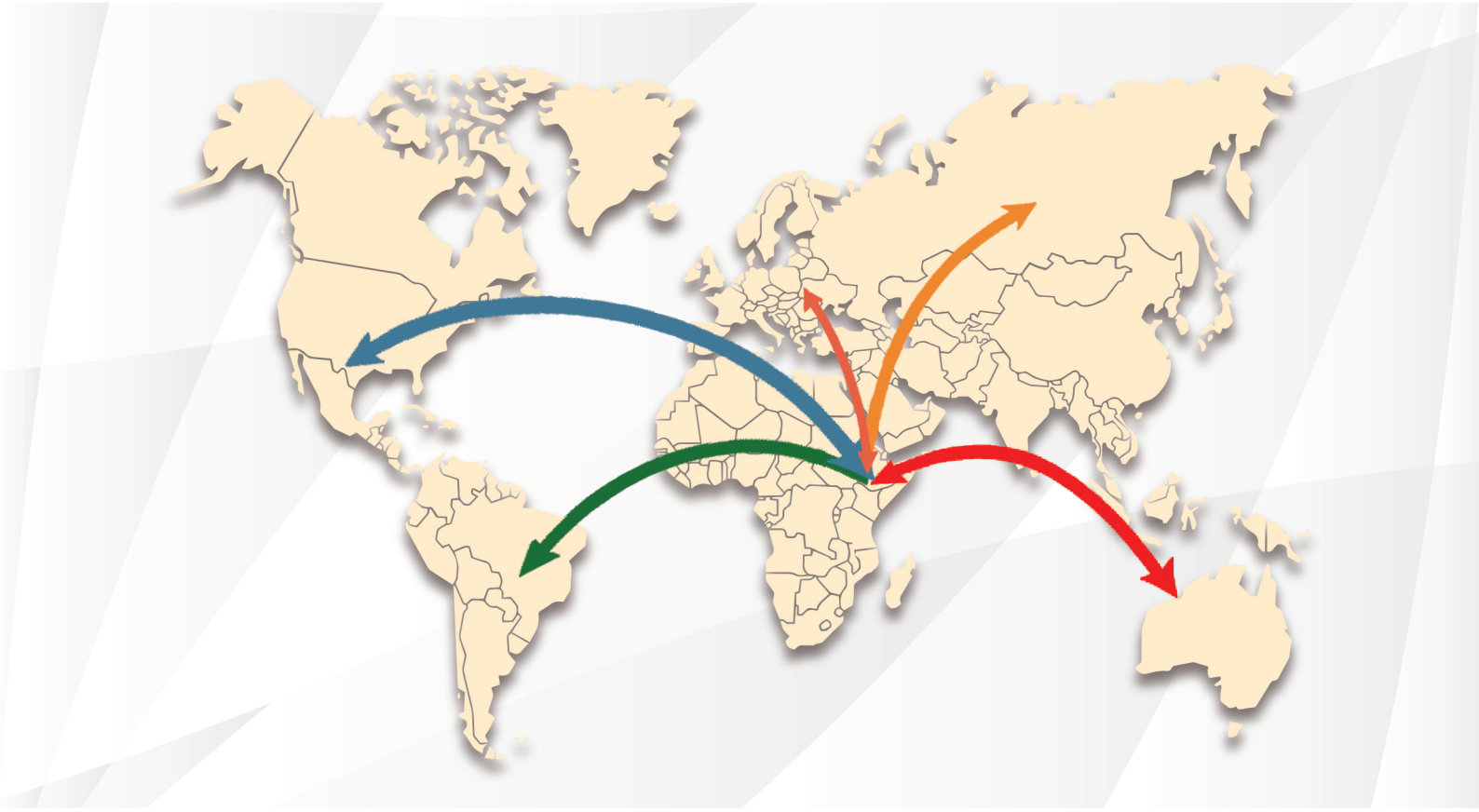
HORN REVIEW
IDEAS CONNECTIONS SYNERGY

SIXTEENTH EDITION

Grand Narratives as Foundational Constructs of Ethiopia's Foreign Policy



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About us:

Founded in 2021, Horn Review is a premier research and publication think-tank dedicated to exploring and amplifying African voices with a goal of interlinking subject matter experts, practitioners, and academics from Ethiopia, the Horn Region, and the African continent with the broader public. With a stated mission of Africa for Africans, Horn Review aims to amplify and mainstream uniquely African ideas and perspectives on sociopolitical, economic, and geostrategic issues relevant to the continent. Horn Review aims to connect African thinkers, practitioners, and policymakers with their respective communities to create greater synergy and a people-centered discourse on African matters.

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Horn Review

Table of Contents

Editor's Note

Horn Review Magazine – 16th Edition

Dear Readers,

It is with great honor that we present the 16th edition of Horn Review, a special volume dedicated exclusively to in-depth interviews with preeminent scholars and practitioners whose insights illuminate the complexities of Ethiopia and the broader Horn of Africa.

This edition unfolds with Grand Narratives Shaping Ethiopia's Foreign Policy, featuring Dr. Dereje Feyisa - whose profound scholarship in social anthropology and conflict resolution offers a critical lens into the intricate interplay between Ethiopia's internal socio-political fabric and its external diplomatic engagements. His reflections remind us that foreign policy is not merely a matter of statecraft, but a lived narrative shaped by ethnicity, identity, and transnational realities

In GERD, Agri-Reforms and the Future of Regional Integration in the Horn of Africa, Lawrence Freeman brings over three decades of analytical rigor to bear on Ethiopia's ambitious developmental trajectory. His nuanced examination of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam and agricultural reforms situates these projects not simply as national milestones, but as catalysts with profound implications for regional interdependence, cooperation, and contestation.

The dialogue with Eyasu Hailemichael in Ethiopia, Djibouti & the Ras Dumera probes the critical yet often underexplored nexus of Ethiopia's access to the sea, focusing in particular on the strategic significance of the Ras Dumera corridor. Hailemichael's nuanced insights underscore the enduring imperatives of maritime access, regional alliances, and geopolitical maneuvering that remain central to Ethiopia's quest for economic and political agency.

Finally, Ahmed Yusuf Hersi's conversation on Somaliland's Unique Statecraft and Regional Diplomacy brings to light the complex interplay between de facto statehood, peacebuilding, and maritime governance. Drawing from his extensive experience with regional institutions, Hersi challenges conventional narratives and opens a vital window into alternative models of sovereignty and diplomacy in the Horn.

This compendium of interviews is not merely an archive of expert opinions but a dynamic intellectual forum where history, policy, and lived realities intersect. It reflects our conviction that the Horn of Africa is a region of profound complexity and resilience - one that is actively shaping its own destiny amidst a rapidly evolving international order.

We invite you to engage deeply with these voices, whose insights provide both clarity and critical perspective in understanding the present and imagining the future of Ethiopia and its neighbors.
With respect,

Blen Mamo
Editor-in-Chief & Executive Director
Horn Review

Grand Narratives as a Foundational Construct of Ethiopia's Foreign Policy

Horn Review: We are honored to have Dr. Dereje Feyisa with us. He is a prominent Ethiopian scholar and an associate professor at Addis Ababa University, renowned for his work in social and political anthropology, migration studies, and conflict resolution in the Horn of Africa. Dr. Feyisa holds a doctorate in social anthropology from Martin Luther University in Halle, Germany. He has enriched his academic career through research fellowships at prestigious institutions, including Osaka University, the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, and as a Humboldt Fellow at the University of Bayreuth. His research spans topics such as ethnicity and conflict orders in transnationalism, as well as the nexus between religion, development, and women's rights. This work has significantly influenced both academic discourse and policy frameworks in the region.

Dr. Dereje: Thank you for having me.

Horn Review: Let's begin. What are grant narratives in your perspective, and why are they essential in the modern nation building process?

