

Eritrea's Post-Pretoria Strategy and the Escalation in Ethiopia

A Brief on Eritrea's Political, Military and Cross-Border Positioning inside Ethiopia

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Eritrea's Position at the Signing of Pretoria

Eritrea was never a party to the November 2, 2022, Pretoria Agreement, an agreement which ended the two-year conflict between Ethiopian federal government and Tigray Liberation Front (TPLF). The accord was negotiated and signed exclusively between the federal government of Ethiopia and the TPLF since it was an internal Ethiopian matter. Although Eritrean forces had participated militarily alongside Ethiopian federal forces, Addis Ababa viewed Eritrea's military involvement as distinct from the political dispute being settled through the peace process. Agreement explicitly required the withdrawal of all foreign forces from Tigray, a clause that applied to Eritrea despite its non-signatory status.

The agreement was therefore negotiated between the two parties to the conflict, with the objective of ending hostilities, restoring constitutional order, and establishing a framework for the political and security normalization of the TPLF. Eritrea's post-Pretoria conduct appears to have been shaped largely by President Isaias Afwerki's broader strategic ambitions in the Horn of Africa, particularly his determination to retain influence over Ethiopia's political and security landscape.

Maintaining Strategic Positions Along the Tigray Border

Following the Pretoria accord, Eritrean forces executed a staged, partial drawdown rather than a complete withdrawal, deliberately retaining forward-deployed elements in key border pockets to preserve operational flexibility. Eritrean forces did begin pulling out of Tigray's heartland following the Tigray Defense Forces' initial attempts of handover of weapons in January 2023, withdrawing their vehicles and heavy armaments from most of central Tigray by the end of that month.

Complete withdrawal, however, never occurred. Eritrean units remained entrenched in contested border pockets, including Badme, the flashpoint of the 1998 to 2000 war, as well as parts of Zalambessa and Irob. The pattern deepened later that year on September 15, 2023, when Eritrean forces reportedly re-entered vacated border areas in Irob and Gulo Mekeda woredas in eastern Tigray as Ethiopian federal troops redeployed south to confront the newly erupted Fano insurgency in Amhara. Eritrean units continued low-level taxation, recruitment, and local administration in residual pockets through 2023–2024

A 2024 report indicate that Zalambessa town and six kebeles in the Gulomakeda district have remained under the control of Eritrean forces.” Mayor of Zalambessa stated approximately 75% of the town was under Eritrean control; AU Monitoring, Verification and Compliance Mechanism (MVCM) team observed dominant Eritrean presence.

Eritrea’s Relation with Groups Inside Ethiopia 2023–2025

Even as it maintained its position inside Tigrayan and frontier territory, Eritrea reportedly began cultivating ties with the one Ethiopian armed movement that, on paper, had the least in common with the TPLF: the Amhara Fano militia. Fano had fought on the federal government's side against the TPLF throughout the 2020 to 2022 war, with relations deteriorated after the agreement in Pretoria.

Since the Fano insurgency began in 2023, persistent reporting has described Eritrean connection. By late 2023, internal Ethiopian military sources were reporting that Isaias was backing Amhara fighters with training and arms. The Ethiopian government formally accused Eritrea of arming Fano rebels, even though Eritrea denied the claims. By the time of the Fano insurgency's consolidation into the Amhara Fano National Movement in January 2026, assessments of the conflict described Eritrea as having fully reversed its 2020 to 2022 alignment, moving from an active actor against the TPLF to a backer of both the TPLF and Fano militias simultaneously.

The Tsimdo Alignment and Secret Contacts with the TPLF

Eritrea’s fundamental behavior is founded on the doctrine of their president and his ambitions. His extra-territorial ambitions in the Horn of Africa, and specifically his desire to dictate, interfere in, and influence Ethiopia’s political landscape, explain why they felt excluded from the Pretoria process, which was an Ethiopian internal matter. The reason Isaias was ready to reverse his position and become an ally of the TPLF is exemplary. That was the reason Eritrea was waiting to capitalize on emerging strategic leverage in the post-war landscape, positioning itself to exploit growing fractures between the Ethiopian federal government and other groups inside Ethiopia.

