

BORDERLESS WORLD VS BORDERS AS WALLS: INSIGHTS FROM A BORDERLAND GROUP IN NORTHERN ETHIOPIA

ALEXANDRA MAGNÓLIA DIAS

Centre for African Studies (CEA-IUL) ISCTE-IUL, University Institute of Lisbon
alexmagnolia.dias@gmail.com

The border between Eritrea and Ethiopia changed status frequently from the 19th century up to Eritrea's independence (Triulzi, 2006: 7). With the creation of Eritrea as an Italian colony and prior to the incorporation of Ethiopia into the Italian East African Empire the border was defined according to colonial treaties. However, the border waxed and waned over the decades of their political coexistence. Indeed, the border's status shifted from a mere internal-administrative marker to a colonial border, to dissolution, to an inter-state border during the one-decade federation, became an internal border again, went through a phase of contested no-man's-land during the civil war and, finally, acquired the status of an international border between two sovereign states. Prior to the outbreak of hostilities in May 1998 the border had never been delimited or demarcated. For all practical purposes the ethnic groups straddling the border continued their usual daily business regardless of the borderline. For borderland groups Eritrea's independence was of secondary importance in the face of the general sense of security generated by the end of the civil war against the Derg.

In the aftermath of the 1998-2000 interstate war between Eritrea and Ethiopia the porous border was transformed into a wall leading to its closure and the hampering of established movements of people and goods across the border. The ethnic groups straddling the borders particularly affected were those of northern Ethiopia from the Tigray and Afar regions.

This article draws on original empirical research among a partitioned group, the Saho on the Ethiopian side of the border, the ethnic group referred to as the Irob. The article will shed light on the strategies and shifting identities that a borderland group created in order to adapt to the closure of a previously porous border.

The first part of the article characterises the borderland group and the places which fall in traditional Irob territory in relation to the process of state formation in Ethiopia and Eritrea, the state's trajectory and the extension of its institutions to the rural area under focus: the current Irob woreda.² The second part assesses the legacy of armed conflicts: the civil war that opposed insurgent movements straddling the border between Ethiopia and Eritrea to the Marxist military regime known as the Derg and

² Woreda is the administrative unit which corresponds to a local district under the new post-1991 federal model in Ethiopia. The administrative units are as follows in descending order: region-zone-woreda-tabia-kushet.

the 1998-2000 inter-state border war between Eritrea and Ethiopia. The article will show that the two armed conflicts left different legacies in the rural area and impacted differently on the local social actors' daily lives. Finally, against the background of the two preceding parts, the article will analyse the borderland group's strategies and the changes in identities since the closure and militarisation of the border between Eritrea and Ethiopia in the aftermath of the 1998-2000 war.

The state's trajectory and the extension of state institutions to a rural area: Irob woreda (district)

The local district presently known as Irob woreda is located in the Tigray Region in the Eastern Zone and its population numbers 31,000, which represents 1.3% of Ethiopia's population. The definition of a local district with the name of the majority ethnic group in this area, the ethnic group referred to as the Irob, corresponds to the political project of state building that the Ethiopia People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) introduced in post-1991 after the overthrow of the Derg.

The capital of the Tigray Regional State of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia is Mekele. Tigray Region is divided into four administrative zones and the capital is the fifth zone. The five zones, which are referred to as Zoba, are as follows: Western, Eastern, North, South and the Capital. Irob woreda is in the Eastern Zone. The Eastern Zone's capital is Adigrat. Currently, the Irob woreda has seven *tabias* and twenty eight *kushets*. The *tabias* are as follows: Alitena, Indalgueda, Agara Lakoma, Ará, Endamosa, Haraza Sabata and Weratle. The old capital of traditional Irob territory, Alitena, was replaced by Dawhan, a newly built capital in the vicinity in 1997. But this was not always the case. Indeed, the recognition of Irob's land within the state's administrative structure was a novelty introduced in the context of the EPRDF's political state building project. In the Imperial Period (Haile Selassie) Ethiopia was divided into 14 provinces and Tigray was a province at that time. Tigray was divided into eight administrative units called *awaraja*. The areas where traditional Irob land is located were under the administration of the Agame *awaraja* with Adigrat as the capital. In the Derg period, Tigray was divided into 11 *awarajas*. Due to the intensity of insurgent movements in Eritrea, Tigray and Ogaden in 1987, the Derg created five autonomous administrative regions: Eritrea, Tigray, Assab, Dire Dawa and Ogaden (Bureau, 1988: 13-16). During this period, due to the rise in insurgent movements in Tigray, their increasing ascendancy and legitimacy was submitted to a tripartite administration: 1) the urban areas along the limited infrastructure of roads that remained under the Derg's control; 2) the villages (*tabias*) and hamlets (*kushets*) that were under the main insurgent movement's control, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), and 3) *terra nullis* (no man's land) which comprised peripheral and remote areas of very difficult access. Many of the localities in the current Irob woreda fell into either category 2 or 3.

The post-1991 federal model marks a significant rupture with the previous political state-building projects and had manifold implications for Irob, as this part of the article will show. The post-1991 transition envisaged the implementation of an ethnic-based federal model. This model was based on the

principle of equality between the diverse groups making up Ethiopia's social structure. The model's aim was to reflect the multi-linguistic, multi-ethnic and multi-confessional character of Ethiopia's state. In order to overcome the centrifugal pull exercised by the periphery over the centre, the federal model was based on the principle of devolution of autonomy to the regions and local districts under the banner of decentralisation.

