

Eritrea's Old Narrative in a New Red Sea Order

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Introduction

In a September 2026 interview with Middle East Eye, Eritrean Foreign Minister Osman Saleh characterized the United Arab Emirates' expanding network of port facilities across Africa as "port imperialism" and questioned whether Abu Dhabi's activities served commercial purposes alone. He connected Eritrea's concerns to relationships among the UAE, Israel, Ethiopia, and states in the Horn of Africa, including possible Israeli security involvement in Somaliland.¹ The formulation recalls a political method developed during Eritrea's movement for secession, when Eritrean organizations presented Ethiopia's relationship with Israel as part of a wider contest involving Arab interests, Zionism, and control of the Red Sea.

The comparison matters because the regional order that once gave that framing substantial political traction has changed considerably. During the formative decades of the Eritrean movement, Arab nationalism shaped regional politics, Israel faced a broad Arab diplomatic and military confrontation, Palestinian organizations occupied a central place in Arab political discourse, and Cold War competition intensified external involvement across the Horn and Red Sea. Contemporary politics operates through a far more complex network of state partnerships, commercial interests, maritime competition, Gulf rivalries, Iranian influence, and African strategic interests. The actors are still interconnected, but the political environment around Eritrea has changed. What remains consistent is the way Asmara views external relationships as part of its strategic environment, while the regional structure in which those relationships operate has been transformed.

The Eritrean conflict originated in a concrete dispute over political status and sovereignty. United Nations General Assembly Resolution 390 A of 2 December 1950 recommended that Eritrea constitute an autonomous unit federated with Ethiopia under the sovereignty of the Ethiopian Crown. Eritrea was to retain legislative, executive, and judicial authority over domestic affairs, while the federal government was assigned responsibility for defense, foreign affairs, currency, and communications. The federation came into effect in 1952. Its institutions were progressively weakened before the arrangement was abolished in November 1962 and Eritrea was incorporated into Ethiopia as a province. The constitutional dispute therefore preceded the later Arab, Palestinian, and Red Sea dimensions of the conflict.

The transformation of the conflict from a domestic political dispute into an internationalized insurgency followed from an asymmetry of power. The early Eritrean Liberation Front lacked the military resources required to challenge Ethiopia directly. The organization formed in Cairo in 1960 and began armed operations in 1961. Its leaders consequently needed access to weapons, training, finance, diplomatic recognition, media platforms, and cross-border routes. Egypt, Syria,

¹ "Exclusive: Eritrea Foreign Minister Says UAE Pursuing 'Port Imperialism' across Africa," Middle East Eye, September 12, 2026.

Iraq, Sudan, South Yemen, Libya, and Palestinian organizations subsequently became important nodes in the movement's external environment, although each pursued its own interests. The external network therefore developed through overlapping relationships instead of a unified command structure.

The Ethiopia-Israel relationship provided an especially useful political reference point because it was real and independently motivated. Israeli military and security cooperation with imperial Ethiopia expanded during the late 1950s and 1960s as part of what David Ben-Gurion's government called the "periphery doctrine," an effort to cultivate non-Arab states on the edge of the Arab world, alongside Turkey and Iran, as a counterweight to Arab hostility. Israeli personnel trained Ethiopian forces and worked with specialized units involved in counterinsurgency in Eritrea. Eritrean organizations could therefore connect a domestic struggle to a regional political argument grounded in an existing strategic relationship. The Arab governments saw Ethiopia's cooperative relationship with Israel as a threat to Arab interests in Africa and recorded Eritrean propaganda from Damascus linking "Zionist Israel" with "feudal Ethiopia." Geography strengthened the argument. Eritrea's coastline connected the Ethiopian highlands to the Red Sea, the Arabian Peninsula, Egypt, and the Bab al-Mandeb. The conflict therefore occupied a geographical space already viewed through questions of maritime access, regional influence, and the movement of military power.

From Constitutional Dispute to External Adaptation

This way of reading regional politics has deeper roots in the history of the Eritrean question. The federation was never purely a domestic arrangement. Resolution 390 A itself referred to Ethiopia's "legitimate need for adequate access to the sea" among the considerations underlying the federation, placing the settlement within broader questions of regional geography and sovereignty alongside its constitutional dimensions. Over the following decade, the federal framework gradually evolved, with changes to Eritrea's institutions and constitutional position contributing to a different political relationship between Eritrea and Ethiopia. The eventual abolition of the federation in 1962 marked the culmination of that process, after which Eritrea was administered within a more centralized state structure. The armed struggle that followed thus emerged within a political context that had changed considerably from the federal arrangement established in 1952.

The development of Eritrean political organizations preceded the ELF. The Eritrean Liberation Movement, founded by Eritrean exiles in Port Sudan in 1958, worked among students, workers, and political activists and provided an early organizational base for the independence movement.² Its ability to sustain armed activity remained limited, however, and attention increasingly shifted toward building a movement capable of carrying out an armed campaign. Eritrean political figures in Cairo, including former Eritrean Assembly president Idris Mohammed Adem, helped establish

². "Eritrean Liberation Movement (የኤርትራ ነፃነት ገዥ ጽ/ቤት)," Sewasew.

the ELF in July 1960.³ Hamid Idris Awate then led its first armed action in September 1961.⁴ The transition was gradual, moving from political organization in exile to a movement with an established leadership and an armed presence inside Eritrea.

Cairo quickly became the main external center of the struggle because Egypt occupied a central place in Arab politics. Under Gamal Abdel Nasser, the city had become a major center of Arab nationalism and regional political activity, while Eritrean activists were already building networks there. Weldeab Woldemariam was active in Cairo,⁵ and Eritrean students maintained political connections through al-Azhar. Egyptian authorities also allowed a degree of political activity that was difficult to sustain from within Ethiopia. An early training facility near Alexandria gave the movement access to military training as well, drawing in part on methods associated with Algeria's National Liberation Front. Cairo therefore offered the emerging Eritrean movement an established political setting in which its networks could expand and gradually support the move toward armed struggle.

Egypt had its own reasons for engaging with the Eritrean question. It fitted with Nasser's opposition to conservative regional structures, his interest in Somali nationalism, and his broader rivalry with Ethiopia. At the same time, Egypt had important interests in maintaining relations with Addis Ababa. Ethiopia controlled the upper Nile, carried considerable diplomatic weight in Africa, and later became the seat of the Organization of African Unity. Cairo thus had to balance its contacts with Eritrean activists against its wider relationship with the Ethiopian government. Political space for Eritreans in Egypt could serve those immediate regional interests without making Eritrean secession a central Egyptian objective.

