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Publisher: Routledge

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UK



Small Wars & Insurgencies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/fswi20>

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Published online: 27 Feb 2014.

To cite this article: Jason Warner (2013) Eritrea's military unprofessionalism and US security assistance in the Horn of Africa, *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 24:4, 696-711, DOI: [10.1080/09592318.2013.857940](https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2013.857940)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2013.857940>

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Eritrea's military unprofessionalism and US security assistance in the Horn of Africa

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(Received 10 June 2011; accepted 21 October 2011)

The United States military's Combined Joint Task Force – Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA) is in need of capable and dependable regional military allies as it seeks to bring stability to the Horn of Africa. Eritrea – once a proclaimed US friend and home to one of Africa's largest military establishments – superficially seems to fit the bill. Drawing from literature on the 'unprofessional nature' of African militaries as well as the scant amount of open source material available on the notoriously secretive nation, this article argues that despite its experienced and well-funded military, President Isaias Afewerki's overbearing control of it has made Eritrea's military highly 'unprofessional' in various ways. As a result, a military that could be a useful US ally in a historically tenuous region will likely remain more of a problem than a boon for the United States into the foreseeable future.

Keywords: Eritrea; Horn of Africa; United States, Combined Joint Task Force – Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA); military unprofessionalism

The Horn of Africa is one of the world's new geopolitical hotspots, and the US military's Combined Joint Task Force – Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA) – tasked with 'promoting security and stability, preventing conflict, and protecting US and coalition interests' – wants to cool the region down.¹

At the center of the regional conflagration was the once deeply troubled nation of Somalia. Devoid of an independently functioning central government since 1991, the international community has seen the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) plagued not only by the country's dogged poverty and spate of pirate attacks in the Gulf of Aden, but more seriously by al-Shabaab, an al-Qaeda allied fundamentalist Islamic movement dedicated explicitly to the TFG's overthrow whose presence in the capital was only mitigated in August 2011. A 2013 decision by the United Nations to lift a two-decade-old arms embargo on the country has also caused autonomous regions like Puntland and Somaliland to express concern that violence could escalate in the future.²

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Elsewhere in the Sudans, the secession of South Sudan from Sudan in 2011 has failed to be a panacea for the region's problems: accusations of violence from each side continue to be volleyed between the countries, and as of March 2013, estimates suggested the presence of 200,000 internally displaced persons within South Sudan with 4 million in the county at risk of food insecurity.³ In Kenya, the al-Qaeda affiliated Muslim Youth Center has become a cause for concern, while in the broader East African region, the hunt for Joseph Kony in Uganda and the ongoing cross-border violence between the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Rwanda by the M23 insurgency only add to CJTF-HOA's regional concerns.

Despite the complexities of the on-the-ground operational environment, US military alliances can be seen with far greater clarity. CJTF-HOA's main partners in the region include Ethiopia, Djibouti, Tanzania, Kenya, and Uganda: between 2007 and 2010, CJTF-HOA tallied 77 military-to-military joint training exercises with these regional states, amounting to some 3788 contact days.⁴ Strikingly absent from exercises during this time were two of the region's hotspots, Sudan and Somalia. As a splinter state from the former of the two countries, since South Sudan's emergence in 2011, CJTF-HOA has begun to partner with it, conducting an exercise on best practices in demining in February 2013.⁵ Yet frequently lost in the regional shuffle is a clear understanding of the role of Eritrea, Africa's second-newest state preceding South Sudan. Just what role does it play in CJTF-HOA's operations?

Early in the Global War on Terror, Eritrea appeared to be an eager ally of the United States. In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, in 2002, it offered to allow the US access to its military bases, a proposition that the US ultimately turned down.⁶ In a May 2004 visit to Washington DC, Eritrea's ambassador emphasized that as a self-proclaimed member of the 'coalition of the willing', Eritrea's military intelligence force was 'ready to assist the United States in any way it can'.⁷ Since then, relations have soured.⁸ Currently, the United States has no bilateral military or diplomatic relations with Eritrea,⁹ and has of late considered adding the country to its list of rogue states;¹⁰ as recently as 2009, the United States accused Eritrea of harboring terrorists implicated in a plot to assassinate President Barack Obama.¹¹ But is there hope for reconciliation? As the CJTF-HOA formulates its on-the-ground Horn of Africa strategy, to what extent could Eritrea reverse its current ways and serve as a useful ally for the United States in the provision of peace in the region?

