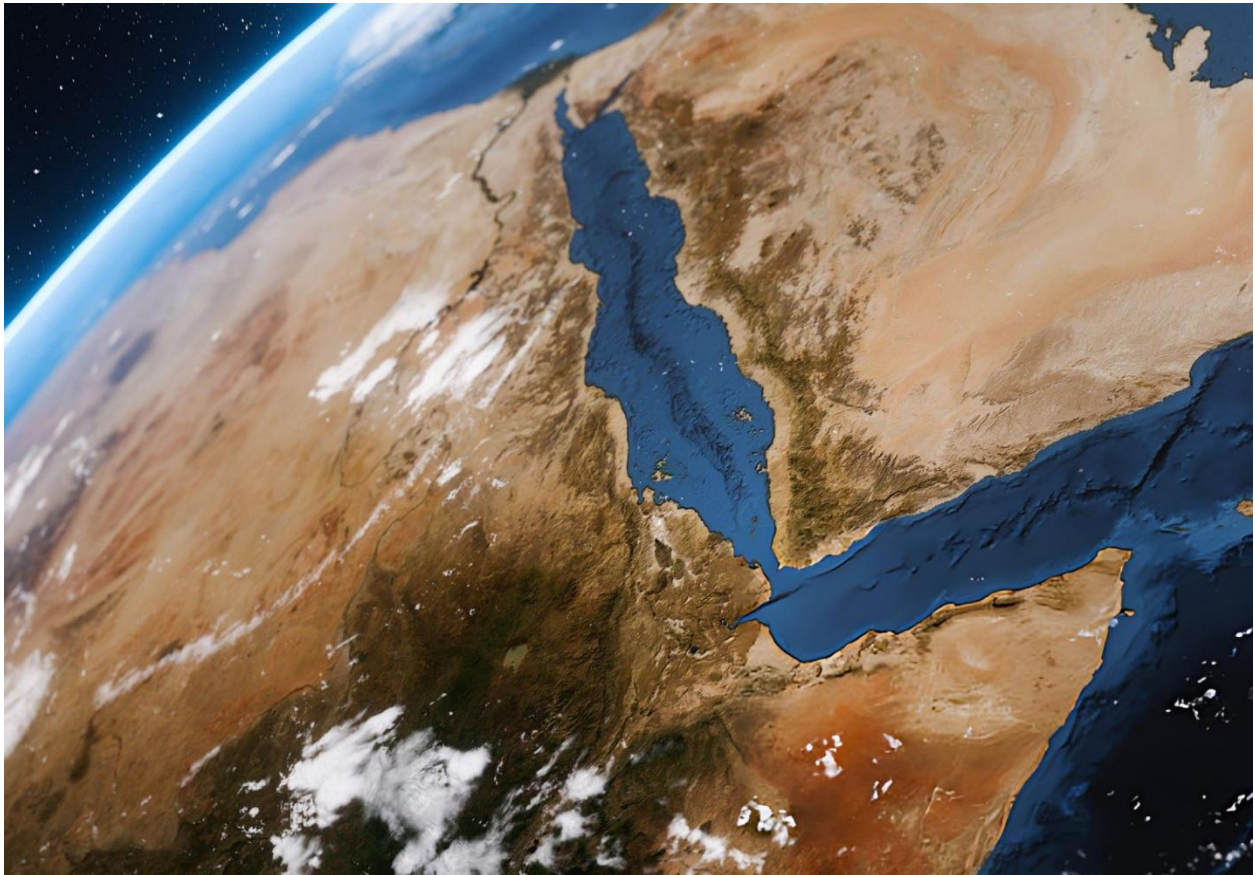


# The New Age of Proxy Politics in the Horn of Africa

**By Mahder Nesibu**



*"We are out to see that this [Sudanese] government is not there anymore. We are not trying to pressure them to talk to us, or to behave in a more constructive way. We will give weapons to anyone committed to overthrowing them."<sup>1</sup>*

**Isaias Afwerki, 1995**

## **Introduction**

Proxy politics is hardly a phenomenon unique to the Horn of Africa. Yet few regions have furnished it with such persistent and fertile conditions. The complex web of states that constitute the Horn have long provided the structural ingredients that proxy warfare requires. Fragile governments, unresolved territorial disputes, aggrieved populations, and the constant presence of armed actors pursuing some political end. These conditions have made the region a recurring theatre for the indirect prosecution of inter-state rivalries, where neighbours settle disputes through the movements they arm rather than the armies they deploy.