Dr. Dereje: My understanding of grand narratives is they are structured stories and there's a discourse behind them. These are not just ordinary stories, but the stories that nations tell themselves. All nations are narrated in a certain way, and this has a lot to do with also a country's national role conception, how it positions itself regionally or internationally, and its major thrust in self-understanding.

Horn Review: Focusing on Ethiopia, the current pillars of grand narratives are the Grand Ethiopian, Renaissance dam, and patriotism. What other grand narratives can you share with us and also how have they been utilized so far?

Dr. Dereje: Before we zoom in into current narrative practices, let's bring a historical perspective. Current narratives build on pre-existing narratives. For a long time, the Ethiopian Nation or State, was narrated in the form of sacred narratives. Ethiopian exceptionalism has a lot to do with this kind of covenantal relationship between Ethiopia and God as it is claimed to have been mentioned in the scripture. Many Ethiopians feel they're different from the exceptional, believing in a historical intimacy between Ethiopia and the Judeo-Christian tradition. The idea of Ethiopia as an "island of Christianity" has a long history. This self-understanding has shaped Ethiopians' perceptions of themselves. The story of the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon, while perhaps dismissed by some, is a myth that has shaped history. This Solomonic narrative has been part of the Ethiopian national psyche, defining Ethiopia's sense of exceptionalism both domestically and regionally.

Domestically, this narrative generated very exclusive ideas. Until recently, we used to say "Muslims in Ethiopia," as if Muslims couldn't truly belong. It was a contradiction in terms: "it's a Christian nation, they could be hosts, there are refugees" and it ended there. That was more or less the case until the 1974 revolution. But then, as part of social justice and rights issues, that was negotiated. The boundaries of Ethiopian citizenship expanded, and Ethiopia began going beyond myth or sacred narratives, searching for more inclusive narratives.

For instance, how this self-understanding of Ethiopia as an "island of Christianity" has shaped its foreign policy. The perception was of an island surrounded by a "Muslim Sea," which included our neighbors. Thus, it's only recently that Ethiopia started re-engaging with the Arab world and the Muslim world more broadly. Arabs were often seen as "bad guys in town," there to conspire and undermine Ethiopia's national interest. This was cited as the reason why they supported Eritrean independence, or why "everything goes wrong" had something to do with the Arab world because they wanted to attack a Christian nation.

These are the kind of key narratives and structured stories which really affected Ethiopia's national road consumption. Since the revolution, we've sought more inclusive narratives. Since 1991, ethnicity has become the master narrative, structuring our politics. Ethnic federalism has implications beyond Ethiopia. The Eritrean government, for example, is threatened by this model, given its own multi-ethnic makeup. Involvement in Ethiopia's domestic politics is evident. For instance, President Isaias, in his annual address, always referenced the problem in Ethiopia as its constitution and ethnic federalism, as if he is part of the Ethiopian political community.

The reason for that is this master narrative: how the Ethiopian State has restructured along ethnic lines, with direct implications on the region. Given Ethiopia's geographic centrality and cross-border settlement patterns, consider Eritrea, a country of nine nations. Of these, two major ones, Tigrinya speakers and the Afar, not only live in Ethiopia but a larger chunk of these groups also live in Ethiopia.

This model grants a possibility of success. So then, the Tigray region would evolve at the center of gravity for Tigrinya politics, and the Afar region for Afar politics, with the Afar triangle's base in Ethiopia, they feel threatened. What is the story we use to tell our nations and the implication of that in our foreign policy? Since 2018, there have been continuities and ruptures. The concept of "disruption" is key to understanding political and geopolitical dynamics in the region.

Ethiopia is currently undergoing a significant disruption of its established narratives, both domestically and regionally. This shift, which gained momentum after 2018, challenges older understandings, such as the narrative of Ethiopia as solely an "island of Christianity." This historical framing, while deeply ingrained, is being replaced by more inclusive stories. A prime example is the emerging Negasi narrative, which acts as a counterpoint to the Solomonic narrative. It highlights Ethiopia's unique and significant role in early Islamic history, recognizing it as the first country outside Arabia where Muslims found refuge in Aksum. This long-silenced story is now being revived to foster nation-building and promote inclusive citizenship within Ethiopia, allowing Ethiopian Muslims to see themselves reflected in the broader national identity.

Another new narrative is Ethiopia's big push in Red Sea politics. This may bring new forms of integration but also tension and potential conflict. The new story Ethiopia is telling itself is about its geopolitical advantages: its large population, geographic centrality, and being the only country in the region that neighbors all others (except Uganda) and the only fully upstream country. Ethiopia is the "water tower of Africa," the "Switzerland of Africa," and seeks to leverage this. It also selectively recalls its historical access to the sea.

Ethiopia's historical claims to sea access, though not new, are now part of a strong, realist narrative, still in its formative stage. This approach aims to negotiate and potentially foster new regional integration by strategically exchanging critical resources. Ethiopia, rich in transboundary rivers, can leverage its water resources, while neighboring countries possess extensive coastlines.

This pragmatic approach can create complementary regional economies, fostering trade-offs that benefit all. However, a strong push for national interest can inherently lead to conflict. This current "disruption" is intended to initiate new regional conversations, but its ultimate outcome remains uncertain, as a focus on national interests by one state can provoke similar responses from others, potentially increasing regional instability.

Horn Review: Unlike nationalism, patriotism is seen as constructive in multicultural nations like Ethiopia. How do you compare and contrast these concepts in the context of current nation-building efforts?

Dr. Dereje: We haven't come that far. We are experiencing heightened nationalism, which often requires an oppositional "other." We need to move towards a post-nationalist approach, considering collective security and interests at the regional level. While governments, presenting their issues in the language of patriotism, but it's very nationalistic with all its limitations.

Horn Review: Many scholars and analysts see Ethiopia as being in a transitional period, rebuilding institutions and organizing new structures. How essential are grand narratives during such transitions, and how are they relevant to Ethiopia's current transition?

Dr. Dereje: Nations are partly the stories they tell about themselves. We've seen the limits of sacred narratives. Since 1974, we've sought more integrative narratives. We even contested the Adwa story, which is not just Ethiopian but also anti-colonial and Pan-African. However, there are now positive developments to redefine Adwa on a more integrative basis, which is crucial for nation-building-engaging with the Adwa story has implications for regional integration and Pan-Africanism. Ethiopia's Pan-Africanist role, which had diminished, is reviving.

Horn Review: How successful have inclusive grand narratives been, both in Ethiopia and in terms of Pan-Africanism and inclusivity of other African nations?

Dr. Dereje: This ongoing process of re-engaging with grand narratives, though just a few years in the making, has been complicated by historical dismissals. During the previous government, grand narratives were often associated with Imperial Ethiopia and largely disregarded. The focus then shifted to building a new nation from scratch, centered on ethnicity, and prioritizing the "politics of difference." While embracing diversity is crucial and Ethiopia needed its pluralistic turn, a nation cannot be built solely on differences.

It was only towards the end of that era that the previous government began re-engaging with grand narratives, albeit sometimes with apparent contradictions. However, mega-projects initiated then, such as Ethiopia's "new mysterious magnetism" and a focus on accelerated economic development as a collective accomplishment, hinted at a shift away from purely sacred narratives towards national pride in achievements. While this started, it was arguably "too little, too late" given its foundation in the politics of difference.

Now, this focus on difference is being complemented by the politics of national unity, fostering a new space for refining our grand narratives and seeking common ground. While still a work in progress, this is a positive development. We must be exceptionally careful in selecting and framing these grand narratives. For instance, while the inclusive re-telling of the Adwa story is a positive step, certain emerging narratives, like the "Karama narrative" remembering Ethiopia's victory over Somalia in the Ogaden War, are deeply concerning.

While appealing to some, such narratives risk alienating Ethiopia's own Somali population by creating a discourse of "winners and losers," potentially fostering distrust and making them feel unreliable. Memory, fundamentally, is about both remembering and forgetting; actively choosing to forget certain conflictual narratives can be more beneficial for national cohesion. Ethiopia would benefit greatly from moving beyond such narratives that perpetuate conflict and alienate its own citizens, instead focusing on stories that promote unity and trust in a conflict-sensitive manner.