By the end of the 1960s, the ELF had gained a wider international profile without acquiring the military strength to seriously challenge Ethiopian control on its own. Its ability to dislodge Ethiopian forces was questionable, but the foreign assistance had increased its effectiveness. That imbalance made external support increasingly important to the movement's ability to sustain the war. Weapons and training were the most immediate needs, but finance, cross-border access, diplomatic contacts, and media platforms also mattered. As these links expanded, the movement increasingly had to work within the political interests of the governments and organizations providing them with support.

The result was a conflict that became increasingly tied to the politics of the wider region. Eritrean nationalism remained the movement's central objective, but sustaining the armed struggle required relationships with actors whose own priorities extended beyond Eritrea. Arab governments and Palestinian organizations became important to this external network, while the movement adjusted its political presentation to secure continued backing. Its international connections therefore grew

³ "Eritrean Liberation Front Founded in Cairo," Zantana Stories, July 10, 1960.

⁴ "Beginning of the Armed Struggle," Zantana Stories, September 1, 1961.

⁵ "Woldeab Woldemariam Started Radio Broadcasting from Cairo," Zantana Stories. September 1956.

through a series of intersecting interests, with each relationship providing something the movement lacked on its own.

Geography as Strategic Multiplier and Narrative Foundation

The internationalization of the Eritrean struggle rested on more than ideological affinity. Geography gave the conflict a wider strategic relevance. Eritrea's position on the western shore of the Red Sea, facing the Arabian Peninsula and lying close to the Bab al-Mandeb, connected the conflict to a maritime space already important to Egypt, Yemen, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and, increasingly, the wider Cold War powers. A struggle over Eritrea's political status could therefore be linked to interests that extended well beyond the territory itself.

That connection became stronger as governments on both sides of the Red Sea began to view the waterway as a shared strategic space. Egypt's position at its northern end tied the Red Sea to both the Suez Canal and the Nile. Yemen controlled the southern approach, while Ethiopia's sovereignty over Eritrea gave Addis Ababa a direct maritime outlet. For Israel, the Bab al-Mandeb mattered for access and maritime trade. South Yemen's control of Aden added another layer when the revolutionary government there became an important factor in the region. These overlapping interests meant that developments on one shore could affect calculations on the other, giving the Eritrean question a significance that went beyond its immediate territorial setting.

Eritrean political activists entered this environment at a time when Arab governments and political movements were already focused on Arab unity, the Arab-Israeli conflict, and struggles against European influence in the region. This gave the movement several ways to present its cause. In one setting it could emphasize Eritrean national aspirations and in another, it could draw on Muslim political identity, opposition to Western influence, or concerns about the security of the Red Sea. This flexibility mattered because the movement needed outside resources that could not be generated internally. Arab nationalism opened one channel of political support, Opposition to Israel opened another, Palestinian politics offered a broader revolutionary vocabulary, and the geography of the Red Sea gave these different themes a common strategic setting.

The Ethiopia-Israel relationship gave those themes a concrete point of reference, precisely because it was real and independently motivated and not an Eritrean invention. Israel regarded Ethiopia as strategically useful for its political position in Africa, its Red Sea coastline, and its place outside the Arab political system, and the two governments consequently developed military, security, and diplomatic ties during the late 1950s and 1960s. Eritrean political actors did not create this relationship, instead they used it, treating an existing partnership as evidence for their own account of the region. ELF propaganda circulated from Damascus, for example, associated Israel with the Ethiopian imperial government, a pairing designed to let Arab audiences already hostile to Israel extend that hostility to Ethiopian rule over Eritrea. Through this association, the Eritrean question acquired a place within a wider regional contest that had never originally been about Eritrea at all.

That interpretation also shaped how parts of the Eritrean political movement described Ethiopia itself. Eritrean discourse increasingly portrayed the imperial government as a Christian monarchy closely tied to Western powers and Israel, a formulation that did more than label Ethiopia, it let Ethiopia's ties with Israel and Arab anxieties about Israeli influence be folded into a single political narrative, so that the Eritrean struggle could be presented as part of the same broader contest. This gave the movement a language that resonated well beyond Eritrea's own borders. Ethiopian officials, for their part, were watching the same regional environment through their own security concerns. The spread of Arab nationalist and revolutionary politics around the Red Sea, sharpened by Egypt's intervention in Yemen from 1962,⁶ heightened Addis Ababa's own sense of exposure, and Ethiopia's cooperation with Israel developed inside that wider regional competition. Officials in Addis Ababa did not agree among themselves about how far the relationship should go.

Those differences were visible in Eritrea itself. Ras Asrate Kassa, who served as enderase from 1964 to 1970, was a strong advocate of closer Israeli cooperation and saw Pan-Arabism and the politicization of Islam as serious challenges to Ethiopian authority.⁷ Israeli advisers worked closely with security units associated with the governor, including locally recruited commandos, a role considerably more direct than their part in the larger, American-linked Ethiopian Second Division. Even those advisers grew uneasy about Ethiopian counterinsurgency practices, warning that excessive violence against civilians was strengthening the insurgency rather than containing it, an early sign of the very visibility problem that would define Aklilu's objection.

Prime Minister Aklilu Habte-Wold read the same relationship differently. He worried less about its security value than about its diplomatic exposure. According to him, a highly visible Israeli role would let Arab governments read Ethiopian-Israeli cooperation exactly as Damascus already read it, as evidence of a broader regional alignment, and respond by increasing their support for the Eritrean insurgency. The disagreement between Asrate and Aklilu was therefore not a dispute over the facts of the relationship but over how to weigh them. Asrate treated Israeli cooperation as a security asset worth its costs, Aklilu treated the same cooperation as a diplomatic liability that risked widening the very conflict it was meant to help contain. The relationship with Israel was substantial, but Ethiopian officials themselves could not agree on what that substance was worth.

What mattered for the Eritrean movement was its ability to connect three existing dynamics to its own political cause. Israel had its own strategic interests in Ethiopia; Arab governments had their own concerns about Israel's growing regional role; and Ethiopian officials themselves differed over how closely Ethiopia should cooperate with Israel and what diplomatic costs that might bring. None of these relationships depended on the Eritrean movement for their existence. The movement brought them together in a political narrative that placed the Eritrean question within the wider rivalries already shaping the region. Geography made the connection plausible, while the political

⁶ Mark Robertson, "Twentieth Century Conflict in the Fourteenth Century: Intervention in Yemen," *The Fletcher Forum* (Winter 1989)

⁷ Haggai Erlich, *The Struggle over Eritrea, 1962–1978: War and Revolution in the Horn of Africa* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1983).

language circulating in Arab capitals made it easier to present. This gave the struggle a significance beyond its immediate political setting and encouraged outside actors to view Eritrea through conflicts and interests that extended far beyond the territory itself.