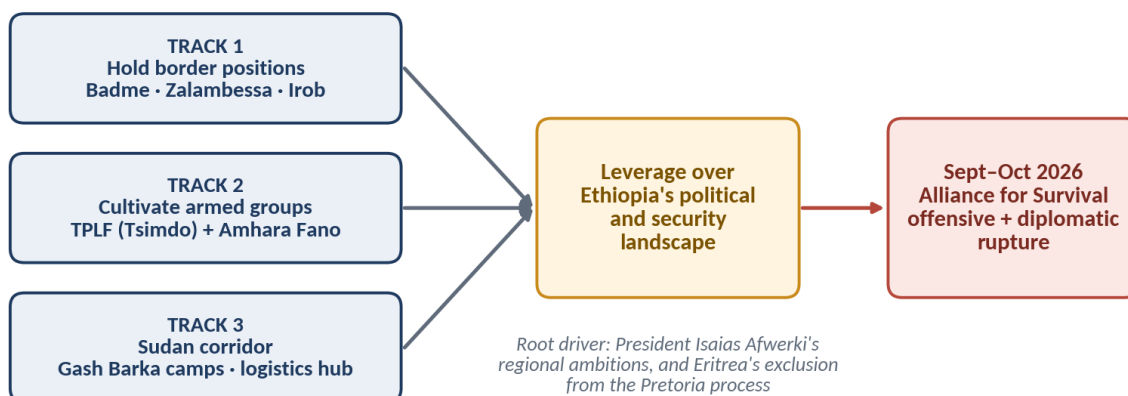
Eritrea pursued this alignment along two tracks. Zemen Kassie, who leads one of many factions within the Fano movement before the establishment of AFNM and has a history of engagement with Eritrea, had established contacts with the Eritrean regime. At the same time, the northern conflict created an opportunity for the Eritrean Defence Forces (EDF) to establish contacts with

Fano, as both forces were fighting on the same side against the TPLF. While its relationship with Fano matured in the open, Eritrea also pursued a parallel and far more sensitive track with its former principal adversary. What has since become known as Tsimdo began with secret contacts reportedly hosted in Dubai in March 2024.

The contacts escalated by May 2025 into open meetings between Eritrean officials and TPLF representatives, accompanied by coordinated messaging across pro-TPLF and pro-Eritrean media outlets. According to reporting citing Africa Intelligence, an unpublicized meeting in Asmara in late January 2025 saw Isaias personally assure Tigrayan officers that Eritrea would protect them in the event of renewed conflict with the federal government, a pledge made while Getachew Reda still nominally led Tigray's interim administration and while the party establishment around Debretsion Gebremichael was still consolidating the internal purge that would remove Getachew from power two months later.

The removal of Getachew Reda, an ardent opponent of any alliance with the Eritrean regime, opened the way for the restoration of the TPLF's pre-war hardliner establishment and for a political strategy increasingly organized around military leverage and what analysts termed as Eritrean anchorship. The subsequent sequence, Debretsion's return to the presidency, the dismantling of the post-Pretoria interim political arrangement, and intensifying military mobilization, represented a fundamental departure in which a regional political organization developed an external military relationship and acted across the northern frontier without federal authorization well before the formal September 2026 coalition announcement.

Eritrea's post-Pretoria strategy: three parallel tracks



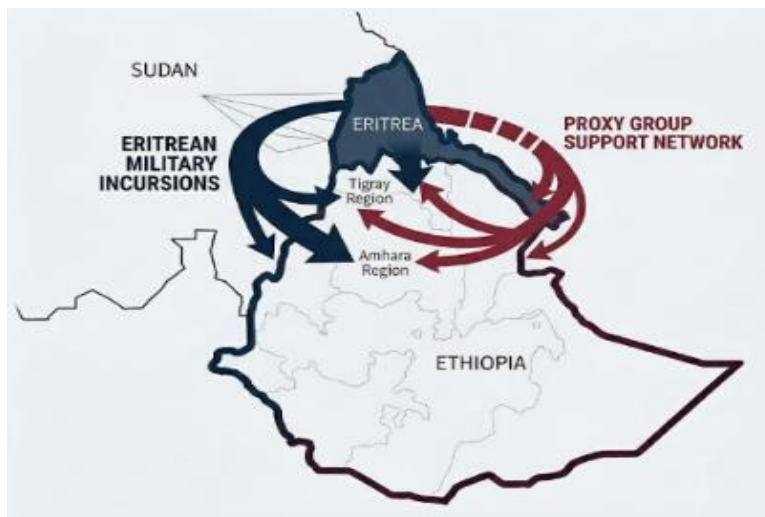
Publicity of the Rapprochement

What had initially been conducted through secret contacts and unpublicized meetings gradually became an increasingly visible rapprochement during 2025 and into 2026. The shift became particularly apparent in mid-2025, when Eritrean forces removed a long-standing checkpoint along the Adigrat–Zalambessa route and cross-border contacts between communities resumed. On June 22, 2025, residents from Tigray and Eritrea gathered at Zalambessa in an event involving community representatives, religious leaders and Eritrean delegates associated with the emerging Tsimdo initiative.