Horn Review: It's hopeful to see new efforts to create inclusive grand narratives. However, there needs to be a balance between opportunities and challenges. How important are grand narratives in mitigating national security challenges during transitional periods?

Dr. Dereje: Grand narratives are not inherently good or bad; their impact depends on when and why a specific one is promoted. For instance, in 2018, the new Ethiopian government used Ethio pianist rhetoric to balance the politics of difference with national unity. This narrative, previously silenced, was vital as the country shifted from emphasizing pluralism to seeking commonality, aiming for direction and national consensus.

However, without a clear communication strategy, narratives can be misinterpreted or even threatening. While many were excited by the Ethiopian narratives in 2018 and 2019, the downside was that they antagonized other political communities, with some federalists perceiving it as a return of the "empire." This highlights that grand narratives aren't always effective if not well-communicated.

Gradually, there's a more nuanced approach, though much remains to be done in how narratives are chosen, told, and communicated. Grand narratives are part of a larger political project, dealing with the excesses of the politics of difference by highlighting shared commonalities. The challenge lies in balancing differences and similarities. The stories we craft must be balanced and well-thought-out, not just promoting Ethiopian exceptionalism. More secular or even balanced sacred narratives can coexist. For example, if the Solomonic narrative makes Ethiopian Christians feel good about themselves, that's positive. Similarly, if Ethiopia's special place in Islamic history resonates with Muslims, that's also good. While conflict can arise, these narratives can coexist if mediated and introduced carefully into the national space. States must avoid partisanship, especially during transitions, where an old order crumbles and a new one is forming. In such periods, narratives that build social cohesion are crucial to mitigate the inherent challenges and conflicts. They are a vital part of any nation-building project.

Horn Review: As the Ethiopian government restructures its foreign policy, specially building positive relationships with its neighbors, what role do grand narratives play? What are the challenges and opportunities?

Dr. Dereje: Ethiopia should play a key role in creating a regional grand narrative. Currently, it's focused on articulating national interests. The "disruption" approach is meant to create space for negotiation. However, this should not be promoted along exclusive lines. Ethiopia can champion complementary regional economies and emphasize the deep people-to-people connections in the region. Formal frameworks are not enough; everyday forms of regional integration are powerful.

Ethiopia's diplomacy has been timid for too long. Playing its cards makes sense, but it needs to be complemented by new grand regional narratives, not just national ones. Peace and stability require collective security and a reconfiguration of the existing regional security architecture, which is based on zero-sum thinking.

Horn Review: Currently Ethiopia is creating alliances with Middle Eastern countries as we know. Historically, the grand narrative of the Christian kingdom, like you just mentioned, the island of Christianity. Was surrounded by hostile neighbors. Led by the state to seek alliances in distant regions, particularly Europe. So, what change does it bring and do you think this has driven a shift in our country?

Dr. Dereje: Ethiopia's foreign policy historically prioritized engagement with Western nations, shifting eastward during the socialist era due to ideological alignment. This historical narrative of Ethiopia as an "island of Christianity" often overlooked its predominantly Muslim neighbors, with the exception of Kenya.

A contemporary reassessment of this grand narrative, moving from an "island to a sea," presents new opportunities for geopolitical engagement, particularly with Gulf countries. This shift is exemplified by the government's openness to pursuing membership in the Arab League, a concept previously considered diplomatically untenable. Membership in the Arab League is not contingent on Arab ethnicity, as demonstrated by the diverse membership, including several of Ethiopia's neighbors. Despite Ethiopia's significant Muslim population (33%, exceeding that of Iraq), the nation has historically refrained from seeking even observer status, viewing it as a contradiction.

Embracing a more pragmatic approach to foreign policy, including potential Arab League membership, offers substantial advantages. It would foster a sense of belonging among Ethiopian Muslims and provide a platform for leveraging regional connections. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church's membership in international Christian organizations further emphasized the precedent for such international affiliations. This evolving perspective signifies progress in re-evaluating Ethiopia's historical narratives and embracing a more inclusive and pragmatic foreign policy.

Horn Review: Grand narrative, like you were mentioning, are constructed in a way that creates an us versus them mentality toward our neighboring states particularly. How can Ethiopia develop a grand narrative? That avoids animosity towards our neighboring countries and instead creates a mutual benefit in regional cooperation like you were mentioning.

Dr. Dereje: Historical narratives serve as foundational elements in national identity construction, yet their utility is contingent upon their capacity to foster unity and inclusivity. The focus should be on the societal impact and affordances of a narrative, rather than its historical veracity. For instance, the Queen of Sheba and Negash narratives hold significant weight due to their widespread acceptance and their role in shaping a sense of belonging among Ethiopians and connecting them to the broader Islamic world. However, not all grand narratives are equally beneficial; some can be conflictual, necessitating careful selection to avoid alienating segments of the population and hindering regional integration.

The Adwa narrative is presented as a valuable historical asset capable of promoting both domestic cohesion and regional solidarity. In contrast, the Karamara narrative is identified as potentially divisive due to its contested nature and its historical association with feelings of alienation among certain Ethiopian communities, particularly those who have sought alternative allegiances based on ethnic or religious solidarity. Prioritizing inclusive narratives like Adwa, which can be leveraged for nation-building and inter-communal harmony, is crucial for fostering a more unified and integrated Ethiopia.

Horn Review: Dr. Dereje, Thank you so much. We have had a very timely and important discussion, not just for Ethiopians, but for the whole region.

GERD, Agricultural Reforms and the Future of Regional Integration in the Horn of Africa

Lawrence Freeman is a distinguished researcher and analyst with over 30 years of experience specializing in the social, political, and economic dynamics of the African continent. Freeman has dedicated significant attention to Ethiopia, producing a wealth of insightful commentaries on the country's evolving challenges and opportunities.

Horn Review: Professor Freeman, welcome to our podcast. Great to have you here.

Lawrence Freeman: Thank you very much.

Horn Review: From your perspective, how would you assess the trajectory of Ethiopia's current agricultural reform agenda? Are the recent state-led initiatives showing signs of structural change?

Lawrence Freeman: Yes, I would say that the progress being made by Ethiopia in agriculture is very significant. The government thinks they have already reached self-sufficiency on wheat in 2022/23, and they're projecting they may be able to produce 30 million tons of wheat in 2025. Several things have taken place that have made it effective. One is they're increasing the use of irrigation, which is necessary for modern farming. This has increased the number of hectares where they can grow crops. Second, Ethiopian farming was based on subsistence farming of one to two hectares, but now the concept is cluster farming, where groups of farmers come together, prepare the land, plant, plow, and use advanced machinery collectively. This collective strength has led to a huge increase in productivity and income per hectare, according to the agricultural department.

These are some of the things Ethiopia is doing, and pretty much Ethiopia should no longer be importing any food from this point on. This is very important because Africa, for no good reason, was importing tens of billions of dollars of food across the continent, even though the land was perfectly capable and was self-sufficient in the 60s and 70s. Due to neoliberal economic policies, development stopped. Ethiopia is playing a very good role in promoting this kind of development. This has been one of the driving points of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed. They have reduced levies on buying tractors and equipment and reduced taxes. The whole orientation of promoting agriculture is substantial and hopefully will continue.

Horn Review: How do you view the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam as a strategic asset for agricultural transformation in Ethiopia? Do you see it meaningfully supporting irrigation and mechanization in the short or long term?

Lawrence Freeman: Since 2022, almost everything has been completed; all 13 turbines and waterways have been constructed that bring water down to the turbines. They are now in the testing phase, with about six turbines operating and testing the remaining seven. The target for completion and inauguration is likely to be in September or earlier.