In conducting an analysis of the admittedly scant amount of open source information available on the highly secretive and closed nation (which has become even more scarce since 2003) this piece offers one of the most comprehensive pictures available on the extent to which the mercurial country's military might be a boon or hindrance to CJTF-HOA. On that front, it is pessimistic. In the main, it argues that although its comparatively strong military – and one-time commitment to the US – outwardly appear to render it an ideal ally for the United States, the 'unprofessional nature' of Eritrea's armed forces (engendered by an unhealthy control of the military by the highly personalized

regime of President Isaias Afewerki) actually makes the country one of the region's least reliable – and perhaps one of the most unlikely – allies for the CJTF-HOA. Divided into three sections, this article first begins by introducing the notion of 'unprofessionalism' in Sub-Saharan African militaries, describing how it is created by the presence of autocratic, personalized regimes. The next two sections focus on the Eritrean military establishment proper: the first describes its relative power while the next explains why, despite its strength, Eritrea hosts the archetype of the unprofessional African military. Consequently, despite the aid that Asmara could theoretically offer to CJTF-HOA, such collaboration looks improbable.

'Personalized rule' and 'unprofessionalism' in African militaries

In his work, *Ambiguous Order: Military Forces in African States*, Herbert M. Howe describes what he calls the 'unprofessional nature' of Sub-Saharan African militaries.¹² Howe asserts that the majority of Africa's militaries are 'unprofessional', lacking technical expertise and political responsibility due to their allegiance to particular *regimes* rather than to the larger apparatus of the *state*.¹³ In making this claim, Howe notes that the distinction between a 'regime' and a 'state' is that the former is a temporarily held position occupied by one person, while the latter is a longer enduring sovereign structure characterized by institutionalized decision-making processes that operate largely beyond the scope of whomever the present leader happens to be.¹⁴ In Sub-Saharan Africa, where executive leadership tends to be highly centralized in the form of a singular cultish figure (see, for example, President Sheikh Professor Alhaji Dr. Yahya Jammeh of the Gambia or the former Emperor of the Central African Republic, Jean Bédel Bokassa), the military's dependence on a particular regime contributes to its 'unprofessionalism' in at least three ways.¹⁵

The first negative effect of 'personalized' rule on Sub-Saharan African militaries is that the highly important civilian–military divide is fundamentally breached. Militaries operate most effectively when a clearly delineated balance of power exists between the state and the military: the military agrees not to overthrow the regime in power and in return, the state allows the military considerable autonomy such as the recruitment and promotion of members and some latitude in the formulation of tactical, operational, and strategic policy.¹⁶ Yet in African countries such as Burkina Faso and the Gambia, such a divide is non-existent thanks to the micromanagement of the military by personalized regimes like those of Blaise Campaoré and Yahya Jammeh, who rose to power precisely by military *coups d'état*. Armed with firsthand knowledge of the fleeting nature of power, these apprehensions about their own overthrow lead authoritarian leaders to make heavy-handed appointments at every level – not just the most senior ranks – of the military establishment.¹⁷

The second negative impact of personalized regimes is that African militaries become highly influenced by the personality of the incumbent leader. In states

where the sovereign has a final say in all aspects of statehood, sectors (such as the military and provincial governments) that in other societies are allowed to function rather autonomously, cannot. For instance, personalized rulers like Siad Barre of Somalia, Siaka Stevens of Sierra Leone, and Samuel Doe of Liberia were each noted for rearranging their militaries to disproportionately employ members of their own ethnic group; in Doe's case, for instance, members of his Krahn ethnic group occupied many of the top military posts, despite representing only 4% of the country's population.¹⁸ In personalized African regimes, the leader's particular style of rule becomes imbued within the fabric of various state institutions, and the distinction between his personality and the operational culture of state institutions often ceases to exist.

Third, the high concentration of power in the executive branch of many Sub-Saharan African governments means that the sovereign is able to deploy the military – particularly to perceived adversarial neighboring countries – with little or no consultation of representative assemblies. In the United States, in the role as commander-in-chief, the president must receive Congressional approval before sending troops to war.¹⁹ Such is not the case in certain African regimes, where legislative bodies are often impotent in the face of presidential volition, and where the military can be deployed for whatever reason the president desires. This was the case in Idi Amin's Uganda, when in 1979 he deployed the national army into neighboring Tanzania – 'wantonly slaughtering' some 1500 Tanzanians – in order to 'correct what he saw as an improper boundary between the two countries'.²⁰

In sum, the highly personalized nature of rule in many Sub-Saharan African states has myriad deleterious effects in the cultivation of efficient militaries. This phenomenon is particularly evidenced for the object of study at hand, the nation of Eritrea. The following sections detail both the relative strengths of the Eritrean military, as well as the 'unprofessionalisms' engendered by the Afewerki regime.

Eritrea: Africa's best army?