Differentiated Patronage and the Limits of Solidarity

The external support structure that developed around the Eritrean struggle could not be understood through the category of “the Arab world” as though Arab states constituted a single strategic actor. Arab nationalism created a broad ideological field, but the states operating within it competed for regional leadership, pursued different relations with Ethiopia, and assessed Israel and the Eritrean question according to distinct political and strategic interests. Baathism was particularly important within this environment because it articulated a conception of the Arab world that extended beyond the existing borders of Arab states and connected local struggles to a broader project of Arab political transformation.

The Baath Party was founded in Syria in the 1940s by Michel Aflaq and Salah al-Din al-Bitar, with Zaki al-Arsuzi also contributing to the intellectual development of Baathist thought.⁸ Its principal commitments included Arab unity, social transformation, economic socialism, and secular political organization. By viewing the political division of the Arab world as a historical condition that could be overcome through political unity, Baathist thought provided a framework through which conflicts beyond the formal boundaries of Arab states could acquire wider political significance. Eritrea’s position on the Red Sea and the early ELF’s emphasis on Muslim communities allowed the Eritrean struggle to enter this broader ideological field, making it relevant to some Arab actors as a question connected to regional security, Arab interests, and anti-colonial liberation. These ideological connections, however, did not produce a unified Arab policy toward Eritrea. Individual states translated them into different forms of political, military, or diplomatic engagement according to their own strategic interests.

Such differences were evident within the Baathist movement itself. Syria and Iraq developed separate Baathist organizations, and the relationship between them deteriorated after the 1966 split within the party. Damascus and Baghdad both claimed political authority within the broader Baathist movement while operating through distinct national structures, and the Syrian and Iraqi parties were subsequently mutually hostile and exclusive organizations. This division was important for the Eritrean struggle because the political competition between the two Baathist states shaped the channels through which Eritrean organizations obtained external support.

Syria became a significant patron of the ELF after the Baathists came to power in 1963. An ELF office operated in Damascus, Syrian radio provided a platform for Eritrean political messaging, and Eritrean recruits received military training in Syria.⁹ Syria was the movement’s most important external backer and allowed substantial numbers of Eritrean recruits to receive paramilitary training and supplied a large part of the arms used in Eritrea. This support strengthened the military

⁸ Joseph Cataliotti, “Ba’ath Party Ideology, Branches & Organization,” Study.com, accessed September 25, 2026

⁹ “This Day in History: The Ba’ath Party Comes to Power in Syria,” Al Majalla.

capacity of the ELF at a time when the movement still relied heavily on limited guerrilla operations. Syrian involvement therefore became an important part of the movement's military development, giving the relationship significance beyond diplomatic or ideological support.

Iraq became increasingly important after the Baath returned to power in Baghdad in 1968.¹⁰ Baghdad supplied arms, trained Eritrean officer candidates, and supported propaganda efforts, while Eritrean political organizations also established a presence in Iraq.¹¹ These links gave Eritrean actors access to another state with both the resources and the political interest to support the struggle against Ethiopia. At the same time, Iraqi support developed within the continuing rivalry between Baghdad and Damascus. The two governments supported Eritrean organizations while remaining adversaries in the wider struggle for influence within the Baathist movement, so their involvement in Eritrea did not amount to a common Arab policy. For Eritrean organizations, however, this division created room for political maneuver. Support from Syria did not require complete dependence on Damascus, since access to Baghdad provided another source of arms, training, political contacts, and financial assistance. The rivalry between the two Baathist states thus became part of the external environment in which Eritrean factions pursued their own organizational and political interests.

Palestinian politics entered this environment through the central place of Palestine within Arab nationalist politics. The Palestinian liberation struggle provided a political language that linked national conflicts across the region to a broader struggle against imperialism, Israel, and established political orders. Eritrean leaders therefore presented their own conflict within a wider revolutionary framework that connected Arab governments, Palestinian organizations, and other movements operating across national boundaries. Osman Saleh Sabbe became particularly important in developing these external relationships. His political position rested heavily on foreign contacts, fundraising, advocacy, and access to Arab governments,¹² while the authority of the field commanders depended more directly on military organization within Eritrea.

The growing importance of these external relationships became tied to a deeper dispute within the Eritrean movement over political authority and representation. Sabbe's relationship with the PLO developed in this setting. Historical accounts place him in contact with Palestinian organizations by 1969 and associate a PLO base in Amman with the organization of Eritrean dissident groups that later contributed to the formation of the EPLF.¹³ Eritrean fighters received training through Palestinian networks in Jordan and elsewhere, and these organizations provided access to political contacts as well as military instruction. Palestinian support therefore added another channel through which Eritrean actors acquired resources and established international connections. For Sabbe in particular, these networks expanded his ability to operate outside the direct control of the

¹⁰ "The Revolution of 1968," in *Encyclopædia Britannica*, s.v. "Iraq."

¹¹ National Intelligence Estimate 75/76-70, May 21, 1970, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976, Volume E-5, Documents on Africa, 1969-1972* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian).

¹² "Ba'ath Party." *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern World*. Oxford University Press. Accessed September 25, 2026.

¹³ Haggai Erlich, *The Struggle over Eritrea, 1962-1978: War and Revolution in the Horn of Africa* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1983).

Syrian and Iraqi governments, even as those governments continued to play an important role in the wider support structure.

Libya further widened this external network after Muammar Qadhdhafi came to power in 1969. Qadhdhafi's foreign policy combined Arab nationalism, revolutionary activism, opposition to Israel, and an active African policy, creating another source of support for Eritrean organizations as the regional environment became increasingly interconnected. Libya subsequently provided financial and material assistance,¹⁴ adding a resource base that complemented the military and political support available from Syria, Iraq, and Palestinian organizations. By the early 1970s, Eritrean organizations had gained access to a transnational network extending through Damascus, Baghdad, Amman, Beirut, Tripoli, Aden, Khartoum, and Cairo.

South Yemen added a further dimension because the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, which became independent in 1967, occupied a strategic position directly across the southern Red Sea. Its control of Aden and proximity to the Bab al-Mandeb gave South Yemeni territory logistical importance for training, transit, and the movement of weapons between the Arab world and the Horn. Eritrean fighters used South Yemeni territory for training and transit, while weapons destined for Eritrean organizations moved through the area. South Yemen was also a part of the network through which Chinese weapons reached Eritrean insurgents.¹⁵ Taken together, these relationships produced a support structure that was spread across several states and political organizations, each contributing different forms of assistance and pursuing its own regional interests.

Arab nationalism provided the broader political language that connected these relationships. Baathist governments supplied state resources and training. Palestinian organizations offered transnational political and military networks. Libya contributed financial and material assistance, while South Yemen provided strategic access across the Red Sea. Sudan at different moments supplied a land corridor. Eritrean actors moved between these centers according to changing political circumstances, and external support consequently became intertwined with the internal development of the movement itself. Access to foreign resources strengthened particular factions, shifted the balance of power among competing leaders, and created new forms of political authority within the struggle. The internationalization of the Eritrean conflict thus developed alongside the internal fragmentation of the movement, linking the external support network to the political struggle that eventually produced the confrontation between the ELF and the EPLF.