This is a huge plus for Ethiopia. The dam holds 74 billion cubic meters of water, which will essentially push water out to irrigate the entire area, as Ethiopia has numerous river systems. Although the water flow from the dam is not to be used for agriculture, but for hydroelectric power, the increase in water presence and moisture in the area will affect agriculture. Of course, there will be more electricity. The dam's capability right now is about 2,600 megawatts, but it was reaching about 1,800 megawatts. Once you begin to utilize more of the 5,150 megawatts available, you start electrifying rural areas. When poor farmers in rural districts begin to have electricity, that changes everything. As you get more electricity to rural areas, you transform productivity, farming, and make every farmer and worker more productive.

Horn Review: Do you think the West recognizes the significance of Ethiopia building the largest hydroelectric dam on the continent?

Lawrence Freeman: No, I don't think there has been enough recognition by the West, certainly not by the United States or Europe. Ethiopia is building the largest hydroelectric dam on the continent and the 17th largest in the world. This is a real plus, which unfortunately the West ignores or doesn't want to recognize at this point.

Horn Review: What would you say is the effect of increasing energy production on Ethiopia's food security and economy?

Lawrence Freeman: Electricity is the most important single ingredient to a successful economy. Infrastructure is essential. You need infrastructure that includes electricity, rail transportation, road transportation, and water management. All this creates the platform on which the entire fiscal economy rests. The denser and more advanced your infrastructure platform is, the more it raises productivity at all levels of the economy. For example, across Africa, 30 to 40% of food rots before it reaches the market; in Ethiopia, it's about 30%. To correct that, you need infrastructure that gets food to market quickly, such as modern fast rail transportation and refrigerated cars to keep food from spoiling. This all requires electricity and roads. There's no way to become an industrialized economy and lift all people out of poverty without infrastructure, and electricity is the key to infrastructure.

With the completion of the dam and the addition of 5,150 megawatts, Ethiopia will become the second-largest electricity producer in sub-Saharan Africa, only behind South Africa, which has a nuclear power plant. That is significant, but not enough for 130 million people. Every part of society must be connected to electricity to achieve real independent sovereignty of development and reach its potential.

Horn Review: How might the electricity generated by the dam reshape rural economies and agribusiness within Ethiopia and the wider Horn of Africa region?

Lawrence Freeman: Ethiopia has already begun regional economic integration because electricity is now being exported to Djibouti, North Sudan, and Kenya. Before the end of the year, there will be a transmission to Tanzania. Electricity from the dam is transported to Ethiopia's grid and then through power lines to neighboring countries. Djibouti and Kenya want to increase imports. Ethiopia is already practicing regional integration with the African Free Trade Area. Ethiopia's agricultural model, successful over five years, is something other countries should emulate. Development is the key to peace, security, raising living standards, and creativity. I have been coming here for 11 years and have seen impressive progress.

Horn Review: How do you assess the regional implications of Ethiopia's agricultural and energy policies for neighboring countries such as Kenya, Sudan, Somalia, and Djibouti, especially in the context of transboundary water and food systems?

Lawrence Freeman: Water is a big issue in Africa. People think there's always a danger of water wars, but there is a lot of water in Africa; the problem is it's not always in the right place. We have to build appropriate canals and waterways to take water from where it is to where it's needed. I saw this on some farms, where people are building waterways to bring water to crop areas. The Nile is the longest river in the world, but not the most voluminous. Ten countries in the Nile basin all use Nile water, which will not last forever. My view is we must move toward rapid nuclear-powered desalination to take salt out of Mediterranean seawater and build the equivalent of a second Nile.

The idea of competition over the Nile is not the right way to look at it; it's about development. Egyptians have adopted a British imperialist policy because Queen Victoria gave it to them in 1903; it's their river. This is artificial. The first agreement was in 1929 between the British Sudan and Egypt, both under British control, which is British imperialism. The second agreement in 1959 was between Egypt and Sudan, no longer under British control, but with the same division of water. Ethiopia wasn't at either conference. The water from the Blue Nile is not part of any agreement, but the colonial view is that they must have guarantees on the water from the Blue Nile. The dam has three mechanisms to maintain a constant, steady flow of water downstream, so downstream countries get a more regulated and concentrated flow from the reservoir. Sudan is intimidated by Egypt, but it should align with Ethiopia they benefit from it. Egypt should give up this colonialist mentality. They never saw the Blue Nile basin as a development but as a water tank to be used in droughts to help Egyptian farmers. There is huge potential in the Blue Nile basin; three additional hydroelectric plants can be built. None would be as large as the dam, but would add electricity. We are at the beginning of the process. The idea is to think in terms of development and countries working together for the development of the nations of the Nile. It's a fatal plea; nothing can stop the dam, but a more enlightened mentality is needed. This also relates to port access to the Red Sea, another important waterway. The 1993 agreement, after Eritrea separated, left the port of Assab, a natural port for Ethiopia, in southern Eritrea, but it's not used. Eritreans can't see the benefit of working with Ethiopia. Ethiopia's economy is the biggest and fastest-growing in East Africa. Developing that port would bring revenue, commerce, trade, and millions of tons of freight. But antagonisms and shortsightedness prevent progress. From a fiscal economist's standpoint, a good leader must think 20 to 40 years ahead for future generations. It's natural that an agreement on Assab would be worked out to fight poverty and hunger in the region. People don't think this way. Hopefully, there will be a peaceful resolution for additional port access because Djibouti charges a lot for access. These are issues to be dealt with by thoughtful leaders for the benefit of their people to raise living standards. Once material standards rise and people live dignified lives, they can focus on developing creative minds. But you can't get there without material existence.

This is my contribution to the analysis of the region's economies, and Ethiopia is situated to play a major role.

Horn Review: In light of this, do you see viable frameworks for cooperation around the dam that could support regional food security and climate resilience, or are geopolitical tensions likely to overshadow such efforts?

Lawrence Freeman: Much of what happens here is shaped by history. Ethiopia is the only country not conquered. I recently saw the museum that Prime Minister Abiy built, celebrating Adwa. My suggestion is that, whatever day they inaugurate the dam, they add it as a national holiday, GERD Day, because it can unify the country. Unfortunately, there is a history involving British colonialism and Somalia, Italians, and the various ways countries were manipulated. Eritrea, Somalia, and Somaliland were independent for about five or six days before forming the nation. Somaliland has been functioning almost independently for 30 years or more. This colonial legacy and antagonism prevent regional economic development. Ethiopia, like all African countries, uses a tiny fraction of arable land. There is potential for land and actual use of arable land, and an even tinier fraction is irrigated. Ethiopia has just started irrigation, which is excellent. This concept can be used in all African countries. One of my missions is to end poverty and hunger in Africa. Many still live in poverty with very low per capita income. This must change. You can't do that unless you produce more wealth and put more people to work. The transformation plan and home-grown economic reform of the Prime Minister emphasize manufacturing.

Africa has been prevented from producing real manufacturing industries. Less than 3% of total manufactured goods in the world come from Africa. Ethiopia is working on light industry, leather, and adding value to agricultural products like coffee, the biggest export. Building up manufacturing, next to infrastructure, is an essential part of an economy. The fundamental issue is that the constitution has to be changed. Everyone knows that, but you need a robust, maybe contentious, discussion, debate, and dialogue with the people of Ethiopia. You have to attack the notion of national ethnic identity, not ethnic culture, but ethnic identity. What must be reinforced is that Ethiopia is a nation-state and its people are citizens of a nation-state, not members of a national ethnicity. Ethnic nationalism is the enemy and is deeply ingrained. There is no congruence between ethnic nationalism and citizenship. People should not give up their rich history, but must see themselves as members of a nation.

Horn Review: That's a profound idea. How should international partners engage with Ethiopia's dual push for food self-sufficiency and energy leadership, given the sensitivity surrounding the dam and regional politics?