In Sub-Saharan Africa, a good military has historically been hard to come by. A 1997 report from the State Department noted that:

[O]nly seven out of forty-six Sub-Saharan militaries are 'capable of deploying without significant augmentation an equipped professional battalion for a multinational peace or humanitarian operation,' that nine state have 'strong officer corps (experienced, trained, professional),' that only six of the forty-two militaries can 'perform engineering tasks such as construction, bridging, and water provision,' that no Sub-Saharan states can 'provide sustained transportation of personnel and equipment to a peace or humanitarian operation,' and that only two states have 'significant naval capability.'²¹

Interestingly, the CJTF-HOA's very neighborhood harbors what is arguably one of the continent's most capable militaries: that of Eritrea. As the second largest army in Africa, it is well staffed, well trained, and compared to the vast majority

of African armies, well funded.²² Indeed, during Eritrea's fight for independence from Ethiopia (which is described subsequently), the Eritrean military was 'once widely admired as one of the most effective fighting organizations in the world'.²³ In investigating what was at one point Eritrea's symbol of national pride, the following section offers a broad overview of the history, structure, and capabilities that make the Eritrean armed forces so superficially competent in relation to those from the rest of the Horn of Africa.

As the Eritrean military was born of the country's independence struggle from Ethiopia, in order to understand its current state, a brief history is presented here. The territory comprising modern day Eritrea had been colonized since the 1880s by Italy,²⁴ but after the country's defeat by the British in 1941, the United Nations became responsible for the administration of all of Italy's former colonies, including Eritrea. Ultimately, the United Nations and the United States agreed that Eritrea should be joined by federation to Ethiopia,²⁵ though it was stipulated that Eritrea should exist as an autonomous region with a separate legislative assembly,²⁶ flag, and official languages.²⁷ Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia quickly capitalized on the externally imposed union and, by 1958, had ensured that Eritrea was an official territory of Ethiopia.

From the 1960s to the 1990s, various Eritrean insurgent groups fought to gain independence from Ethiopia. Prime among these were the Eritrean Liberation Movement (ELM) and the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF). From them sprang a third faction, the People's Liberation Front (EPLF), which was formed around the personality cult of Eritrea's soon-to-be first president, Isaias Afewerki.²⁸ After the Derg regime overthrew Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie in 1974, the Eritrean rebel groups took increasing control of their territory, and in May 1991, the EPLF overtook the city of Asmara, which would later come to be the capital of Eritrea.²⁹ Under the leadership of Afewerki, Eritrea moved swiftly to gain independent status, and in 1993, 99.8% of Eritreans voted for sovereignty from Ethiopia.³⁰ The next year, in 1994, Africa's 53rd state was born.

In its post-independence incarnation, the Eritrean military comprises three divisions: the Ground Forces (Army), the Navy, and the Air Force.³¹ The Army, which has 'four corps with twenty infantry brigades, one commando division, and one mechanized brigade'³² is unquestionably the most developed sector of the three, singularly because of its role in waging the country's continuous border wars with former (and current) adversary Ethiopia. In contrast to the Army, the Air Force and Navy are comparatively underdeveloped precisely because the country's conflicts with Ethiopia lack a maritime or air dimension. However, although Eritrea officially has no paramilitary forces, one analyst noted that its Navy could be 'considered a competent paramilitary force in the coast guard role'.³³

Underlining its relative strength in comparison to all other African countries, Eritrea unquestionably spends a larger portion of its gross domestic product (GDP) on defense. Because of the country's secretive nature, exact numbers are hard to come by; however, two projections are presented below. First, shortly

after its independence, by 1997, Eritrea's defense budget was US\$88 million, or 13.6% of its GDP. A looming war with Ethiopia induced apprehension in the county, and in 1999, Eritrea ratcheted up its defense expenditures, devoting an astronomical 38.5% of GDP to its defense budget, amounting to a total of US \$271 million. Following the easing of tensions, spending decreased to a 'modest' 25.7% of its budget in 2002, and only 19.4% of its budget in 2003.³⁴ For its part, SIPRI has offered a slightly altered vision of expenditures as seen in [Table 1](#), which, like the previous analyses, extend only to 2003. Indeed, after that date, the deeply secretive Asmara stopped publishing exact numbers on defense expenditures, but most recent figures forwarded by the *CIA World Factbook* for the year 2006 suggest that spending is still at 6.3%, ranking Eritrea ninth internationally in defense expenditure as a proportion of GDP.³⁵

Just what does all that money buy? As of 2005 – again, before Asmara's turn to profound informational non-disclosure – the Library of Congress's Federal Research Division assessed the Eritrean military to possess the following materiel:

150 main battle tanks, 40 reconnaissance vehicles, 40 armored infantry fighting and personnel vehicles, 100 pieces of towed artillery, 25 pieces of self-propelled artillery, 35 multiple rocket launchers, 100 + mortars, 200 antitank guided weapons, and 70 air-defense guns. The Navy has one missile craft, seven inshore patrol boats, and three amphibious vehicles of unknown serviceability. The air force has eighteen combat aircraft of unknown serviceability, including MiG-21s, MiG-23s, and MiG-29s. The Air Force is thought to have approximately 15 training, transport, and armed helicopters.³⁶