<sup>1</sup> Awate Team, "PFDJ's Eritrea: Klashnikov Diplomacy," Awate.com, October 11, 2010. <https://awate.com/pfdjs-eritrea-klashnikov-diplomacy/>

What gives this dynamic renewed urgency is the convergence of two simultaneous shifts. Internally, the Horn's two largest states, Ethiopia and Sudan, have undergone radical political upheaval, producing fragmented security landscapes and a proliferation of armed actors that external powers have found both tempting and exploitable. Externally, the steady erosion of the liberal international order and the retreat of Western engagement have cleared space for a new cast of middle powers, arriving with capable militaries, deep pockets, and strategic ambitions of their own. The consequence of these two shifts colliding is that proxy war-making has moved from the margins of the region's inter-state relations to its very centre, threatening to deepen what is already a proliferated and interlocking set of crises.

### **The Cold War and the Architecture of Proxy Rivalry**

The states of the Horn have contended with organised armed movements since the earliest years of their statehood. Whether rooted in ethnic grievance, ideological opposition, or the ambitions of political entrepreneurs who found the gun more persuasive than the ballot, these movements emerged as a defining feature of the region's political landscape. Critically, they did not operate in isolation. The structural fragility of these states, their incomplete monopoly over violence and their porous, ethnically interwoven borders, meant that armed movements could be cultivated, sheltered, and directed by neighbouring governments pursuing strategic ends of their own.<sup>2</sup> The result was a regional order in which proxy warfare became a primary instrument of inter-state competition.

The cold war period accelerated this considerably.<sup>3</sup> Superpower rivalry mapped itself onto the Horn's existing fault lines, amplifying local tensions and furnishing competing governments with the arms, resources, and ideological cover to back movements against their neighbours. It was in this environment that several armed organisations emerged which would go on to redraw the political map of the region entirely.

Among the most consequential were the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), which prosecuted a decades-long insurgency and ultimately seceded Eritrea from Ethiopia in 1991, formalising statehood in 1993, and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), which, in collaboration with the EPLF, overthrew the Derg regime in the same year and went on to dominate the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) coalition for nearly three decades. The relationship between these two movements is itself instructive. The TPLF's development as a formidable rebel organisation owed enormously to the EPLF, which provided it with extensive material support, training, and strategic direction.<sup>4</sup> In this sense, the TPLF functioned, at least in its formative years, as a proxy of the Eritrean liberation movement, an early illustration of a pattern that would repeat itself, with greater complexity, in the decades that followed. Further south, the Sudan People's Liberation

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<sup>2</sup> Donald Crummey, "The Horn of Africa: Between History and Politics," *\*Northeast African Studies\** n.s., 10, no. 3 (2003): 117–138. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41931242>

<sup>3</sup> Peter Schwab, "Cold War on the Horn of Africa," *\*African Affairs\** 77, no. 306 (1978): 6–20. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/721344>

<sup>4</sup> John Young, "The Tigray and Eritrean Peoples Liberation Fronts: A History of Tensions and Pragmatism," *\*The Journal of Modern African Studies\** 34, no. 1 (1996): 105–120. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/161740>

Movement (SPLM), sustained a protracted struggle that eventually delivered South Sudanese independence in 2011.<sup>5</sup>

What distinguished these movements from the many armed groups of the period that left little lasting consequence was their exploitation of inter-state antagonism. Their survival and growth depended not only on the grievances they mobilised domestically, but on the strategic calculations of neighbouring states that found it useful to keep them in the field.