Lawrence Freeman: The international community doesn't understand economic development or Ethiopia. There are many NGOs and international organizations, some being dismantled by the US, but they don't focus on questions that would change society. If you want to improve life, bring democracy, and good governance, you must put electricity at the top of the list. Without electricity, people don't develop. Good governance over poverty is meaningless.The West must change its thinking. Look at why Western leaders haven't complimented Ethiopia on the dam, the largest hydroelectric dam built without World Bank or IMF money. Why haven't presidents visited the dam? The West is ideologically deficient and prejudiced against development, so they're not good partners now. This will change because China is outproducing the US in many economic sectors, and the US is contracting its manufacturing base. The West's ideology is collapsing, and China and BRICS are growing. Ethiopia is one of three African countries in BRICS. The global south is forming new political and economic relations based on a new paradigm of development and growth. Hopefully, enlightened leaders in Africa, Latin America, and The world is no longer fixed in a hierarchy. The West must change and recognize that Africa needs long-term, low-interest credit for infrastructure to build hydroelectric and nuclear power plants. Infrastructure itself may not make money, but it raises the economy's profitability. We should unite with China to help African nations build infrastructure to eliminate poverty and hunger. The West should work with Africa in critical transformational areas.

Horn Review: From a regional integration perspective, what role could Ethiopia's emerging industrial base, especially agro-processing and light manufacturing, play in reshaping trade and economic interdependence in Africa?

Lawrence Freeman: Ethiopia's major export is coffee, which can have added value. Ethiopia is self-sufficient in wheat and can start exporting wheat for foreign exchange. Africa wastes foreign exchange on buying agricultural products and importing food. Ethiopia is close to eliminating this system. Ethiopia has 165 million livestock, the largest in Africa, which supports the leather industry. Ethiopia plans to build steel plants. Ethiopia needs national industries like steel, aluminum, and cement to avoid buying from other countries on their terms. The West controls the terms of trade. Producing your own goods increases revenue. Tourism is important, but service and tourism make up 40% of GDP, which is not ideal because service and tourism bring revenue but not wealth. Manufacturing, agriculture, and mining should be emphasized. Gold is a big revenue source now. Ethiopia should focus on industry. Ethiopia's leaders understand this. I've worked with many African countries that don't grasp this economic concept. Ethiopia understands this. There are problems, but progress exists. Maybe it's not fast enough or comprehensive, but it's a basis for optimism.

Horn Review: Ethiopia is also investing heavily in urban infrastructure and industrial parks. How do you assess the role of urban development in facilitating structural transformation, labor mobility, and regional economic competitiveness?

Lawrence Freeman: I toured Addis Ababa's mayor's office and have watched the city change since 2014. It's almost unrecognizable. Policies include clearing polluted rivers, new walkways, and tree planting. Trees are the best way to improve the environment. Trees are important because they absorb CO2 and produce oxygen. Photosynthesis changes climate through transpiration how much water comes up and down. To change deserts, plant trees. Ethiopia has planted 40 billion seedlings, with 10 billion more to go, which is very positive. People displaced from less developed areas along waterways have not been thrown out but resettled with housing, food, and small manufacturing plots like bakeries. This is positive. The changes in Addis Ababa, farming, and manufacturing are slow but in the right direction. Ethiopia has 130 million people to employ, which is hard, but this is the direction. There are detractors of Prime Minister Abiy, but I follow his policies carefully. I don't analyze every political nuance but look at substantial results, which are palatable. This should be encouraged and supported. Criticisms are fine if made in good faith to move the country forward. If you want to criticize, propose better policies. Otherwise, keep quiet and let economic development proceed.

Horn Review: Professor Freeman, we've had a very insightful discussion. You have enlightened us, and thank you once again for coming on our podcast.

Lawrence Freeman: My pleasure. Happy to do it. Maybe we'll do it again someday.

We would love that. Thank you again.

Ethiopia, Djibouti & the Controversies Surrounding Ras Dumera

The following conversation is with Eyasu Hailemichael. He's a dedicated lecturer in international relations, diplomacy, and global studies - shaping the minds of future leaders beyond the lecture hall. His commitment to youth empowerment is evident through his role as an adviser to the Ethiopian National Council. Furthermore, his expertise extends to the African Youth Development and Excellence Centre, where he serves as a technical adviser. His multifaceted engagement in academia and youth development brings valuable practical perspectives to our discussions. Today, we're eager to delve into his insights on the critical issues shaping our world and the strategic approaches needed to navigate them.

Horn Review: Thank you, Mr. Eyasu. We are very honoured to have you here. Let's get into our first discussion.
Historical evidence suggests that Ras Dumera - even as late as the Derg period, when Djibouti gained independence - had been left unclaimed, and only later did the dispute between Eritrea and Djibouti over the territory emerge. What's your take on the historical circumstances surrounding Ras Dumera?

Eyasu Hailemichael: Thank you for having me. First and foremost, I want to focus on this strategic chokepoint next to Bab-el-Mandeb in the Horn of Africa, which is a critical position between East Africa, the Horn of Africa, and the Middle East. Rather than delving into the current scenario, let's move back to history. When we look at this region's past, it was highly strategic. The Ottoman Empire ruled the area, which connects not only to Ethiopia's geography but also beyond the Horn of Africa.

The Turkish civilization which began in 1299 and continued through the 15th century until the reign of Suleiman the Magnificent. The Ottomans controlled the spice trade routes reaching toward the Far East, near India and beyond.

Over time, the Ottoman Empire declined while European powers - particularly the British, French, and Italians - sought to expand their influence. Following the Scramble for Africa (1884–1885), they justified their presence by claiming to "civilize" Africa and secure strategic interests. In reality, Africa already had its own cultures, governance, kingdoms, and states - such as the Axum Empire, which ruled across parts of today's Saudi Arabia and Yemen.

Later, the construction of the Suez Canal further transformed the region. Egyptians, Turks, and other emergent regional players vied for influence, but Europeans were determined to secure strategic footholds.

The French established French Somaliland near Bab-el-Mandeb (today's Djibouti), while the Italians took Eritrea. The French then installed a small settlement about 11 kilometres from Ras Dumera, later expanding inland by roughly 60 kilometres, sparking competition and debate.

"Ras" derives from the Arabic word for "head" or "cape" - so Ras Dumera is essentially the tip of land between Eritrea and Djibouti, next to a crucial chokepoint. At the time, colonizers left it as a peripheral zone between Italian and French Somaliland. They drew boundaries without African participation, dividing, for example, the Afar people among three states. Ras Dumera remained an "unwanted" periphery, not a point of contention - at least initially.

Horn Review: Does it ever occur to you that it might have been more about "civilizing" Africa than just a strategic location? Can you elaborate, especially about Bab-el-Mandeb?

Eyasu Hailemichael: Africans before colonization had their own governance systems and institutions. They had markets with complex exchange mechanisms - similar to today's malls and currencies - and cultivated relations beyond their borders, including with the Middle East and Asia. Cultural integration and language ties - for example, Tigrinya's relationship to Arabic - testify to these connections.

Ethiopia's religious and cultural bonds with Israel, and the early Muslim community that migrated from Mecca and Medina to Ethiopia, show pre-colonial ties. Monastic Christianity also spread into the eastern Horn of Africa. These exchanges demonstrate that "civilization" was ongoing long before Europeans arrived. When colonizers did arrive, they shifted the focus from mutual exchange to strategic control.

Horn Review: Despite having strong historical grounds to lay claim to the area, Ethiopia has not attempted to gain sovereignty over Ras Dumera. Why do you think Ethiopian states - and especially their foreign affairs establishments - failed to do so?

Eyasu Hailemichael: After Emperor Tewodros's rise, there were efforts to form a greater Ethiopia. Under Emperor Yohannes IV, Ethiopia expanded its territory; later, Menelik II established formal international relations and territorial demarcations. After the Battle of Adwa, Menelik corresponded with French, Italian, and British leaders, warning them against ceding French Somaliland to third parties.