Coupled with this artillery load is Eritrea's impressive manpower: the most recent figures (lamentably from 2010) suggest that a staggering 11.3% of its population is employed in the military, leading it to rank second in the world in terms of workforce population employed by the military.³⁷ Following independence from Ethiopia in 1991, Eritrea's Army dwindled to only about 30,000 troops before increasing in the mid 1990s to around 50,000 troops.³⁸ But as tensions with that country again reached a fever pitch in 1998, the country again began intensive recruiting, and numbers shot up to 300,000.³⁹ A second demobilization happened in the early 2000s, but then as tensions have again risen, so have Eritrea's troop numbers. Though no exact figures are available, most estimates suggest that as of 2009 the country employed some 300,000 active duty troops.⁴⁰

Table 1. Eritrean defense spending as a proportion of gross domestic product, 1993–2003.

Year	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003
Military Spending as % of GDP	21.3	12.7	19.5	20.3	11.9	32.5	34.4	32.7	22.1	20.7	20.9

Source: SIPRI, 'Eritrean Military Expenditures'.

With a seemingly competent military that could aid in the fight against extremism in the Horn of Africa, why then is a US partnership with Eritrea so seemingly unlikely?

The nature of the state and unprofessionalism in Eritrea's military

For any benefit that the United States might derive from Eritrea's comparatively capable military, the Eritrean state is highly characteristic of the 'charismatic personality' cult described by Howe and, as such, is a problematic military ally for the CJTF-HOA.

Since gaining its sovereignty in 1994, Eritrea's president and independence leader Isaias Afewerki has proven himself an authoritarian of the highest degree and serves as a caricature of the personalized Sub-Saharan African ruler described by Howe. Afewerki presides over Eritrea with an iron fist, treating the state as his own personal dominion. The Mo Ibrahim Index recently ranked Eritrea 49th out of 52 African states for good governance, placing it ahead only of Somalia, Chad, and the Democratic Republic of Congo.⁴¹ Dissent from Afewerki's regime is not allowed, as meetings of eight or more persons require government approval.⁴² So too is reporting from inside the country monitored meticulously: Reporters Without Borders has ranked Eritrea the worst country in the world for press freedom every year since 2007.⁴³ Because of the highly authoritarian nature of the Eritrean state, the Eritrean military, as per Howe's assessment, suffers profoundly. Three outcomes examined below include the lack of a civil-military divide; the military's profound reflection of many of the worst aspects of the Afewerki regime; and its international deployment for nefarious purposes at Afewerki's whim.

Citizen soldiers or soldier citizens? The lack of a civil-military divide

Howe's suggestion that presidential overreach into military affairs serves to hamper African military professionalism is evidenced no better than in Eritrea. As the archetypal authoritarian state, Eritrea displays an utter lack of a civil-military divide, a fact evidenced by Afewerki's involvement in every aspect of its operation and his resultant desire to ensure that the military mindset is interwoven into the very fabric of everyday Eritrean life.

In an almost clichéd expression of authoritarian power, Afewerki has a heavy hand in military dealings and grants virtually no autonomy to the military to carry out its internal affairs. For example, the Eritrean military has five theaters of operation, each headed by a general, all of whom report to the country's Defense Minister, Sebhat Ephrem, who has served in the position since 1995.⁴⁴ Though outwardly a functioning hierarchy, observers note that Ephrem is 'frequently ignored', and instead it is Isaias Afewerki who dictates the most minute details of the inner workings of the military. In addition to maintaining de facto control over the Army, Navy, and Air Force, Afewerki also presides over the National Security Service.⁴⁵

The ramifications of the lack of a civil–military divide extend far beyond simple military policymaking: Afewerki’s authoritarian regime has ensured that the Eritrean military’s presence permeates every aspect of quotidian life. Since Eritrea’s independence in 1994, Afewerki – trained in military tactics by China,⁴⁶ his country’s principal military ally⁴⁷ – has attempted to imbue within the country’s social fabric the notion that the territory is under constant threat, needs to be constantly vigilant, and must never fall into complacency that its battle has been won.⁴⁸ As the International Crisis Group asserts:

Eritrea is a highly militarized society shaped by war, run by warriors . . . The ethos of armed struggle permeates all aspects of public life, and the country has proved unable, as yet, to escape its violent past.⁴⁹

As such, even the most mundane aspects of everyday existence have come to be marked with a military outlook, and in the policymaking realm, this means that the prevailing assumption is that for every problem, there is a military solution.⁵⁰