The political messaging surrounding the rapprochement also became increasingly explicit. Debretsion Gebremichael publicly congratulated Eritrea on its independence anniversary and spoke of strengthening relations between the peoples of Tigray region and Eritrea. The opening around Zalambessa subsequently developed into a broader pattern of cross-border engagement, while the TPLF leadership increasingly treated its relationship with Asmara as a political choice. An independent assessment by Germany's SWP similarly describes Tsimdo as an initiative launched by Eritrea in 2025 in the context of the broader rapprochement with the TPLF.

On June 4, 2026, TPLF leaders under Debretsion inaugurated construction of a road linking the town of Ahse'a in Adwa directly to the Eritrean frontier. TPLF Executive Committee member Abraham Tekeste publicly dismissed criticism of the opening to Asmara, stating that the party did not seek anyone's approval for its choices.

The Sudan Corridor and Eritrea's Other Frontier



A third and less visible dimension of Eritrea's post-Pretoria strategy ran through Sudan, where Eritrea has functioned simultaneously as a combatant patron in Sudan's own civil war and as a logistics hub feeding Ethiopia's internal insurgencies. Training camps in Eritrea's Gash Barka region,

adjacent to the Sudanese border, have hosted fighters from eastern Sudanese communities,

including the Eastern Sudan Liberation Forces, the Eastern Battalion under Amin Daoud, and Beja Congress factions.

More than a dozen such Eritrean-trained and equipped militias now fight alongside the Sudanese Armed Forces, and Eritrean territory has functioned as a rear base, with Eritrean military units reportedly providing support and Eritrean facilities used by Sudanese personnel and aircraft. The eastern Sudan corridor running through Kassala, Kumruk, and Gedaref toward the Metema crossing has become a conduit for arming Ethiopian insurgent groups active in Amhara and Oromia as well. Ethiopian authorities have recorded significant seizures along these routes, including more than 56,000 rounds of ammunition assessed to have originated in Eritrea, and weapons and drone components have moved through networks using islands and coastal zones near Eritrea as temporary storage and assembly points before reaching SAF-aligned and Ethiopian insurgent forces alike.

This same corridor has direct relevance to the TPLF's own military buildup. TDF units such as Army 70, drawn from both Tigray proper and from TPLF-aligned fighters embedded in Sudan's civil war, have operated from bases in eastern Sudan along the border with Western Tigray with reported Sudanese Armed Forces support.

In July 2026 a drone strike attributed to the Rapid Support Forces on the Sudanese town of al-Kurmuk killed several senior Army 70 commanders along with Eritrean soldiers present at the same gathering, confirming direct Eritrean military co-location with TPLF-aligned forces inside Sudanese territory months before the formal Alliance for Survival coalition was announced.

Public Posture versus Operational Record

Throughout this period, Eritrea's public posture has consistently inverted its operational record. Asmara denied arming insurgencies and dismissed Ethiopian accusations, even as internal Ethiopian military sources and independent reporting described sustained Eritrean training and weapons support to various groups. These claims that were later supported by video footage and other evidence documenting the presence and activities of the relationship in Eritrea.

Elements of the Sudan Corridor

Element	Detail
Training camps	Gash Barka region, next to the Sudanese border, hosted fighters from eastern Sudanese communities, including the Eastern Sudan Liberation Forces, the Eastern Battalion under Amin Daoud, and Beja Congress factions.
Militias	More than a dozen Eritrean-trained and equipped militias now fight alongside the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF). Eritrean territory has served as a rear base, with reported Eritrean military support and Eritrean facilities used by Sudanese personnel and aircraft.
Supply route	The eastern Sudan corridor through Kassala and Gedaref reportedly toward the Ethiopian border crossing is a conduit for arming insurgents in Amhara and Oromia.
Seizures	Ethiopian authorities recorded significant seizures, including more than 56,000 rounds of ammunition assessed to be of Eritrean origin.
Storage and assembly	Weapons and drone components moved through networks using islands and coastal zones near Eritrea as temporary storage and assembly points, before reaching SAF-aligned and Ethiopian insurgent forces.
Link to the TPLF	TDF units such as Army 70, drawn from Tigray and from TPLF-aligned fighters in Sudan's war, operated from bases in eastern Sudan along the Western Tigray border with reported SAF support.
July 2026 strike	A drone strike attributed to the Rapid Support Forces on al-Kurmuk killed several senior Army 70 commanders and Eritrean soldiers at the same gathering. This confirmed direct Eritrean co-location with TPLF-aligned forces in Sudan, months before the Alliance for Survival was announced.