Internal Fragmentation and the Rise of the EPLF

The external support network surrounding the Eritrean struggle changed significantly as the 1960s gave way to the 1970s. Syria and Iraq remained important, but their support operated within an increasingly competitive Arab system and an increasingly fragmented Eritrean movement. The

¹⁴ Francis, S. T. "Libya's Empire of Terror." *Africa Insight* 12, no. 1 (1982).

¹⁵ Document 197, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Volume E-9, Part 2* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian).

PLO emerged as a particularly valuable channel because it linked Eritrean organizations to transnational revolutionary networks that extended beyond the policy choices of individual Arab governments. The internal structure of the ELF increasingly reflected the consequences of this external environment. The organization had become divided over leadership, ideology, regional representation, and military command, and the growing influence of field commanders weakened the authority of political figures whose power depended on foreign relationships. Osman Saleh Sabbe was particularly affected because his political influence rested heavily on diplomatic access and foreign support rather than on control of fighters in the field.

The issue was therefore organizational authority. A movement engaged in prolonged insurgency required leaders capable of acquiring external resources, but it also required commanders capable of converting resources into territorial and military power, and as the field organizations expanded, these forms of authority increasingly came into conflict. The PLO provided Sabbe with an alternative external network. The relationship developed in the aftermath of the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, when the PLO had become increasingly central to revolutionary politics in the Arab world, and Sabbe developed links with Palestinian organizations and used their infrastructure to assist Eritrean dissident groups. Historical accounts associate a PLO base in Amman with the organizational development of the forces from which the EPLF emerged. Eritrean fighters also received military training through Palestinian networks. The political logic of the relationship was broader than military training, however, the PLO offered a transnational political vocabulary in which Eritrea could be represented as another national liberation struggle.

The emergence of new Eritrean formations proceeded simultaneously. Dissident groups emerged from the ELF from 1969 onward, responding to dissatisfaction with leadership, organization, ideological direction, and the treatment of different social constituencies.¹⁶ The Eritrean Liberation Front created new organizational structures in an effort to restore central authority, while breakaway groups pursued separate military and political strategies, and fighting between the ELF and dissident formations began in 1972.¹⁷ The dissident forces gradually developed a more centralized political and military structure, and their ideological orientation drew increasingly on Marxist and Maoist revolutionary ideas. Isaias Afwerki and Ramadan Mohammed Nur became important leaders within this emerging political formation, which consolidated as the EPLF in 1973 after the convergence of several dissident forces.¹⁸ EPLF developed from internal dissent within the ELF, factional coalition building, military competition, ideological transformation, and the gradual rise of a field-based command.

The role of Sabbe within this development was therefore complicated. He remained an important political figure, particularly in foreign relations, but his authority increasingly diverged from that of the commanders building military and political institutions inside Eritrea, and the movement's

¹⁶Connell, Dan. "Inside the EPLF: The Origins of the 'People's Party' & Its Role in the Liberation of Eritrea." *Review of African Political Economy* 28, no. 89 (September 2001): 345–364.

¹⁷ "The ELF Leading the Struggle (1962–1974)," GlobalSecurity.org.

¹⁸ United Nations Human Rights Council, Report of the Detailed Findings of the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea, A/HRC/29/CRP.1 (2015).

center of gravity was shifting toward the field. Libya became increasingly important during this stage. Qadhdhafi's government combined revolutionary ideology with a willingness to finance external political organizations, and Libya provided financial and material support to Eritrean groups, becoming especially significant after political changes in Sudan reduced the movement's access to Sudanese territory. Substantial Libyan assistance was identified and described Libya as one of the principal external backers of the Eritrean insurgency. South Yemen further strengthened the external network. The PDRY's revolutionary orientation and position around Aden gave Eritrean organizations access to the southern Red Sea, Eritrean fighters received training there, and assistance could move through the port and surrounding infrastructure.¹⁹

These expanding external relationships increased the resources available to Eritrean organizations, but they developed alongside growing disputes over the organization and direction of the movement itself. The transformation from the ELF to the EPLF was therefore shaped by the way Eritrean leaders and commanders organized those resources and responded to internal divisions. The distinction is visible in the contrast between the ELF's decentralized structure and the more centralized system developed by the EPLF. The ELF had adopted an organizational model influenced by Algerian national liberation structures, and its command system relied heavily on zones whose commanders possessed substantial autonomy.²⁰ This arrangement allowed the movement to establish itself across a difficult geographic environment, but it also created coordination problems. The organizational problem was compounded by social change within the movement because the early ELF had developed heavily among Muslim communities in the lowlands, while its expansion brought increasing participation from Christian highlanders, and the resulting tensions concerned representation, leadership, ideology, and access to political authority.

The leadership responded with efforts at institutional reform. In 1971 the ELF created a Revolutionary Council and an Executive Committee and reorganized military units in an attempt to impose greater coordination,²¹ changes that reflected recognition that decentralized authority had become a structural weakness. Yet the reforms occurred in a context in which dissident groups had already established alternative organizations and the political crisis had moved beyond the control of the existing leadership. The dissident formations pursued a different organizational trajectory.

Isaias Afwerki, Ramadan Mohammed Nur, and their associates emphasized centralized command, political education, ideological discipline, and the development of internal institutions; both Isaias and Ramadan had exposure to Maoist guerrilla thought in China, which influenced the organizational model of the emerging EPLF.²² The movement's leaders sought to avoid the factional fragmentation that had weakened the ELF by creating a more integrated military and political structure. The Eritrean People's Revolutionary Party became important to this process.

¹⁹ P.D.R. Yemen: Outpost of Socialist Development in Arabia (London: Ithaca Press, 1986).

²⁰ Markakis, John. "The Nationalist Revolution in Eritrea." *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 26, no. 1 (March 1988): 51–70.

²¹ "The ELF Leading the Struggle (1962–1974)," [GlobalSecurity.org](https://www.globalsecurity.org).

²² "Isaias Afwerki: Beijing's Friend in the Horn," *African Arguments*, July 2023.

Dan Connell's research identifies the EPRP as a clandestine political structure operating within the EPLF and providing ideological and organizational direction, with functions that included cadre development, political education, and coordination between the military movement and the wider political organization.²³ This structure allowed the EPLF to develop a political apparatus alongside its armed wing.