At the centre of this dynamic stood the Ethiopia-Sudan relationship, which throughout the cold war period was defined less by diplomacy than by mutual destabilisation. The two largest states of the Horn carried an accumulated weight of unresolved border tensions and the deep ethnic and communal ties that connected populations across their shared frontier, ties that could be activated as instruments of pressure as readily as they served as bonds of kinship.<sup>6</sup> Layered on top of these structural tensions were the ideological alignments of the cold war itself. Sudan under General Jaafar Nimeiry positioned itself within the Soviet orbit before eventually pivoting westward, while imperial Ethiopia maintained its alignment with the United States and, critically, with Israel before pivoting to the Soviet Union under a Marxist dictatorship. Sudan drew support from Egypt under Gamal Abdel Nasser, whose own strategic interests in the Nile basin gave him reasons to view a strong, centralised Ethiopia with suspicion. Ethiopia, by contrast, cultivated Israeli backing, which carried its own regional implications in an Arab-dominated neighbourhood.

These alignments stopped well short of open war between Khartoum and Addis Ababa, but they produced something arguably more durable: a pattern of competitive proxy engagement in which each state backed the armed movements tormenting the other. Khartoum permitted its territory to serve as a rear base and supply corridor for the EPLF and, to a lesser degree, for movements operating in Ethiopia's north. Sudanese territory became the channel through which arms were smuggled and insurgencies sustained, contributing materially to the pressure that ultimately brought down the Derg in 1991. Ethiopia, operating from the same logic, extended support at various points to the southern movements that challenged Khartoum, viewing them as a counterweight and a lever of pressure in an adversarial relationship it could not resolve through direct confrontation.

The pattern that emerges from this period is one of structured mutual vulnerability. Neither state was strong enough to impose its will on the other directly, and both possessed internal fault lines that the other could exploit. Proxy warfare filled the gap, allowing each to pursue strategic objectives while maintaining the formal posture of states at peace. By the time the cold war ended and the liberation movements it had nurtured came to power, the Horn of

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<sup>5</sup> Øystein H. Rolandsen and M. W. Daly, \*A History of South Sudan: From Slavery to Independence\* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

[https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/africa/article/oystein-h-rolandsen-and-m-w-daly-a-history-of-south-sudan-from-slavery-to-independence-cambridge-cambridge-university-press-hb-5999-978-0-521-11631-2-pb-1899-978-0-521-13325-8-2016-xix-171-pp/B8343B4E8E5A9160AEF5CEA0F50E739B?utm\\_campaign=shareaholic&utm\\_medium=copy\\_link&utm\\_source=bookmark](https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/africa/article/oystein-h-rolandsen-and-m-w-daly-a-history-of-south-sudan-from-slavery-to-independence-cambridge-cambridge-university-press-hb-5999-978-0-521-11631-2-pb-1899-978-0-521-13325-8-2016-xix-171-pp/B8343B4E8E5A9160AEF5CEA0F50E739B?utm_campaign=shareaholic&utm_medium=copy_link&utm_source=bookmark)

<sup>6</sup> Belete Belachew Yihun, "Ethiopia's Troubled Relations with the Sudan, 1956–1983," \*International Journal of Ethiopian Studies\* 10, nos. 1–2 (2016): 67–88. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26554853>

Africa was a fundamentally different political geography from the one that had existed a generation earlier.

### **The Eritrean Interlude: A Small State's Outsized Reach**

The post-cold war order arrived in the Horn with the promise, however unevenly distributed, of a new organising logic. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of a rules-based international system, anchored by the United States and expressed through multilateral institutions, created conditions in which direct military adventurism carried higher costs and in which the most egregious forms of interstate predation faced at least nominal pushback. For a period, the Horn reflected something of this shift. Strong governments consolidated themselves in Addis Ababa and Khartoum. The liberation fronts that had defined the previous era were either in power or marginalised. The South Sudan question remained unresolved, but it had not yet reached its explosive conclusion.