Although Ethiopia defeated Italy, it maintained relations with France. Letters from French presidents to Ethiopian rulers negotiated boundaries and effectively excluded Ethiopian interests. During World War II, the British expelled the Italians, leading to an Ethiopian–Eritrean federation until Eritrea's reunification in 1962. At that time, Ethiopia bordered what became Eritrean territory, so sovereignty over Ras Dumera wasn't disputed.

After Eritrea's independence in 1993 - and following internal upheavals, war with Somalia, and the Derg regime - Ethiopia supported Djibouti's independence to counter Greater Somalia, which cost it any claim to Ras Dumera. Since 1991, Ethiopia and Djibouti have enjoyed strong trade and infrastructure ties - sharing railways, ports, and even water projects - so Ethiopia's maritime access concerns shifted toward collaboration rather than competition.

Horn Review: Does Ethiopia have any legal grounds to lay claim to Ras Dumera? What international law frameworks would be involved?

Eyasu Hailemichael: To my understanding, Ras Dumera is now split between Eritrea and Djibouti, and its sovereignty is hotly debated. The two neighbours clashed over it in 2008, leading to Qatari-mediated peacekeepers until 2017. Today, the area attracts extra-regional powers and is increasingly contested. Under international law, any claim would hinge on historical treaties, uti possidetis juris principles, and possibly customary international law - though once sovereignty is established and stabilized for decades, it's extremely difficult to overturn without mutual agreement.

Horn Review: If Ethiopia were to have legitimate sovereign rights over the territory, how could the country utilize it, considering its geographical and geopolitical context?

Eyasu Hailemichael: International relations always balance cooperation and competition. A competitive approach would strain ties with Eritrea and Djibouti and risk regional instability. Instead, Ethiopia should pursue cooperative frameworks: deepen bilateral relations with Djibouti, enhance trade reciprocity, and leverage shared populations like the Afar. Ethiopia could also solicit mediation through Turkey, IGAD, the African Union, or other actors, presenting its case peacefully. If diplomacy stalls, Ethiopia can diversify its maritime options - investing in ports at Berbera or Lamu, for instance - while continuing negotiations over Ras Dumera.

Horn Review: If Ethiopia were to claim use of Ras Dumera, what would be the likely response from Eritrea and Djibouti? Can Ethiopia diplomatically avoid tensions, or are they inevitable?

Eyasu Hailemichael: Ethiopia can request access diplomatically - historically, Ras Dumera fell within Ethiopian influence. But raising the issue risks diplomatic friction, especially given the military bases of superpowers in Djibouti and Eritrea's own claims. Ethiopia could organize lobbies or enlist allies to mediate, but it must tread carefully.

Any attempt to escalate militarily would be highly destabilizing. Diplomacy - through bodies like the proposed Red Sea Council and via public and citizen diplomacy - offers the best chance to minimize tensions. Also, excluding Ethiopia would hurt regional cooperation, as Ethiopia is a major market and actor.

Horn Review: Considering cases like Greenland and Crimea, where powerful states have laid claim to strategically important areas, what legal precedents or comparable cases exist from which Ethiopia could draw lessons regarding access to the sea?

Eyasu Hailemichael: Crimea's annexation by Russia - justified by historical ties - resulted in sanctions and ongoing contestation. Greenland, where the U.S. once sought military bases, remains under Danish sovereignty, with tight EU oversight.

Growing states often pursue joint administration or leasing agreements rather than outright annexation.

Bolivia's negotiations for Pacific access - through international institutions rather than force - offer a useful model. Ultimately, Ethiopia's strategy should combine legal argumentation, diplomatic negotiation, and investment-led cooperation, rather than confrontation.

Somaliland's Unique Statecraft and Regional Diplomacy

Ahmed Yusuf Hersi, a seasoned expert in regional diplomacy, conflict resolution, and maritime governance, sat down with Horn Review to share insights on Somaliland, peacebuilding, and regional dynamics in the Horn of Africa. Hersi has advised peace processes in South Sudan as IGAD's representative and senior political adviser, and has worked closely with the AU and UN. He brings deep experience across East Africa and the Horn of Africa, particularly in maritime security and conflict mediation. He holds advanced degrees in conflict security and environmental law from Coventry University and the University of Birmingham.

Horn Review: Mr. Ahmed, welcome to Horn Review. Very glad to have you here.

Mr. Ahmed Yusu Hersi: I'm also glad to be here.

Horn Review: Somaliland has developed a functioning political system in the absence of international recognition. In light of this, what foundational principles such as political, social, or historical have enabled this achievement?

Mr. Ahmed Yusu Hersi: the Somali peninsula as a whole encompasses both Somalia and Somaliland.

Historically, the societies have been organized around kinship networks, operating much like pastoral democracies, where all disputes are settled by consensus. In Somaliland's case, its experience with colonialism was more like indirect rule. The British ruled through traditional systems, unlike the south, which experienced direct Italian rule with Italian civilians owning farms and running the administration. In the north, now Somaliland, communities had space to experiment resolving their own conflicts and develop traditional leadership and practice customary laws. This legacy remains foundational today.

Horn Review: How does Somaliland's diplomatic limbo shape its internal policy priorities?

Mr. Ahmed Yusu Hersi: There is strong social cohesion in Somaliland. While elections are regularly held, disputes often arise before or after them. What makes Somaliland distinct is the immediate recourse to traditional mechanisms for resolving such issues. Democracy, though fragile across much of Africa, is also fragile in Somaliland but its resilience lies in how quickly traditional systems step in. In moments of tension, legal debates are set aside to focus on maintaining security, cohesion, and the flow of trade. This approach has been the foundation of Somaliland's internal stability in the absence of international recognition or intervention.

Horn Review: Somaliland's democratic institutions stand in contrast to many others in the Horn. In that sense, what have been the key drivers of your relatively stable and participatory governance model?

Mr. Ahmed Yusu Hersi: Somaliland adopted a national charter in 1991, rooted in traditional mechanisms. By 2000, this was replaced with a constitution guaranteeing multi-party democracy, following a referendum where the people voted to remain in Somaliland. A key driver of stability was the transition from the community-driven charter of 1991 to the 2001 referendum, which affirmed the path toward a Somaliland nation-state. This decade allowed traditional mechanisms to strengthen before moving to multi-party democracy. In times of crisis, Somaliland still falls back on these traditional mechanisms, ensuring grassroots participation bringing all the Somaliland communities at one point.

I was present during the drafting of the constitution in 1997, which involved a reconciliation process including 300 people discussing for months. Before the referendum, the new constitution was broadly representative and incorporated core traditional mechanisms, featuring the House of Elders, known as the Guurti. Somaliland has a bicameral system comprising a House of Representatives who come through elections and the Guurti, a council of esteemed traditional representatives from clans and communities, two bodies that serve to balance and cross-check each other. The upper house was retained in the 2001 constitution and approved through a referendum, reinforcing Somaliland's participatory model of governance.

Horn Review: What are the main risks and constraints of operating under an unrecognized status?

Mr. Ahmed Yusu Hersi: Political recognition is crucial as it provides access to international financing instruments. Hence, without international financing, Somaliland cannot undertake major infrastructure and social development projects. This lack of recognition remains a major drawback. Otherwise, the state exists, with its parliament and elections, but political recognition has been the missing link. That is why Somaliland considers political recognition its topmost priority. That said, it is an agenda of the current government as well as the previous administration. It has now been 34 years since it declared independence, yet recognition is lying in limbo.

Will the state continue to hold? Yes, but external factors could still arise we cannot be certain. Recognition is what truly secures the state. While statehood exists internally, externally it remains in limbo.