The contrast with Sabbe was increasingly clear. Sabbe's influence rested on diplomacy, fundraising, foreign political access, and international representation, while Isaias and the field leadership derived their authority from fighters, territorial organization, cadres, and direct relationships with Eritrean communities. The contest consequently involved two different sources of political power. Reporting in 1975 recognized the growing division between the political leadership abroad and the field command, identifying the Foreign Mission led by Osman Saleh Sabbe and Woldeab Woldemariam as more willing to compromise over Eritrean secession than the ELF and PLF military leadership.²⁴ External networks strengthened both sides of this struggle. Sabbe possessed access to Arab capitals and Palestinian organizations, while the field leadership possessed its own military and political networks. The resulting competition demonstrated that foreign relationships could contribute to internal institutional formation without determining which faction would ultimately dominate.

The development of the EPLF's organizational system also reflected an attempt to integrate military and civilian life. The movement built political structures in areas under its influence and emphasized ideological education among fighters, aiming to create a system in which military capability, political discipline, and civilian organization reinforced one another. The process was accompanied by internal repression. Dissident currents inside the emerging EPLF were suppressed, and critics were imprisoned or executed during the movement's early consolidation, a history that matters because it reveals that the political centralization developed.

The conflict between the ELF and the emerging EPLF became the central internal struggle of the Eritrean revolution. Fighting began in 1972, followed by periods of limited cooperation and renewed confrontation, as the organizations competed over territory, recruitment, external legitimacy, and the future political structure of the Eritrean movement. The EPLF's military and organizational advantages became increasingly significant. Its leadership developed a centralized command structure capable of coordinating forces over difficult terrain, political cadres maintained organizational continuity and supported recruitment among populations beyond the original social base of the ELF, and the movement established stronger relationships with emerging revolutionary networks in Libya, South Yemen, and elsewhere.

The decisive confrontation came in 1980 and 1981. The EPLF, with assistance from the Tigray People's Liberation Front, defeated the ELF and forced many of its fighters toward Sudan, and the

²³ Article in *Review of African Political Economy* 28, no. 89 (2001): 345–364.

²⁴ Document 153, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976*, Volume E-6, Documents on Africa, 1973–1976 (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian).

ELF ceased to function as the dominant military organization inside Eritrea. The result marked the consolidation of the EPLF as the principal Eritrean liberation force, and its significance lies in what it reveals about the relationship between foreign support and internal organization. Foreign governments had supplied weapons, money, training, political access, and logistical routes to Eritrean movements for almost two decades. Those resources affected the capacity of the insurgency to survive and expand.

Realignment after 1973 and the Persistence of Method

The relationship between Ethiopia, Israel, and the Arab world reached a decisive point between 1973 and 1974. By 1973, Ethiopia's association with Israel had become increasingly difficult to sustain because of pressure from Arab governments, African states, and political organizations that linked Israeli activity in Ethiopia to the wider Arab-Israeli confrontation. Libya played a prominent role in this pressure. In March 1973, Libya succeeded in advancing a resolution supporting the ELF at the Islamic Foreign Ministers' meeting in Benghazi,²⁵ an episode that demonstrated that the Eritrean question had acquired significance within institutions concerned primarily with Arab and Muslim political interests.

Arab support for the ELF is linked to perceptions of Ethiopia as a Christian state cooperating with Israel. The regional argument also extended into African diplomacy. Ethiopia faced accusations that Israeli military facilities were being developed along its Red Sea coast, which Addis Ababa denied,²⁶ though the dispute nevertheless had diplomatic consequences because it linked Ethiopia's bilateral relationship with Israel to wider Arab concerns about the Red Sea.

Ethiopia's decision to sever relations with Israel on 23 October 1973²⁷ therefore represented a major turning point. The decision followed the outbreak of the October Arab-Israeli war and came after months of diplomatic pressure, including a cabinet vote for rupture that Haile Selassie had initially vetoed before Arab threats of an oil embargo and a wave of African diplomatic breaks with Israel forced his hand. Ethiopia stated that the decision was connected to Israel's continued occupation of Arab territories captured in 1967. The decision had a paradoxical effect for the Eritrean movement.

It confirmed that the Ethiopia-Israel relationship had become a matter of wider Arab and African diplomacy, validating the strategic relevance of the narrative, even as the bilateral relationship that had supplied the narrative with much of its political force was being reduced. The fall of Haile Selassie in 1974 transformed the equation even more dramatically. The imperial monarchy was replaced by the Derg, a military government that moved toward Marxist-Leninist politics and a strategic relationship with the Soviet Union, so the political identity of Ethiopia changed from that

²⁵Document 91, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Volume E-6, Documents on Africa, 1973–1976* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian).

²⁶Arbitral Tribunal. *Eritrea/Yemen (Territorial Sovereignty and Scope of the Dispute)*. Award. October 9, 1998. 114 *International Law Reports* 1.

²⁷ishku, Michael B. "Israel and Ethiopia: From a Special to a Pragmatic Relationship." *Journal of Conflict Studies* 14, no. 2 (1994): 39–62.

of a conservative imperial monarchy maintaining relationships with the United States and Israel to that of a revolutionary regime increasingly integrated into the Soviet bloc.

The regional implications were immediate. The political basis for the old image of “Christian imperial Ethiopia” had weakened substantially, yet the Eritrean conflict continued because the sovereignty dispute itself remained unresolved and the Eritrean movement had already developed its own institutional and military capacities. The post-1974 period demonstrates the difference between a political narrative and the conditions that originally gave it strength. A narrative can persist after the political configuration that produced it has changed because it becomes embedded in organizational memory and political identity. Eritrean organizations had spent more than a decade interpreting their conflict through the relationship between Ethiopia, Israel, Arab nationalism, and the Red Sea, and that interpretive structure did not disappear when the Derg replaced the monarchy. The 1973 to 1974 transition therefore represents a point at which the old regional system began to separate from the Eritrean political narrative attached to it. Ethiopia’s government changed; its external alignment changed; Israel’s formal relationship with Ethiopia changed, yet the Eritrean movement remained embedded in an external support system whose importance now derived increasingly from the Cold War and from competition among revolutionary states.

The Derg’s rise altered Ethiopia’s place within the regional system and further fragmented the external environment surrounding the Eritrean struggle. The Ethiopian government adopted Marxist-Leninist political language, moved toward the Soviet Union, and became increasingly dependent upon Soviet and Cuban military support, so the regional competition that had previously centered heavily on imperial Ethiopia and its relationship with Israel was increasingly reorganized around revolutionary politics and Cold War alignments. Israel nevertheless retained a relationship with Ethiopia for a period after the formal diplomatic break, and Israeli military assistance continued in limited forms, illustrating that formal diplomatic rupture did not immediately erase security relationships. The Arab response to the Ethiopian revolution was highly differentiated. Libya, South Yemen, and Algeria initially moved toward Addis Ababa because they interpreted the new government as a progressive revolutionary regime,²⁸ while Iraq and Syria continued to support the Eritrean cause and Saudi Arabia increased assistance to the insurgents as concern over Ethiopia’s increasingly radical orientation grew. A U.S. national intelligence assessment from 1977 explicitly described this divergence and identified Iraq and Syria as continuing supporters while Libya, South Yemen, and Algeria shifted toward the Ethiopian government. The change demonstrates why political ideology could not fully determine foreign policy. Libya had supported Eritrean insurgents under the imperial regime because the relationship served its revolutionary and anti-Israeli interests; after the Derg came to power, Addis Ababa itself became a revolutionary partner, so Libya’s strategic calculation changed accordingly. South Yemen followed a similar trajectory because its relationship with Addis Ababa was shaped by revolutionary solidarity, Soviet

²⁸ Document 84, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977–1980, Volume XVII, Part 1* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian).

alignment, and regional competition. Syria and Iraq remained committed to Eritrean organizations because their assessments of Ethiopia continued to be shaped by strategic rivalry and their own conceptions of Arab influence. The same Ethiopian government could therefore be considered a revolutionary partner by one Arab state and an adversarial force by another.