Into this environment came Eritrea, newly independent, governed by the EPLF's political successor, the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), and led by Isaias Afwerki.<sup>7</sup> Eritrea wasted little time in colliding with the regional order it had entered. Within a decade of secession, it had entered into territorial disputes with Djibouti, Yemen, and Ethiopia, the last of which escalated into a full-scale border war between 1998 and 2000 that killed tens of thousands and left the two countries locked in a cold hostility that would persist for two decades. Relations with Sudan deteriorated into mutual accusations of backing each other's armed opposition. Eritrea's early alignment with the United States as a partner in counterterrorism efforts in the region, conceived as a bulwark against the spread of radical Islamism, collapsed under the weight of its own behaviour.<sup>8</sup>

Isolated diplomatically and outmatched militarily by its larger neighbours, Eritrea adapted. What it lacked in conventional power it compensated for through the systematic cultivation of proxy networks across the region. This was where the country's formative experience as a liberation movement became a strategic asset. The PFDJ regime understood, from its own history, how armed movements were built, sustained, and directed. It possessed an experienced and networked intelligence apparatus, anchored by the National Security Office (NSO), which maintained a dedicated unit for the mobilisation of proxy forces across the Horn.<sup>9</sup> Through this structure, Eritrea extended support to an array of armed groups operating against governments it wished to destabilise.

The reach was considerable. Eritrea backed the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) in Sudan, which included factions of the SPLM under John Garang. Inside Ethiopia, it extended support to various groups including Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) in the east,

<sup>7</sup> Tekle M. Woldemikael, "Introduction to Special Issue: Postliberation Eritrea," *\*Africa Today\** 60, no. 2 (2013): v–xix.

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/276188958\\_Introduction\\_to\\_Special\\_Issue\\_Postliberation\\_Eritrea](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/276188958_Introduction_to_Special_Issue_Postliberation_Eritrea)

<sup>8</sup> Dan Connell, "Eritrea and the United States: Towards a New US Policy," in *\*Eritrea's External Relations: Understanding Its Regional Role and Foreign Policy\**, ed. Richard Reid (London: Chatham House, 2009).

<https://danconnell.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/23-Eri-US-rels-Reid-4.09-.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> United Nations Security Council, *\*Letter Dated 18 July 2011 from the Chairman of the Security Council Committee Pursuant to Resolutions 751 (1992) and 1907 (2009) Concerning Somalia and Eritrea Addressed to the President of the Security Council\** (S/2011/433), July 18, 2011.

<https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/708002?v=pdf>

the Tigray People's Democratic Movement (TPDM) in the north, and various other opposition organisations.<sup>10</sup> In Djibouti, it supported the Front for the Restoration of Unity and Democracy (FRUD). Most damagingly for its international standing, Eritrea extended support to armed Islamist actors in Somalia, including the Union of Islamic Courts and, later, Al-Shabaab, drawing sharp condemnation from the international community and United Nations sanctions.

Yet for all its reach, this phase of Eritrean proxy activism produced relatively limited strategic returns. The governments it targeted, in Ethiopia, Sudan, and Djibouti, remained largely intact. The armed groups it backed, with the exception of the SPLM, made noise but did not come close to achieving the kind of transformative political outcomes that the liberation fronts of the cold war period had managed. Eritrea found itself spending considerable resources and political capital to sustain a destabilisation strategy that kept its neighbours uncomfortable but did not fundamentally alter the regional balance of power in its favour. The country remained isolated, sanctioned, and encircled by governments that viewed it with varying degrees of hostility.

This intermittent period, in which a limited and isolated Eritrea mobilised weak armed groups against grounded states, was characterised by its asymmetry. The ambition was outsized relative to the capacity. What changed the calculus was not anything Eritrea did, but rather the seismic shifts that overtook the Horn itself from 2018 onwards.

### **The New Horn of Africa: Upheaval and Opportunity**

The internal landscape of the Horn began changing rapidly and simultaneously in ways that reopened the structural conditions for proxy warfare on a far larger scale. The two most significant shifts occurred in Ethiopia and Sudan, the region's anchor states, both of which entered periods of political transition that quickly unravelled into something far more turbulent.