Because of this absence of a civil–military divide, citizens are assumed to be part of the military structure from the beginning of their lives (and for the duration of them) as conscription in the Eritrean military is obligatory. Beginning in 1994, Afewerki began a program of mandatory national service for all of the country’s citizens, demanding that all Eritreans (both male and female) between the ages of 18 and 40 serve the country for at least 16 months, of which at least four are in military training.⁵¹ Age limits for service have been constantly expanding though, as in 2005, the Afewerki regime went to smaller Eritrean towns to recruit older males, aged 40 to 60, for weeks of additional civil defense training.⁵²

Limits on length of deployment have proven malleable too, as, since 1998, obligatory service tours within the Eritrean military have been extended indefinitely.⁵³ Just after the conclusion of its independence struggle in 1993, Eritrea began a demobilization campaign that saw some recruits phased out, but when tensions flared with Ethiopia again in 1998, term limits in the military became a fiction.⁵⁴ To this end, recruits from the inaugural national service class of 1994 were still conscripted some 14 years later in 2008;⁵⁵ resultantly, the National Service Program has been rightly described as ‘a giant prison for people under forty’.⁵⁶ Lamented one Eritrean, ‘the only people who don’t go to military service are blind or missing their trigger fingers’.⁵⁷

Further crossing the civil–military divide was the creation of the so-called ‘Sawa camps’, military training facilities located in the western part of the country to which the country’s youth must go to complete their senior year of high school. Created by Afewerki’s EPLF in the country’s immediate post-independence period, the camps have been employed instrumentally as part of a larger nation-building scheme to instill within the country’s youth the ethos of struggle that had been indispensable in the country’s fight for independence from Ethiopia.⁵⁸ So too have the Sawa camps been described as giant prisons by attendees, with students forced to endure ‘machine gun [*sic*] fire,

barbed wire fences, and several days of walking through the desert without food and water'.⁵⁹ In order to take exams for higher education, Eritrean youth are required to attend the Sawa camp training,⁶⁰ a process that UNICEF has condemned as violating the statutes of the United Nations' Charter on Children.⁶¹ Disturbingly, the International Crisis group notes that for Eritrean youth, 'there are no possibilities of advancement, only the prospect of indefinite assignment to military duty.'⁶²

The apple doesn't fall far: The Eritrean Army as a reflection of the regime

A second way in which Eritrea corroborates Howe's classification of unprofessional African militaries is the extreme degree to which the armed forces are patterned after the incumbent regime: namely, oppressive and with a blatant disregard for the rule of law and human rights.

As the previous section has insinuated, it is perhaps not surprising that the armed forces in Eritrea face increasing amounts of desertions. Defections from the Eritrean military are common, with service members frequently escaping to Ethiopia, Sudan, and Djibouti,⁶³ and less commonly to Libya, Egypt, and Israel.⁶⁴ In almost all international locales, refugee defectors from the Eritrean military have complained of suffering from racial discrimination and substandard living conditions.⁶⁵ Anecdotally, the wave of some 10,000 Eritrean refugees (mostly believed to be draft evaders) that fled into Sudan in 2007 brought the total number of Eritrean refugees in that country to over 100,000.⁶⁶ This great prevalence of defections has led the Afewerki regime to institute harsh sentences for deserters and draft evaders. Article 297 of the Eritrean penal code decrees that failure to enlist in the military is punished by at least six months' imprisonment in times of peace, and 'rigorous imprisonment' of up to five years in wartime scenarios. Article 300 states that punishment for desertion ranges from five years' incarceration to the death penalty.⁶⁷

The most tangible example in recent history of the military's dissent against Afewerki was a possible attempted *coup d'état* that took place in January 2013. While the details of events vary significantly, international media reported that on the morning of 21 January 2013, mutinying soldiers took over the Ministry of Information so as to disseminate their demands, which included the implementation of the 1997 constitution, and a release of the country's estimated 5000 to 10,000 political prisoners. Quickly, Asmara shut down the television station, the first gap in its functioning since 1993.⁶⁸ Some reporters (including some presumed to be government-affiliated Eritreans writing under the pennames of Western journalists) denied that the attempted coup was as severe as international media suggested.⁶⁹ However, the broader body of observers believes the story – regardless of its precise details – to be indicative of a simmering and palpable move by the military to break the grip of Afewerki's rule.