Saudi Arabia represented another distinct calculation. Riyadh's opposition to radical revolutionary politics increased its willingness to support Eritrean insurgents after the Derg consolidated power, so the Eritrean conflict could acquire assistance from governments whose political ideologies differed sharply from those of the original ELF and EPLF supporters.²⁹ The common ground was strategic opposition to Addis Ababa's evolving orientation. The resulting external environment was different from the one that had developed during the imperial period. The central political divide increasingly ran through competing revolutionary and Cold War alignments, and the Arab states themselves were divided over the meaning of the Ethiopian revolution.

Eritrea became part of a contest involving Soviet influence, Cuban military involvement, Gulf politics, revolutionary Arab states, conservative Arab monarchies, and African strategic interests. This period also changed the function of Palestinian support. The PLO remained an important political actor, yet Palestinian organizations operated within a regional environment increasingly shaped by the Lebanese conflict, Jordanian politics, the October War, and changing relationships among Arab governments, so Eritrean organizations continued to use Palestinian networks even as those relationships now interacted with a broader revolutionary system extending beyond the Arab-Israeli confrontation itself.

The internal strength of the EPLF also became increasingly important during this period. The organization had survived the factional struggles of the early 1970s and established a more coherent military-political system, allowing it to withstand changes in foreign support and reducing its dependence on any single patron. This became especially important after 1974, as shifts in the policies of Arab states made external assistance less predictable. At the same time, the growing Ethiopian-Soviet relationship changed the military balance. Soviet arms and Cuban personnel enabled the Derg to launch large-scale offensives against Eritrean organizations, increasing the pressure on the EPLF and making its ability to organize, adapt, and sustain its forces increasingly important.³⁰

The Red Sea remained central to these developments because the movement continued to rely on a regional network whose members pursued different interests. South Yemen provided a strategic location for training and transit, Sudan remained an important corridor when relations with Ethiopia allowed Eritrean activity there, Libya adjusted its policy according to its relations with Ethiopia and other revolutionary movements, and Saudi Arabia viewed the Horn increasingly through the lens of Gulf security and opposition to revolutionary politics. These relationships kept

²⁹ Document 84, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977–1980, Volume XVII, Part 1* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian).

³⁰ "From Ally to Enemy: The Soviet Union and the Horn," Scribd document.

the Eritrean struggle connected to the wider region, but they also exposed it to changes in the policies of individual states. The external environment was therefore becoming more difficult to predict, even as the movement's political objective remained unchanged.

It was this instability in the external environment that weakened the usefulness of the old political framework. The earlier political language still possessed historical resonance, but the changing pattern of support made it increasingly difficult to understand the conflict through a single Arab-Israeli confrontation. The Ethiopian revolution demonstrated the problem most clearly, as changes in Ethiopia's political orientation led several states to reconsider their previous policies toward the Eritrean movement. External support could therefore change even when the Eritrean objective did not. Under these conditions, the institutional capacity the EPLF had built inside the movement became increasingly important. Its ability to organize forces, maintain political structures, and continue the war through changing regional conditions reduced the consequences of fluctuations in foreign assistance. By the late 1970s, the struggle remained internationalized, but the EPLF's survival depended increasingly on its own organizational capacity.

From Arab-Israeli Confrontation to a Fragmented Regional Order

The late 1970s marked a change in the political environment surrounding the Eritrean struggle. The Arab-Israeli confrontation remained consequential, but it was becoming less capable of organizing the policies of every government operating around the Red Sea and Horn of Africa. Eritrean organizations had used Ethiopia's relationship with Israel as a bridge into this regional political field. That method depended on a structure in which opposition to Israel, Arab political solidarity, Palestinian politics, and Red Sea security could reinforce one another. The subsequent transformation of the Middle East gradually separated these issues, allowing governments to pursue distinct combinations of relations with Israel, the Palestinians, Iran, Ethiopia, and the Gulf.

The change unfolded over several decades. Egypt's peace treaty with Israel in 1979³¹ established the first formal peace between Israel and a major Arab state, and Jordan followed in 1994.³² The Arab Peace Initiative adopted in 2002 went further by placing the prospect of comprehensive Arab normalization within a proposed settlement of the Palestinian conflict.³³ These developments did not resolve the regional dispute, but they changed the political meaning of relations with Israel. An Arab government could increasingly pursue formal engagement with Israel as part of its own state strategy while retaining a distinct position on Palestine and on other regional conflicts.

The transformation became more visible in 2020. The United Arab Emirates and Bahrain established relations with Israel through the Abraham Accords, Morocco subsequently entered a normalization agreement, and Sudan joined the normalization framework. The United States itself described the agreements as part of a wider expansion of normalization involving Israel, Bahrain,

³¹ Peace Treaty Between the State of Israel and the Arab Republic of Egypt. March 26, 1979. Peace and Security Department, African Union.

³² "Israel-Jordan Peace Treaty (1994)." Economic Cooperation Foundation.

³³. "OPT: Arab Peace Initiative, Why Now?" *ReliefWeb*. Accessed September 25, 2026.

the UAE, Morocco, and Sudan. The significance of this sequence lies in the multiplication of policy choices available to Arab governments. Israel became a state with which several Arab governments could maintain diplomatic, economic, and security relationships without treating those relationships as a shared regional policy.

The UAE illustrates the new pattern particularly well. Abu Dhabi maintains formal relations with Israel and continues to sustain direct governmental channels between the two countries. In September 2026, the UAE Foreign Ministry stated that relevant government entities on both sides maintained open communication and exchanged intelligence when necessary.³⁴ At the same time, the UAE has continued to participate in joint Arab and Islamic diplomacy criticizing Israeli policies concerning Gaza and the West Bank and calling for a Palestinian state.³⁵ The coexistence of these policies shows how sharply the contemporary regional system differs from the political environment in which the earlier Eritrean narrative acquired its broadest resonance.