In Ethiopia, the displacement of the TPLF from the apex of federal power in 2018 brought Abiy Ahmed to the premiership on a wave of popular expectation.<sup>11</sup> The transition, however, inherited a deeply militarised political environment. During the EPRDF era, regional governments had been permitted, for reasons bound up in the management of ethnically defined federal structures, to build up their own security and fighting capabilities. This proliferation of arms and armed capacity did not dissolve with the change of government. When the TPLF, having lost its position in Addis Ababa, rejected the new political arrangement and the subsequent dissolution of the EPRDF into the Prosperity Party in 2019, it retained both the political organisation and the military infrastructure to mount a serious challenge. The war that erupted in November 2020 lasted two years, caused catastrophic destruction across Tigray and the surrounding regions, and ended in a peace agreement in 2022 that halted the fighting without resolving the underlying tensions. Today the TPLF

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<sup>10</sup> G. J. Abbink, "Ethiopia-Eritrea: Proxy Wars and Prospects of Peace in the Horn of Africa," *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 21, no. 3 (2003): 407–425. <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/9487>

<sup>11</sup> International Crisis Group, "Keeping Ethiopia's Transition on the Rails", Report no. 283 (Brussels: International Crisis Group, December 16, 2019). <https://www.crisisgroup.org/rpt/africa/ethiopia/283-keeping-ethiopia-transition-rails>

retains control over Tigray through a regional council operating outside the constitutional framework, and maintains an armed wing that, while a shadow of the Tigray Defence Forces (TDF) at the height of the conflict, remains a credible source of instability.<sup>12</sup> Alongside the TPLF, the Amhara Fano National Movement and a range of ethno-nationalist formations, including the Oromo Liberation Army, continue to wage armed opposition against the federal government, sustaining a security environment of diffuse and overlapping conflicts.

Sudan's trajectory followed a similar but a radically destabilising path. Longtime strongman Omar al-Bashir's effort to insulate himself from military challenge had led him to elevate the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), originally a tribal militia with roots in the Janjaweed, into a parallel military structure capable of counterbalancing the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF).<sup>13</sup> The strategy succeeded in delaying a coup but failed to suppress a far larger catastrophe. When nationwide protests forced Bashir from power in 2019, both the RSF and the SAF moved to fill the political vacuum, initially in coalition, then in mounting rivalry with the civilian forces pressing for democratic transition. By April 2023, the latent tension between the two armed formations had exploded into open war. What began as a clash in Khartoum spread across the country, drawing in a proliferation of smaller armed actors and reducing Sudan's prospects for political stabilisation to near zero. Both the RSF and the SAF have developed civilian political wings, conduct their own foreign relations, and have secured external backing to sustain their campaigns. The prospect of Sudanese fragmentation, once a worst-case scenario discussed in policy circles, has become a plausible trajectory.<sup>14</sup>

These internal upheavals unfolded against a significantly altered external environment, one in which the structural conditions that had previously constrained proxy warfare were themselves weakening. The liberal international order, whose institutional architecture had imposed at least some discipline on the behaviour of regional actors, was in visible retreat. The United States, the primary external guarantor of that order's reach into the Horn, had substantially reduced its appetite for engagement on the continent.<sup>15</sup> Under the Trump administration, American foreign policy abandoned the pretence of sustained investment in African stability, withdrawing diplomatic attention, development resources, and the kind of institutional pressure that had once, however imperfectly, served as a brake on the worst forms of inter-state predation.