In yet another parallel to Afewerki's regime, there is no recourse for military judicial matters, as military courts do not exist in the country. As such, desertion,

attempted desertion, or other military disobedience are punished by arbitrary imprisonment with no trials or secret trials, are frequently accompanied by torture, and in extreme cases, end in executions at the hands of senior military officers. The deplorable state of the Eritrean prison system makes matters worse. Detainees have told of extreme overcrowding, low sanitation standards, exposure to extreme heat, mental abuse, hard labor, and so-called 'starvation rations'.⁷⁰ Others have reported prolonged imprisonment in contorted positions, eventually causing atrophy of limbs.⁷¹

Apart from incarceration, severe ramifications can befall a defector and his or her family. When trying to flee Eritrea, deserters are frequently shot and killed by the military, or are punished in impromptu ways by nearby officers.⁷² Particularly notorious among these punishments is the 'Jesus Christ', the nailing of deserters to trees in the Eritrean desert.⁷³ For deserters at large, their families face punishment. Oftentimes, the father of the defector or draft evader will be automatically conscripted, imprisoned, or forced to pay a large fine.⁷⁴ To this end, hundreds of relatives of deserters and draft evaders were captured between July 2005 and December 2006 (particularly from the southern Debub region) and held incommunicado.⁷⁵ Said one Eritrean military refugee in a Sudanese camp, 'The moment I fled, the Eritrean government took my mother and sister and imprisoned them as hostages until I return.'⁷⁶

Moreover, women's accusations of sexual harassment and rape by mid-ranking and senior officers are common. Some women have reported that their senior commanders have coerced them into sexual relations by threatening heavier workloads, more difficult postings, or the denial of home leave. Those who refuse sexual advances by their superiors are often imprisoned and beaten, and have also reported reduced food rations.⁷⁷ Many Eritrean women have contracted HIV/AIDS from and been impregnated by their military superiors. Those discharged on these grounds are then frequently shunned by society for their status as unwed, impure females, infected with a deadly disease.⁷⁸

No checks, no balances: Eritrea's belligerent foreign policy

Perhaps the most obvious mark of the unprofessional nature of the Eritrean military is its frequent and almost casual deployment around the Horn of Africa by Afewerki for questionable purposes. Eritrea frequently defies ostensible intra-African international relations norms by attacking neighboring states, supporting terrorist groups, and maintaining a generally cantankerous and confused outlook on international affairs.

Principal among its schizophrenic foreign policy agenda goals, Eritrea maintains a highly paranoid stance towards its former 'colonizer', the neighboring state of Ethiopia. In the aftermath of Eritrea's independence, hopes ran high that the adversarial relationship between Eritrea and Ethiopia would turn to one of peace. Such was not the case. Despite initial reconciliation, the two countries disagreed on the new border demarcations between them,

particularly at the city of Badame. Further, disagreements arose over sea access, as Eritrea's accession to independence had landlocked Ethiopia, which now had to pay taxes to the Asmara government in exchange for the use of the Assab port that had historically been clearly Ethiopian. Tempers flared and a crippling two-year war between the two countries raged between 1998 and 2000.⁷⁹ Unsurprisingly, demobilized soldiers have recently relayed that the majority of their time was spent patrolling Eritrea's borders with Ethiopia and Djibouti.⁸⁰

Relations have also been tumultuous with Sudan. Khartoum, which was Eritrea's most reliable regional ally during its struggle for independence,⁸¹ became increasingly threatening to Eritrea as Sudan's president, Hassan al-Turabi, began a campaign to spread a version of radical Islam throughout the Horn. Turabi began financing fighters that entered Eritrea, and, as a country divided jointly between Christians and Muslims, Afewerki became apprehensive. In December 1994, Eritrea broke off formal diplomatic relations with Sudan, and Afewerki pledged to provide military training and assistance to any elements working to overthrow the Sudanese regime in Khartoum.⁸² Relations have improved little since.

Importantly for the United States, Eritrea has been accused of illogically bullying the Horn's smallest state, Djibouti, which plays host to the CJTF-HOA's base, Camp Lemonnier. The comparatively serene state of Djibouti – which has been likened to a 'chihuahua sleeping among pitbulls'⁸³ – felt the wrath of its neighbor's fire, which had border disputes with the country in 1996 and 1998. Although the two signed agreements of cooperation in both 2004 and 2006,⁸⁴ tensions flared once again in 2008 as Eritrean troops invaded Djibouti to capture army deserters attempting to flee the military's draconian conditions.⁸⁵ French troops stationed in Djibouti fired at the Eritrean military, and international rebuke of Eritrea's violation of Djiboutian sovereignty followed. The African Union condemned Eritrea's actions⁸⁶ and the United Nations Security Council also censured the regime.⁸⁷

More than unilaterally employing the Eritrean military to wage conventional interstate wars against regional neighbors, Afewerki has also received financial gain by renting out experienced military units to armed rebel groups throughout the Horn of Africa. In addition to collusion with insurgent elements in the aforementioned states, the Eritrean military has aided in attempted government overthrows of the late Laurent Kabila of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the anti-government Tigrayan, Amahra, and Ogadeni factions in Ethiopia, the armed groups of the Beja and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement in Sudan, and the al-Shabaab militias that terrorized Mogadishu from approximately 2006 to mid 2011. Afewerki has also been known to extend office space and training grounds to the leaders of these movements in his own country.⁸⁸

Conclusion: An unlikely partnership in CJTF-HOA's future

As the CJTF-HOA looks to states in the Horn of Africa for help to stabilize the region, Eritrea appears an unlikely ally. Despite its relatively strong, experienced,

and fairly well-trained military, the highly authoritarian nature of the regime in power has been translated into the operational culture of the military and, as such, has rendered it a force that often works in opposition – rather than in concert – with US objectives in the region.