Saudi Arabia occupies a different position. Riyadh has not established diplomatic relations with Israel and has continued to link normalization to Palestinian statehood. In July 2026, Reuters reported that the Saudi position remained a condition for any normalization agreement despite pressure from Washington, and Saudi statements during 2026 have likewise reiterated support for Palestinian statehood and the Arab Peace Initiative.³⁶ Yet this insistence on the Palestinian question has not stopped Saudi Arabia from acting on other fronts. It continues to cooperate closely with the UAE and other Gulf states, coordinate with Egypt and Türkiye on regional security, and maintain its own approach to Israel and Palestine at the same time. The point is the degree of differentiation within the Arab system itself which is disagreement on one question and cooperation on another are no longer treated as incompatible.

That differentiation has become especially visible during the Gaza war. Governments that maintain relations with Israel have continued to criticize Israeli conduct in Gaza and the West Bank, while governments without diplomatic relations have pursued their own channels of negotiation, mediation, and regional security. Türkiye has adopted an especially confrontational political posture toward Israel, while Saudi Arabia and the UAE have continued to combine diplomatic engagement with pressure over Palestinian issues. Yet, just as in the Saudi case above, these diverging postures toward Israel have not prevented coordination on other shared concerns.

The category of "the Arab world" therefore carries a different strategic meaning in relation to Israel today than it did during the formative period of the Eritrean struggle. Where the pattern described above is one of multiple, cross-cutting positions coexisting within a single regional system, the earlier period offered something closer to a unified field. During the 1960s and early 1970s, the Ethiopia-Israel connection could be presented within a regional political field already structured

³⁴ Emirates News Agency (WAM). "Statement by UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Response to Media Reporting." September 8, 2026.

³⁵ UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs. "Joint Statement by the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the UAE, KSA, Qatar, Jordan, Indonesia, Pakistan, Türkiye, and Egypt." September 22, 2026

³⁶ "Trump Says US-Saudi Nuclear Deal Conditional on Country Joining Abraham Accords," Reuters, July 23, 2026.

by Arab-Israeli confrontation, Arab nationalism, Palestinian politics, and competing visions of the Red Sea. Eritrean organizations did benefit from this environment precisely because separate external interests could be attached to a common regional narrative. That aggregation is harder to sustain now because an Arab government can maintain relations with Israel while simultaneously pursuing policies that conflict with Israeli preferences in another arena, and it can deepen ties with Ethiopia or other African states without treating those relationships as part of the same strategic project.

This change does not remove the Ethiopia-Israel relationship from regional politics. It changes the conditions under which that relationship acquires wider political meaning. Ethiopia's ties with Israel must now be interpreted alongside the same kind of differentiated relationships surveyed above considering its relations with Gulf governments, its economic interests in regional infrastructure, the politics of the Horn, and the positions individual Arab governments take on Palestine and Iran. The contemporary significance of an Ethiopia-Israel connection therefore depends increasingly on the particular interests of the actors involved and not on membership in any single regional bloc. That leads directly to the other side of the transformation, because Israel's own strategic position has also been rearranged.

The Reversal of Israel's Periphery

Israel's early periphery doctrine emerged from a strategic problem of regional isolation. Ben-Gurion sought relationships with non-Arab states and other actors beyond Israel's immediate Arab environment, with Iran, Turkey, and Ethiopia occupying important positions in that strategy. The logic was to create strategic space around Israel by cultivating partners whose own security concerns could intersect with Israeli interests. Scholarship on the doctrine identifies these relationships as an effort to compensate for Israel's isolation within a predominantly hostile regional environment. The Ethiopia-Israel relationship that Eritrean organizations later incorporated into their political framing was therefore part of a broader Israeli strategy that predated and exceeded the Eritrean question, one strand within a three-part doctrine whose other two strands, Iran and Turkey, would travel in very different directions.

Iran provides the clearest example of how that strategic system was reversed. Under Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, Israel and Iran developed extensive security, intelligence, economic, and energy relationships despite Iran's formal diplomatic ambiguity toward Israel.³⁷ The two governments shared concerns over Arab nationalism and Soviet influence, and Israeli policymakers regarded Iran as one of the most valuable non-Arab partners available to Israel. The 1979 Iranian Revolution transformed that relationship.³⁸ Cooperation gave way to sustained confrontation, and Iran became one of Israel's principal regional adversaries. In 2026, the

³⁷ "Israel's Ties to Pre-Revolutionary Iran Provided a Road Map to the Abraham Accords," Middle East Institute.

³⁸ "The Long Shadow of Iran's 1979 Revolution: Israel's Vengeance on the Specter of a Nuclear Iran," Washington Report on Middle East Affairs.

relationship entered direct military confrontation between the two states, demonstrating how completely the strategic meaning of the old partnership had been reversed.

Turkey followed a different but still significant trajectory. Iran's break with Israel was sudden and comprehensive, while Turkey's developed gradually and remained political and diplomatic rather than military. Israeli-Turkish relations reached their peak in the 1990s, when the two countries built extensive military and intelligence cooperation, deepened defense ties, and established a close strategic dialogue.³⁹ The partnership reflected Turkey's military capabilities, NATO alignment, and geographic position, while Israel provided Ankara with an important channel for security and defense cooperation. Relations began to deteriorate as Turkish politics shifted and disputes over Gaza and the Palestinian issue became more prominent in Ankara's foreign policy. By 2026, Turkey had adopted an increasingly confrontational political stance toward Israel. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan again criticized Israel's conduct in Gaza at the United Nations in September,⁴⁰ while Ankara had also pursued legal and diplomatic measures against senior Israeli officials.⁴¹ Turkey had therefore moved from being a close Israeli partner on the periphery of the Middle East to becoming a major source of political friction, marking a different form of rupture from the Iranian case but a substantial change in the regional relationship.

Ethiopia offers a contrast to both cases. Where a revolution severed the Iranian relationship within months and changing politics eroded the Turkish one over decades, the Ethiopia-Israel relationship has absorbed comparable shocks without breaking. It has survived the end of the imperial order, Ethiopia's revolutionary alignment with the Soviet Union, the formal diplomatic rupture of 1973, and subsequent changes in Ethiopian foreign policy. Even the diplomatic break did not immediately eliminate Israeli security ties with Ethiopia, demonstrating the resilience of the relationship across political transformations. That resilience is visible again in the relationship's most recent chapter, in February 2026, Israeli President Isaac Herzog visited Addis Ababa and met Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and President Taye Atske Selassie.⁴² The Israeli presidency described the discussions as focused on strengthening bilateral relations and expanding cooperation in areas including innovation, trade, and other issues of mutual interest.