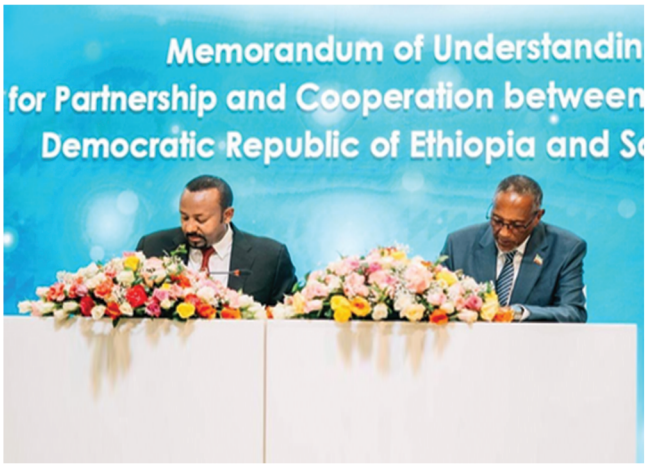
Horn Review: We have been discussing how traditional governance has been mixed with modern governance. In contrast, are there African or non-Western models of governance or diplomacy that Somaliland draws inspiration from internally?

Mr. Ahmed Yusu Hersi: The House of Elders, or Majlis, is an African governance model comprising regional representatives whose interest is state survival. Then there is a Western-style elections for parliament members, providing checks and balances. The Guurti is comparable to the UK's House of Lords, with appointed or inherited positions. This hybrid model serves traditional communities effectively. For Africans, the Guurti resolves peace and security issues, taking months until settlement. The Western style uses brief hotel meetings with immediate implementation. African societies need to exhaust all discussion avenues before reaching resolution. I proposed this approach in South Sudan.

In contrast, peace processes in places like South Sudan have often been externally imposed, with strict timelines and donor-driven agendas funded by the international community. These processes are constrained by limited resources and deadlines, unlike traditional models where communities use their own resources and take the time needed to achieve lasting peace even if it means months or a year of discussion. This comparison highlights that in societies with strong traditional structures, like South Sudan, local ownership and patience can lead to more sustainable peace.

Horn Review: What's a major lesson other African nations or regions can learn from Somaliland's path?

Mr. Ahmed Yusu Hersi: Somaliland secured peace through its own efforts, using local resources and rooted in traditional structures that allowed genuine grassroots participation. When interventions come from outside, so do the solutions - making implementation difficult and peace unsustainable. The lesson is to return to traditional mechanisms. In Africa it is only in the postcolonial era that solutions shifted to elite-driven, Western-style conferences.



Horn Review: Situated at a strategic crossroads in the Horn of Africa, what is Somaliland's broader geopolitical vision?

Mr. Ahmed Yusu Hersi: Somaliland's political vision is to achieve statehood and become a key Horn of Africa member, leveraging its strategic location to boost economic benefits. Its entrepreneurial population seeks freedom of movement and open regional trade, using their own resources to build infrastructure and pursue business interests rather than await government direction. Recognition, the one missing link, would unlock these opportunities and help Somaliland realize its aspiration of becoming a "small UAE."

Horn Review: How is Somaliland balancing regional and global interests?

Mr. Ahmed Yusu Hersi: Somaliland maintains strict neutrality, refusing to host foreign forces or take sides in regional conflicts. Its leadership and citizens understand that inviting intervention - such as U.S. forces fighting the Houthis - would expose Berbera and other centers to missile strikes within minutes. Situated on a strategic corridor through which 20 percent of global trade and some 30,000 ships pass annually, Somaliland views any Middle East tensions as direct threats. Consequently, it prioritizes a standing body of intellectuals to advise the president, ensuring that Somaliland remains a neutral, nonbelligerent actor in all international disputes.

Horn Review: How is Somaliland managing ongoing tensions with Somalia while also managing its internal stability?

Mr. Ahmed Yusu Hersi: Numerous short, Western-style conferences have been held to define Somaliland's future relationship with Somalia, but such brief meetings cannot fully address the complexities involved. Talks are now suspended due to Mogadishu's incorporation of Sool and Sanaag into Somalia's federal system, an action Somaliland views as undermining its position. No face-to-face negotiations are planned until the eastern conflict is resolved - either through direct settlement between the parties in Sool and Sanaag or by mutual agreement that Somaliland and Somalia first settle their internal disputes before resuming bilateral talks.

In the meantime, the current administration has prioritized resolving the eastern conflict internally to prevent external interference. Once a ceasefire and agreement on key points are in place, only then can Hargeisa and Mogadishu legitimately address the political status of the northern regions together.

Horn Review: What is Somaliland's approach to engagement with external powers such as the UAE, China, and the United States?

Mr. Ahmed Yusu Hersi: Somaliland has already engaged diplomatically with both the United Arab Emirates and the United States. Its invitation to Taiwan to open a liaison office - and Taiwan's reciprocal invitation has displeased China, putting Beijing out of reach for now. Meanwhile, Somaliland's strategic location draws intense interest from military and political planners, and the United States' counter-al-Shabaab cooperation with Somalia adds another layer to the region's security dynamics.

Horn Review: On that note, the controversial MOU between Ethiopia and Somaliland on naval and port access has generated significant international attention. From Somaliland's perspective, what are the strategic objectives of this agreement?

Mr. Ahmed Yusu Hersi: The previous administration announced it would grant a 50-year lease on a block of Somaliland territory in exchange for political recognition, but never published the MOU or took it to parliament for ratification.

Although the press described it as a naval-base deal, complete with port access and a land corridor, the exact terms were never disclosed. Somaliland's sovereignty over the land was to remain intact, yet without the details or parliamentary debate, the proposal ultimately stalled and has since been abandoned.

Somaliland's entrepreneurs were ready for trade, infrastructure development, and joint programs with neighbors like Ethiopia or Djibouti on non-controversial projects but the persistent difficulty in securing governmental approval remains the Achilles' heel of Somaliland politics.

Horn Review: How do you respond to original criticism, particularly from Somalia, and international skepticism?

Mr. Ahmed Yusu Hersi: The international community including the African Union, the United Nations and other multilateral bodies treats Somalia as a single entity. That unified position has exerted pressure on Ethiopia to distance itself from Somaliland, framing any alteration of territorial land or sea boundaries as illegitimate. In my view, if there was real urgency, the anomaly lay in how rapidly the MOU was negotiated. A more deliberate dialogue was needed. Consider the existing arrangement at Berbera port, where Ethiopia holds nineteen percent ownership alongside Somaliland, the UAE and DP World. That partnership could serve as a platform for further trade expansion and infrastructure development. Instead, the secretive MOU proposal to cede land ignited backlash from Somalia and multilateral institutions. A transparent, technically grounded discussion of shareholding, investment and commercial terms would have avoided politicization and could still yield significant benefits.

Horn Review: Moving to the economy, how is the intensifying competition over key trade corridors such as Berbera and Djibouti reshaping regional military alliances and political power balances?

Mr. Ahmed Yusu Hersi: I don't see this as competition but as economic growth. LAPSSET was designed to create a northern corridor from the new Lamu port, with one route through Moyale into Ethiopia and another into South Sudan. Both economies are expanding and need multiple port options.

South Sudan currently relies on Port Sudan, which is effectively bottlenecked, and on Kenya for essential imports. LAPSSET would have allowed bulk cargo into South Sudan, Sudan and Ethiopia, providing alternatives in case of political instability.

As populations and trade volumes rise, additional infrastructures, especially ports, become essential. Any new port on the Somali peninsula, whether in Somaliland or elsewhere, would serve 95–98% as a trade corridor into Ethiopia rather than for domestic traffic. East Africa is already a highly integrated multimodal network of rail, sea and road moving heavy goods from Mombasa to as far as the Congo. Ethiopia itself has identified the need for three to four more ports, and neighbouring Djibouti continues to expand its facilities to serve Ethiopian markets. This is not competition but cooperative economic planning.

For example, a dry port in Jigjiga handles customs and paperwork for goods off-loaded at Berbera, speeding their onward flow and opening eastern regions to investment. In short, expanding port capacity makes clear economic sense and underpins regional peace and prosperity.

Horn Review: To what extent are these infrastructure projects financed by external powers such as China, the UAE, and Turkey, and how sustainable are they in the long term?