One of the takeaway lessons from the preceding discussion is that in a world region in constant search of democratic ideals, the US military is profoundly affected by the lack of suitable allies precisely because of this absence of democracy. Thus the CJTF-HOA is placed in an unsavory situation whereby the neighborhood watch program it seeks to assist in creating is hampered by the fact that one of the few capable neighbors is itself a criminal. The region's lack of democracy thus becomes both the cause and effect of instability: authoritarian tendencies allow leaders like Afewerki to singlehandedly manipulate national militaries according to personal whims, which they can then deploy instrumentally to create an ever-more tenuous Horn of Africa. For the foreseeable future, the CJTF-HOA is likely to rely on its comparatively more democratic partners of Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania, not because of their military capabilities (which pale in comparison to Eritrea's) but simply because of the profound impact that modalities of governance have on the operational culture of African militaries. Thus, as the CJTF-HOA looks for allies, when it comes to Eritrea, it should look elsewhere.

Notes

1. US Department of Defense, Africa Command, 'CJTF-HOA Factsheet'.
2. 'Somalia: Somaliland Says...'
3. Uma, 'South Sudan'.
4. US Department of Defense, Africa Command, 'Factsheet'.
5. Wright, 'CJTF-HOA EOD team'.
6. 'Eritrea Offers Military Help To US', BBC, 10 December 2002, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/2563259.stm>.
7. Hennig, 'Eritrea Now Sees US as Arch-Enemy'.
8. In a 2009 radio interview about the situation in the Horn, an interviewer asked General Kip Ward, then-commander of AFRICOM, whether Eritrea was indeed an ally in the quest to stabilize the region. Ward's response: 'Well, I think it's a function of how... countries work to help to prevent crisis – help to create stability, as opposed to not. And what we would like to see is all the countries be active contributors in helping to create stability – [but we] don't see a lot of that evidence from Eritrea'.
9. US Department of State, Bureau of Public Affairs, 'Eritrea'.
10. Martel, 'How Eritrea fell out with the West'.
11. McElroy, 'U.S. Threatens Eritrea'.
12. Howe, *Ambiguous Order*.
13. To be sure, there are myriad exceptions to this very broad assertion, which should not be taken to be a definitive statement about Sub-Saharan Africa as a whole.
14. Howe, *Ambiguous Order*, 9.
15. 'President Jammeh Receives Five More Ambassadors', State House of the Gambia, Office of the Gambian President, 1 December 2010, http://www.statehouse.gm/ambassadors_01122010.html.

16. Howe, *Ambiguous Order*, 10.
17. This creates for them a security dilemma: how to maintain a strong and competent army capable of suppressing domestic dissent and international attacks, while simultaneously never allowing the military to become a threat to overthrow their regimes.
18. Howe, *Ambiguous Order*, 38.
19. As Howe rightly notes, 'the balancing of power . . . between the government and the public specifically helps to check unpopular military incursions into foreign lands' (Howe, *Ambiguous Order*, 10).
20. Edgerton, *Africa's Armies*, 154.
21. [Defense Forecasts International](#), 'African Capabilities'.
22. [Library of Congress](#), 'Country Profile: Eritrea'.
23. [International Crisis Group](#), 'Eritrea: The Siege State'.
24. Italians had used Eritrea as their Horn of Africa foothold, using it to counter British and French presence in Sudan, and in their unsuccessful bid to invade Ethiopia in the 1896 battle of Adwa.
25. In accordance with Eritrea's constitution, the UN should have intervened to ensure that Eritrean autonomy was respected. When it did not, Eritrea began to develop its two enduring foreign policy orientations: that Ethiopia was out to eradicate it, and that the international community was not to be confided in.
26. International Crisis Group, 'Eritrea: The Siege State', 3.
27. [Meredith](#), *The Fate of Africa*, 208–9.
28. International Crisis Group, 'Eritrea: The Siege State', 3.
29. *Ibid.*, 4.
30. [Iyob](#), *The Eritrean Struggle for Independence*, 140.
31. 'Eritrean Military Stats', [NationMaster.com](#), 26 November 2010, <http://www.nationmaster.com/country/er-eritrea/mil-military>.
32. Library of Congress, 'Country Profile: Eritrea'.
33. [IHS Jane's](#), 'Armed Forces (Eritrea)'.
34. 'Eritrean Military Stats'.
35. [CIA](#), 'Eritrea'.
36. Library of Congress, 'Country Profile: Eritrea'.
37. 'Eritrean Military Stats'.
38. Library of Congress, 'Country Profile: Eritrea'.
39. [IHS Jane's](#), 'Armed Forces (Eritrea)'.
40. [War Resisters' International](#), 'Eritrea'.
41. [Mo Ibrahim Foundation](#), '2012 Ibrahim Index', 9.
42. [Gondwe](#), 'The Plight of Eritrean Refugees'.
43. [Reporters Without Borders](#), 'Press Freedom Index 2013'.
44. These generals who report directly to Afewerki, are well-known as the de facto governors of Eritrea's various states. (International Crisis Group, 'Eritrea: The Siege State', 10).
45. *Ibid.*, 10.
46. [Myers](#), 'Africa's North Korea'.
47. Library of Congress, 'Country Profile: Eritrea'.
48. International Crisis Group, 'Eritrea: The Siege State', 10.
49. *Ibid.*, 9.
50. *Ibid.*
51. Other sources, including the International Crisis Group, claim instead that the national service requirement demands six months of military training, with 12 months of military deployment. (*Ibid.*, 10.)
52. Library of Congress, 'Country Profile: Eritrea'.