Into the space vacated by Western disengagement came a set of middle powers for whom the Horn represents a zone of strategic opportunity rather than humanitarian obligation. The Gulf states, Turkiye, Iran, and Egypt are all present in the region, each pursuing a distinct set of

<sup>12</sup> Magnus Taylor, \*Power Struggle in Ethiopia's Tigray: Averting a Return to War\*, Africa Briefing (Brussels: International Crisis Group, May 15, 2026). <https://www.crisisgroup.org/qna/africa/ethiopia-eritrea/power-struggle-ethiopia-tigray-averting-return-war>

<sup>13</sup> John Lechner, \*A History of Outsourced Violence: The Rise of the Rapid Support Forces, Libyan National Army, and Wagner Group\*, Situation Update (Geneva: Small Arms Survey, December 2025). <https://www.smallarmssurvey.org/resource/outsourced-violence-rise-of-rsf-libyan-national-army-and-wagner>

<sup>14</sup> Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), "Foreign Meddling and Fragmentation Fuel the War in Sudan," ACLED Conflict Watchlist 2025, December 12, 2024. <https://acleddata.com/report/foreign-meddling-and-fragmentation-fuel-war-sudan>

<sup>15</sup> Christopher Faulkner and Raphael Parens, "The Africa Blind Spot: The US National Security Strategy and the Risks of Retreat," Foreign Policy Research Institute, January 6, 2026. <https://www.fpri.org/article/2026/01/the-africa-blind-spot-the-us-national-security-strategy-and-the-risks-of-retreat/>

interests expressed through investment, political backing, arms transfers, and the cultivation of client relationships with both state and non-state actors.<sup>16</sup> These powers do not operate according to a unified logic. Their interests frequently diverge and occasionally clash. But their collective effect has been to deepen fragmentation, embolden armed actors who might otherwise have been compelled toward negotiation, and introduce into the region's conflicts a set of external dynamics that no single mediating framework has the leverage to contain.

### **The Architecture of the New Proxy Order**

What has emerged from this convergence of internal shifts and external transformation is a proxy landscape qualitatively different from anything the Horn has previously experienced, and distinct even from the Eritrean-led destabilisation of the 2000s and 2010s.

The structure of this new order can be understood as a layered web of interdependencies, running from middle powers at the apex, through regional states, down to the armed groups prosecuting conflicts on the ground. At each level, actors are animated by specific interests and sustained by relationships of exchange with the levels above and below them. What holds the web together is not ideological alignment or formal alliance, but convergence of interest, often partial, sometimes temporary, and always subject to recalculation.

At the apex sit the middle powers. Saudi Arabia and the UAE have invested heavily in the Horn, with competing and sometimes contradictory interests that have led them to back opposing sides in Sudan's civil war.<sup>17</sup> Iran has extended support to the SAF. Turkey has maintained relationships with multiple actors simultaneously. Russia, operating through the Africa Corps, has deepened its military footprint across the continent's conflict zones.<sup>18</sup> Egypt, driven by its mounting anxiety over Ethiopian control of the Nile through the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, has pursued a strategy of building pressure points around Ethiopia's periphery, deepening its alignment with Eritrea and extending support to actors positioned to complicate Addis Ababa's strategic environment.<sup>19</sup>

At the state level, Eritrea occupies a position of particular significance. In the current configuration, Asmara functions simultaneously as a regional actor pursuing its own agenda and as an instrument through which more capable external powers project influence on the ground. Eritrea is a major backer of the SAF in Sudan's civil war, a posture that aligns it with Egypt and certain Gulf actors. It has established what has been described as the Tsimdo framework, an umbrella structure through which it is working to align various non-state armed actors inside Ethiopia, including the TPLF, under a coordinated architecture directed

<sup>16</sup> Ngala Chome, *The Rising Influence of Gulf and Middle Eastern Powers in the Horn of Africa: Consideration for Peace and Security*, Analytical Note no. 03 (Juba: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung South Sudan, January 2025).