Thus, Iran, Turkey, and Ethiopia reveal a fundamentally altered strategic map. The original periphery relied on relationships with non-Arab states that could help Israel manage regional isolation. Two of those relationships later moved in the opposite direction. Iran became a central adversary, while Turkey moved from strategic partnership toward sustained confrontation. Ethiopia alone held its ground, remaining an important relationship within a different regional setting and through different bilateral interests centered on the innovation and trade agenda visible in the Herzog visit above. Even as Iran and Turkey were slipping toward confrontation, Israel established formal relations with several Arab governments. The periphery therefore did not

³⁹ "Indispensable Enemies: The Shifting Dynamics of Israeli-Turkish Relations," ELIAMEP.

⁴⁰ "Erdogan Targets Israel, Gender Policies in Sweeping UN Speech," *The Arab Weekly*.

⁴¹ Institute for National Security Studies. "Turkey-Israel Law." INSS.

⁴² Embassy of Israel in Nepal, "President Isaac Herzog to Make Official Visit to Ethiopia," February 22, 2026, Embassy of Israel.

disappear so much as change direction, with parts of the old strategic geography being replaced by relationships within the Arab regional system.

That change is important for the Eritrean narrative because the Ethiopia-Israel connection no longer enters a regional environment structured primarily by Arab opposition to Israel, the way it did during the period before. Israel now possesses Arab partners with whom it cooperates on security, trade, technology, and diplomacy while simultaneously facing major adversaries in Iran and Türkiye. Alongside this layered map of Arab partnerships and non-Arab adversaries, Ethiopia remains connected to Israel through a relationship with its own historical depth. The relationship is therefore capable of acquiring strategic significance, but its wider meaning has to be established through the interaction of specific interests rather than through membership in any single regional bloc, Arab or peripheral. It is within this transformed setting that Asmara has chosen to revive a familiar geopolitical connection.

Reviving the Ethiopia-Israel Frame in a New Red Sea

Osman Saleh's September 2026 interview is significant because it shows the persistence of an older Eritrean political method under different regional conditions. The Red Sea has again become embedded in a wider Middle Eastern security crisis. The confrontation between Israel and Iran has placed the region under direct military pressure, while the activities of Iran-aligned Houthi forces in and around Yemen have connected maritime insecurity to the wider conflict. In September 2026, regional governments were again emphasizing the importance of safe navigation through the Bab al-Mandeb and other strategic waterways,⁴³ while the wider Middle East remained affected by the confrontation involving Iran, Israel, and their respective regional networks. For Eritrea, whose coastline sits immediately opposite Yemen and close to the Bab al-Mandeb, developments in the wider conflict have direct strategic relevance.

The infrastructure behind Saleh's argument is real. DP World has invested substantially in the port of Berbera and built it into a logistics network connecting Somaliland with Ethiopia through the Berbera Corridor, and these links have created a genuine point of contact between Emirati commercial activity, Somaliland's economic ambitions, and Ethiopia's search for diversified maritime access. At this level, Saleh's own word for the pattern is accurate. Interests are intersecting at Berbera. What his broader argument does is convert that accurate observation into something larger, treating the intersection as proof of a coordinated political structure and not as a set of separately motivated relationships that happen to meet at the same port. Shared infrastructure does not establish that structure on its own. The same network can be read through the distinct interests of the actors who use it, each pursuing its own agenda through Berbera, without the overlap adding up to a single strategic design.

Israel's relationship with Somaliland is the clearest new addition to that picture. Israel formally recognized Somaliland in December 2025, becoming the first state to do so, and the relationship

⁴³ Yordanos D. "Ethiopia's Red Sea Role: The Missing Link in Regional Stability." Ethiopian News Agency, September 22, 2026.

quickly acquired a security dimension. In June 2026, Somaliland's defense minister confirmed that Israel was training the territory's police and military forces, while dismissing as rumor any suggestion that the two sides were negotiating an Israeli base.⁴⁴ The public record supports military and security cooperation between Israel and Somaliland and not support the more expansive basing claim that Saleh's argument later attaches to it.

Berbera brings several interests into the same physical space. DP World has developed the port as a logistics hub linking landlocked Ethiopia to the sea through the Berbera Corridor, giving Ethiopia an alternative trade route. For the UAE, Berbera forms part of a wider commercial and logistical network across the Red Sea and Horn of Africa. Somaliland has used the port to attract investment and security partnerships while pursuing international recognition. Israel's growing relationship with Somaliland adds another security dimension, including confirmed cooperation in training.

Eritrea's interpretation goes beyond these individual relationships. Asmara places Ethiopia's search for maritime access, the UAE's presence around Berbera, and Israel's ties with Somaliland within a single regional security picture. This turns Berbera from a port connecting several interests into a focal point in a broader political narrative about the changing balance around the Red Sea and the Horn. Saleh's argument therefore gives these developments a common strategic meaning that is larger than any one of the relationships themselves.

That framing also shifts the focus from Berbera's immediate economic and security value to what its development represents for Eritrea. Ethiopia's growing access to the coast becomes part of a wider regional transformation in which external powers are acquiring stronger positions around Eritrea's strategic environment. The significance of Berbera, in this reading, lies as much in the regional configuration Eritrea sees emerging around it as in the port itself. For decades Eritrea's long Red Sea coastline conferred something close to a monopoly on southern access points near Bab el-Mandeb, with only Djibouti offering a serious alternative. Somaliland now supplies Ethiopia with a maritime outlet that bypasses Eritrean territory entirely while providing the UAE and Israel a security partner that requires no engagement with Asmara. Every relationship that once had to run through Eritrea for lack of an alternative now has one; that loss of exclusivity is what endows Ethiopia's maritime search with its wider security weight in Eritrean eyes.

Looking at all the strategic trajectories currently intersecting across the Red Sea, Asmara's insistence on projecting its historical Ethiopia and Israel narrative onto modern Middle Eastern diplomacy reflects a fundamental structural mismatch. Historically, this framing generated strategic leverage by embedding localized territorial disputes into a cohesive Arab confrontation with Israel. Contemporary regional dynamics operate through normalization agreements, transactional Gulf investments, and flexible bilateral partnerships that bypass traditional ideological alignments. The simultaneous convergence of Ethiopian trade requirements, Emirati logistical infrastructure, and Israeli security ties around Berbera represents independent state interests interacting within a multipolar environment. Treating these separate commercial and

⁴⁴ Reuters. "No Talks to Establish Israeli Military Base in Somaliland, Defence Minister Says." June 17, 2026.

diplomatic initiatives as a single coordinated hostile strategy miscalculates the motives driving modern Red Sea politics. The persistent deployment of this inherited political language functions primarily to process the sudden erosion of Eritrea's coastal exclusivity. As alternative maritime corridors expand across neighboring territories, Asmara loses the geographical monopoly that previously guaranteed its regional weight. Consequently, relying on an outdated interpretive model accelerates Eritrea's strategic isolation, leaving the state struggling to exert leverage in a theater that operates completely outside its traditional assumptions.