Eritrea's Role in the Alliance for Survival Offensive

When seven Ethiopian armed opposition groups formally announced the Ethiopian Peoples' Forces Alliance for Survival on September 20, 2026, and launched a coordinated offensive against federal forces days later, Ethiopian officials immediately identified Eritrea as a central external backer.

ENDF Chief of Staff Birhanu Julia stated on September 25 that Eritrea was financially supporting the TPLF and facilitating support from external actors to the rebel coalition. The Afar regional president separately told Al Jazeera that the Eritrean military was directly participating in the rebel offensive in Afar.

Military Repositioning Along the Assab-Afar Axis

The most specific and operationally detailed account of Eritrea's military posture in the days before the offensive came from Horn Review's own intelligence reporting on September 25, 2026, which subsequent events have tended to corroborate. The reporting described an intention to move brigades composed of units from different Eritrean divisions away from the Assab-Bure front toward the Northern Red Sea Zone, specifically the districts of Ethiopia's Afar region, Berahle and Dalul, formations reportedly including elements of the 44th, 67th, and 38th Divisions.

The reporting identified Colonel Teshome as commander of the 44th Division's militia units, Colonel Osman Sabe as intelligence chief of the 67th Division, and Yasin Hussein as a Defense Intelligence battalion officer, each occupying coordinating roles in the repositioning. The report assessed that a movement from the Assab-Bure axis toward Berahle and Dalul was not automatically synonymous with an assault on Tigray, since those areas sit within the wider Red Sea-Afar strategic system linking Eritrea's southeastern military frontier to the approaches toward Afar and northern Ethiopia, but concluded that the assembly of multi-divisional formations together with the involvement of intelligence-linked personnel indicated a deliberate mobile reserve.

Subsequent developments gave greater significance to the earlier repositioning. Fighting and military activity around Berahle, Abala, Erebti, and Dalul increasingly linked the Eritrean military posture along the Assab-Bure axis with developments inside Afar. The Critical Threats Project subsequently reported that TDF and ARDUF/Ugugumo captured Abala on September 22 and Erebti on September 27, followed by an Ethiopian counterattack that reportedly retook both locations on October 1.

There is stronger subsequent reporting on actual Eritrean military movement into Ethiopia. Earlier OSINT claims of EDF entry via Rama, Sheraro, Zalambessa, and Badme, with mechanized elements at Fiya K'eshi and possible reach to Nebelet, were reinforced by mainstream reporting. On 8 October, the Associated Press reported that Tigray Peace Force commander Ermiyas Ababu stated Eritrean personnel entered Adigrat on Tuesday (7 October) and Idaga Hamus on Wednesday (8 October). He further reported that Eritrean military officers and commanders were conducting surveillance in Idaga Hamus, citing his personnel on the ground.

Diplomatic Rupture Between Ethiopia and Eritrea

Ethiopia's relationship with Eritrea collapsed from accusation to formal diplomatic rupture within the war's first ten days. The Ethiopian Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced on October 1, 2026, that it was closing the Ethiopian embassy in Asmara and expelling ten Eritrean diplomats, declaring them persona non grata and ordering them to leave the country within 48 hours, citing what it called Eritrea's direct and indirect acts of hostility and belligerence against Ethiopia. Eritrea responded by severing diplomatic ties with Ethiopia.

The rupture occurred in the same period as the 4 October El-Alamein summit of Egypt, Sudan's SAF, Eritrea, and Somalia. The gathering formed part of a broader pattern in which Ethiopia's northern conflict is increasingly trying to be shaped by external regional arrangements in which Addis Ababa is not the central participant. Cairo's insertion into successive trilateral and quadrilateral formats with Asmara, Port Sudan, and Mogadishu has created a coordinated diplomatic and security framework focused on the Nile, the Red Sea, and "regional affairs of mutual concern," effectively positioning Ethiopia's internal security crisis within a wider geopolitical contest over maritime access and regional order.

Eritrean Troops Inside Ethiopian Territory and Subsequent Reactions

For roughly two weeks after the war's outbreak, reports of a direct Eritrean military presence inside Ethiopia began to be verified and began to be increasingly substantiated. Claims began to emerge from multiple open-source monitors describing an increased Eritrean military presence, including mechanized units and trench-digging, near the border towns of Irob, Rama, Sheraro, and Zalambessa.

The United States and European Union had already called on October 3 and October 5, respectively, for Ethiopia and Eritrea to respect each other's territorial integrity and pursue dialogue. That changed within a day. In addition to the above reports, witnesses told Reuters on October 7 that they had seen Eritrean soldiers driving through a northern Ethiopian town located 25 kilometers south of the Eritrean border into Adigrat, days after the two countries severed diplomatic ties, marking the first confirmed sighting of Eritrean forces inside Ethiopian territory since fighting resumed on September 23.