<sup>17</sup> Jean-Baptiste Galopin, "The Great Game of the UAE and Saudi Arabia in Sudan," in *Africa and the Middle East: Beyond the Divides*, POMEPS Studies 40 (Washington, DC: Project on Middle East Political Science, June 2020), 25–30. <https://pomeps.org/the-great-game-of-the-uae-and-saudi-arabia-in-sudan>

<sup>18</sup> I. Ryan Bauer et al., *\*Russian Mercenary and Paramilitary Groups in Africa: Examining Changes and Impacts Since the Wagner Rebellion\** (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2025). [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_reports/RRA2600/RRA2613-1/RAND\\_RRA2613-1.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RRA2600/RRA2613-1/RAND_RRA2613-1.pdf)

<sup>19</sup> Mahder Nesibu, "As Ethiopia Doubles Down on the Nile, Egypt Deepens Its Eritrea Alignment," *Horn Review*, April 22, 2026. <https://hornreview.org/2026/04/22/as-ethiopia-doubles-down-on-the-nile-egypt-deepens-its-eritrea-alignment/>

against the Ethiopian federal government. And it maintains the intelligence infrastructure, the NSO's dedicated proxy mobilisation unit, that makes it capable of translating political alignment with external powers into operational effect on the ground.<sup>20</sup>

What makes Eritrea's position peculiar is that it is simultaneously a principal and an agent. It pursues its own strategic objectives against Ethiopia, its primary adversary, while serving as the regional instrument through which Egypt and others extend their reach without direct exposure. Its decades of experience in rebel warfare, its established networks across the Horn's armed landscape, and its institutional capacity for clandestine support make it a uniquely capable facilitator in a region where that capacity is in high demand.

Below the state level, the armed groups themselves operate within this web in ways that reflect their own political calculations. The TPLF, having governed Ethiopia for nearly three decades, is a sophisticated political actor, far removed from the simple armed rebellion its current circumstances might suggest. It controls a territory, runs administrative structures, and maintains external relationships of its own. The Amhara Fano and the Oromo Liberation Army are driven by ethno-nationalist agendas rooted grievances against the Ethiopian government, but their capacity to sustain armed opposition is shaped in part by the external support available to them. In Sudan, the RSF and SAF have transcended the category of simple armed factions, each functioning as a proto-state with its own governance claims, foreign relations, and economic interests. They align with external powers where interests converge, extract resources and diplomatic cover from those relationships, and deploy those resources to sustain a war neither appears capable of winning outright.

The currencies of this web are varied. Arms and ammunition flow across actors, sometimes through regional states to armed groups on the ground. Diplomatic cover, the willingness to block or frustrate mediation, provide legitimacy, flows in multiple directions. Intelligence and operational expertise, Eritrea's particular contribution, circulates through the network's connective tissue. Financial resources lubricate relationships and sustain fighting capacity. What binds all this together is the absence of any actor with both the interest and the capacity to impose a different order.

### **A New Age**

The cold-war era proxy order is partially instructive in understanding the dynamics developing today. The liberation fronts of that era pursued defined political objectives, the overthrow of specific regimes, the secession of specific territories, and they operated in an environment where superpower patronage, however distorting, imposed a certain structure on the conflicts it fed. The movements that emerged from that period went on to redraw the map of the Horn, producing new states and fundamentally restructuring those that remained.

The current proxy landscape is in some respects more complex and in others more dangerous. The armed groups at its base are more capable, more fragmented, and more varied in their objectives. The external actors feeding the system are more diverse, less coordinated, and

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<sup>20</sup> Mahder Nesibu, "Eritrea's Proxy Strategy and the Rising Threat to Ethiopian Stability," Horn Review, June 7, 2025. <https://hornreview.org/2025/06/07/eritreas-proxy-strategy-and-the-rising-threat-to-ethiopian-stability/>

operating in an environment with no dominant power willing or able to serve as a final arbiter.

What is clear is that the Horn of Africa is no longer dealing with a contained or episodic form of proxy politics. The convergence of collapsing state authority, proliferating armed movements, inter-state antagonism, and middle power competition has produced a web of relationships dense enough and durable enough to constitute a structural feature of the regional order, rather than a temporary crisis to be managed. The conditions that once made proxy warfare an instrument of choice for isolated or resource-constrained actors have now generalised across the region, drawing in a far wider range of participants with far greater capacity. The Horn has been here before, in the turbulent decades of the cold war, and the consequences of that period reshaped the region's political geography in ways that are still being lived. Whether the current configuration produces comparable consequences remains to be seen, but the structural conditions for it are, by any reasonable assessment, in place.