53. For his part, Afewerki claims that the extended conscription is legal, as Article 13 (2) of the Eritrean constitution declares that even in the aftermath of 18 months of national service, personnel can be retained 'under mobilization or emergency situation directives given by the government. (War Resisters' International, 'Eritrea').
54. International Crisis Group, 'Eritrea: The Siege State', 9.
55. 'Military Service In Eritrea: Eighteen Months or Eighteen Years?' [Meseley.net](http://meseley.net), 11 May 2009, http://meseley.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=756:military-service-in-eritrea-eighteen-months-or-eighteen-years&catid=4:featured-articles&Itemid=4.
56. McElroy, 'U.S. Threatens Eritrea'.
57. War Resisters' International, 'Eritrea'.
58. International Crisis Group, 'Eritrea: The Siege State', 9.
59. [Human Rights Watch](#), 'Service for Life', 50.
60. [US Department of State](#), '2009 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices – Eritrea'.
61. [Fisher](#), 'Eritrea Rapped'.
62. International Crisis Group, 'Eritrea: The Siege State', 11.
63. *Ibid.*, 10.
64. But even outside of the country, these refuges are not safe. The Eritrean government has made pacts with many countries to forcibly return the refugees to the country. Examples of forced repatriation have occurred in Libya, Egypt, and Israel. (Lee, 'Eritrean Refugees'.)
65. For example, in 2009 an Eritrean refugee in a public market in Tel Aviv made international news by hanging himself in a fit of desperation at the prospect of being repatriated back to Eritrea. (Gondwe, 'The Plight of Eritrean Refugees').
66. War Resisters' International, 'Eritrea'.
67. *Ibid.*
68. [George](#), 'A Glimpse into a Mysterious African Dictatorship'.
69. [Mountrain](#), 'The Eritrean "Coup"'.
70. War Resisters' International, 'Eritrea'.
71. Gondwe, 'The Plight of Eritrean Refugees'.
72. War Resisters' International, 'Eritrea'.
73. McElroy, 'U.S. Threatens Eritrea'.
74. War Resisters' International, 'Eritrea'.
75. *Ibid.*
76. Lee, 'Eritrean Refugees'.
77. War Resisters' International, 'Eritrea'.
78. [Eritrean Global Solidarity](#), 'Human Rights Concern'.
79. International Crisis Group, 'Eritrea: The Siege State', 5.
80. *Ibid.*
81. [Clapham](#), *Africa and the International System*, 241.
82. [Clapham](#), 'The Foreign Policies of Ethiopia and Eritrea', 95.
83. [Simpson](#), 'Hung up on the Horn of Africa'.
84. International Crisis Group, 'Eritrea: The Siege State', 20.
85. 'Iran offers Djibouti, Eritrea mediation', [AfolNews.com](#), 5 November 2010, <http://www.afrol.com/articles/31564>.
86. 'AU condemns Eritrea military attack on Djibouti', [AfolNews.com](#), 1 July 2010, <http://www.afrol.com/articles/29637>.
87. The International Crisis Group argues that although the censure in the form of UNSCR 1862 (14 January 2009) was intended primarily to chastise Eritrea for invading Djibouti, it also played a more important role in serving as the basis for the

subsequent sanctions placed on the country for its funding of Somali insurgency groups (International Crisis Group, 'Eritrea: The Siege State', 20).

88. 'General Sebbat Ephrem's Schedule'.

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