Mr. Ahmed Yusu Hersi: To undertake these projects, international financing is essential when domestic resources fall short. China, Turkey and others invest heavily in African infrastructure, ports, roads and mines, because Africa remains largely undeveloped and rich in resources. Political leaders must create the right economic and regulatory environment such as freedom of movement for goods and clear investment frameworks, to attract joint projects that serve Somalia or Somaliland and their neighbors, such as Ethiopia and South Sudan. Unlike Europe, where an ID card allows seamless travel and trade, Africa still faces economic, infrastructural and political barriers. Donors and investors expect a concession period to manage and recoup their investments often over twenty years, which is acceptable given the jobs, economic activity and long-term growth these projects generate. In my view, expanding infrastructure through such partnerships is a boon for Africa's development, whether between Somalia and Ethiopia or with external partners.

Horn Review: Moving to Egypt, Egypt's growing naval posture in the Red Sea combined with increasingly assertive diplomacy, how might Egypt use the Red Sea crisis to influence aspirations, possibly by aligning more closely with Mogadishu to assert control over strategic maritime spaces?

Mr. Ahmed Yusu Hersi: Somalia and Egypt are already aligned under a standing defense treaty, which has rendered the MOU largely irrelevant as a flashpoint. Egypt entered at Mogadishu's invitation partly to counter Ethiopia over the Nile, so it would naturally support Somalia if Ethiopia sought to flex its muscles. Although tensions persist and could resurface, they have not escalated, and the MOU itself is no longer central. In practice, Egypt now includes

Somaliland in its regional defense planning, viewing it strictly as part of Somalia, while Turkey's parallel treaty with Mogadishu similarly places Somaliland in a diplomatically precarious spot.

Horn Review: Is Somaliland currently cooperating with any regional or international actors on maritime security, anti-piracy, or Red Sea governance

Mr. Ahmed Yusu Hersi: State-to-state cooperation already covers coastal security. Djibouti, for example, partners on patrols and coastal-guard operations. The EU Naval Force's Operation Atalanta oversees anti-piracy patrols and provides training and capacity building for Somaliland's coast guard. No multilateral agency has backed a naval force; assistance is limited to coastal policing, and Somaliland receives the same support that Somalia does.

Horn Review: In this context, how do you envision strengthening maritime partnerships moving forward?

Mr. Ahmed Yusu Hersi: Somaliland needs investment in naval assets and training, ideally through a bilateral agreement similar to Turkey's arrangement with Somalia. However, it has yet to secure a partner that recognizes its strategic need for naval capacity to defend its coastline. Currently, support is limited to programmatic assistance. In the future, a country could step in; for example, the UAE already supports Puntland's maritime police and operates a port in Berbera. Given its interests, it wouldn't be surprising if the UAE expands its support to include Somaliland's maritime capabilities.

Horn Review: The regional race for port access and trade infrastructure by Ethiopia, South Sudan, and Uganda is transforming the Horn. Do you view these projects as promoting genuine regional integration or fostering new dependencies and rivalries that could fragment the Horn economy?

Mr. Ahmed Yusu Hersi: As I said, this isn't about rivalry though business naturally involves competition. If shipping through Mombasa is costly, South Sudan can look to Djibouti, provided the infrastructure exists. While I was in South Sudan, there were talks with Djibouti and Ethiopia to build a highway and allocate land in Djibouti for South Sudanese storage, part of a port diversification strategy.

A landlocked country must secure multiple port options and build the infrastructure to move goods efficiently.
Politics or instability may force a shift to southern routes like LAPSSET. Ports compete on rates, handling, storage, and insurance if costs rise, businesses look elsewhere. That's how markets work. But today, beyond Mombasa and Djibouti, options are limited. The only viable alternative right now is Berbera.

Horn Review: What are Somaliland's top three development priorities for the next decade?

Mr. Ahmed Yusu Hersi: Somaliland's priority is economic development, as its fate is closely tied to regional peace and stability. Joint projects such as ports and highways connecting to inland countries like Ethiopia are essential. Expanding cross-border trade and opening more entry points matter more than political recognition at this stage. By focusing on economic engagement with countries like South Sudan, Ethiopia, and Uganda, Somaliland believes political progress will eventually follow. Starting with politics, on the other hand, only creates obstacles.

Horn Review: How do you envision Somaliland's cooperation with Ethiopia on trade, energy, military modernization, and investments advancing?

Mr. Ahmed Yusu Hersi: There is some existing cooperation, but it has yet to expand meaningfully. Somaliland needs affordable energy to grow, and Ethiopia already supplying electricity and water to Djibouti could play a key role. While military cooperation is currently inadvisable due to the MOU experience, there is strong potential for collaboration in energy and cross-border trade. Ethiopia has trade offices in Somaliland, and this could be strengthened by opening more border points to facilitate the movement of goods into Somalia. Developing ports in parallel with planned highway links is also crucial. If Somaliland could access Ethiopian electricity, just 70 km from Jigjiga, it would be a major boost while pursuing its own energy sources, whether renewable, fossil fuel, or mineral-based.

Horn Review: Despite lacking formal recognition, what role does Somaliland aspire to play in regional organizations such as IGAD, the African Union, and the African Continental Free Trade Area?

Mr. Ahmed Yusu Hersi: Somaliland seeks observer status to gain access to programmatic benefits and participate in projects run by international organizations. While it supports engagement with bodies like the UN and AU, the lack of recognition or dialogue excludes it from functional-level support. Observer status would be a meaningful step forward historically granted to liberation movements like SWAPO and the ANC during their anti-colonial struggles. The Horn of Africa is unique; it has already produced two independent states, Eritrea and South Sudan through prolonged conflict.

The question now is whether another bitter struggle is necessary between Somalia and Somaliland, or if peaceful alternatives can be pursued to prevent further human suffering.

Horn Review: How does Somaliland engage with these organizations currently and what are your long-term diplomatic aspirations?

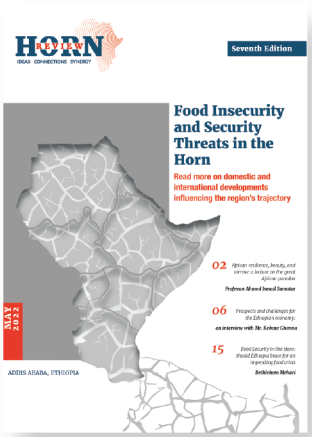
Mr. Ahmed Yusu Hersi: Somaliland doesn't engage directly or hold a seat at the table. In the long term, it would be beneficial for it to gain access.

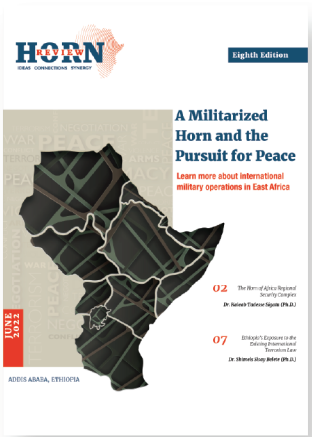
Some have proposed starting with program-level engagement allowing Somaliland a functional presence and involving it in initiatives on the ground. Currently, there is no such presence; while troops and operations exist in southern Somalia, they are absent in Somaliland.

Horn Review: My final question: what is one thing you would most like the international community to understand about Somaliland today, especially in the context of its growing partnership with Ethiopia and broader regional engagement?

Mr. Ahmed Yusu Hersi: I want the international community to understand that Somaliland is an important part of the world and should not be ignored. It deserves international support, at the very least through a mediating role between Somalia and Somaliland, and by backing its pursuit of economic development. Even without political recognition, Somaliland's development needs should be acknowledged. It is a natural trading partner, particularly with neighbors like Ethiopia, and the international community should do more to engage with and support it.

Horn Review: Mr. Ahmed, we've had a great discussion. Once again, thank you so much for coming.
Mr. Ahmed Yusu Hersi: Thank you very much.





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