The ethnic-based federal model aimed to rebuild the state in a way that would reflect the distribution of the various nationalities in Ethiopia. Article 39 of the new Constitution recognised even the right of secession for the nations, nationalities and peoples of Ethiopia. In this context, the nationality concept in the 1994 Constitution involved recognition of the multinational character of the state. In practice, the Constitution recognises each citizen as an Ethiopian (national identity) and as identified with the majority ethnic group in its region, zone or local district – *woreda*. In this sense, nationalities should be interpreted as sub-nationalities, which are synonymous to ethnic groups. The different administrative units and the internal boundaries between them were redefined and delimited in accordance with the distribution of the different ethnic groups in each region and local administrative unit. However, in Ethiopia's case ethnic distribution is not geographically or homogeneously consolidated in each region. The logic underlying the expansion of the state since the 19th century, namely with Emperor Menelik II, was one of subordinating the foci of opposition to the central state through expansion and incorporation of peripheral groups. This logic was reproduced and consolidated by the subsequent regimes. Adding to this logic of expansion, the voluntary and forced processes of migration during the imperial regimes, the Italian occupation (1936-1941) and the Marxist military regime resulted in the geographical scattering of various ethnic groups (Donham and James, 1986; James, *et al*, 2002; Turton, 2006). Finally, the previous political state-building projects were framed around the principle of subordinating all other sources of identity to the national identity and Amharic took precedence over all other languages as the *lingua franca* of the Ethiopian state.

The Irob and their traditional territory remained on the periphery of the state until very recently, as the next section of the article will show. The relationship between Ethiopia and Eritrea's state trajectories and the positioning of this ethnic group vis-à-vis the border between Ethiopia and Eritrea are central for an understanding of the process of extending the state's institutions and representatives to this rural borderland area. But first the next section will introduce the Irob's myth of origins, their sources of identification and the Bukenayto sub-group. This clan is of particular importance as the author gathered most of the data for the present article through participant observation, group and semi-structured interviews among the Irob Bukenayto during fieldwork in November 2010, as mentioned in the introductory section.

The Irob's myth(s) of origin and sources of identity

In the 19th century, an Irob family, the Soubagadis, played a critical role in Tigray's power reconfiguration and in the regional history of political rivalries. Dedjatch Soubagadis (1816-1830) managed to gain ascendancy over other potential candidates through his warrior's skills and political astuteness. For the Irob, as a minority group in Tigray, this marked a moment of political ascendancy in a region dominated by the majority ethnic group, the Tigrayans.

The sources and contemporary oral narratives differ in terms of the origins of the Irob. The Irob do not identify themselves with the other seven Saho clans that converted to Islam. One line defends that they are the descendants of Greeks who arrived at the current Eritrean port of Adulis, hence their name Irob which in local pronunciation sounds like "Europe". Another line of oral tradition links them to the word Rome. The last one links Irob to the word in Saho which means "return to origins". Perhaps it is no coincidence that the myth of origins links Irob to Europe, as one of its lineages (Irob Bukenayto) converted to Catholicism after the foundation of a Lazarist mission by French priests in the traditional capital of their homeland, Alitena, circa 1846. The other two lineages, Irob Adgade and Irob Hasaballa, remain loyal to the Christian Orthodox tradition of the Ethiopian state, while part of Irob Hasaballa converted to Islam (AAVV, 2007: 187).³

The regional political ascendancy of an Irob families' representative, as mentioned before, marked the affirmation of members of this group as social actors in Tigray's political space. Soubagadis's father had the merit of bringing together supporters from the three Irob families - Bukenayto, Hasaballa and Adgade (Coulbeaux, 1929: 381). The division in three families of this sub-group of the Saho follows the principle of descent from one of the three brothers and leaders of these clans.

In terms of social organisation and of the traditional political lineage units the three families are referred to as *Are*, which literally means house or place of residence according to the tradition of descent from one of the three lineages' traditional authorities. The leader of each clan is referred to as *Ona* and is elected for life. A council of five elders or of other members of recognised prestige within the group is responsible for the final decision. This position of *Ona* has predominantly remained within certain families and/or sub-clans in a line of continuity. The assemblage of the representatives and other important meetings and ceremonies have traditionally been held in the old capital of Irob, Alitena,⁴ in a place called Dalubeta. In Weratle, another place in the Irob traditional territory, the traditional assembly place is located by the clinic under a centuries-old tree and is known as Indharta Daga.

³ The only mosque in Irob woreda was built recently in the new capital, Dawhan. Families in Wuratle who identify themselves with Islam and follow the religion live peacefully with those who identify themselves with Catholicism. However, the only public place of religious profession and cult is a Catholic church.

⁴ See map 2 to identify Alitena's geographical location in relation to the new woreda capital, Dawhan, the Eastern Zone capital, Adigrat, and the Eritrean town of Senafe.

In terms of socio-economic organisation, in contrast to other Saho sub-groups that tend to remain nomads and devoted to transhumant pastoralist activities, the Irob are sedentary and engage in agriculture and cattle breeding.

Their language Saho is a Cushitic language, as is the case with Somali, Oromifa, Afar and other languages in the Horn of Africa (Lewis, 1998: 176). Indeed, their language is very close to Afar. However, while Afar follows the Latin script, Saho follows the Ge'ez script.

More recently, especially since the international recognition of Eritrea as a sovereign state (formally in 1993) an interesting distinction has emerged according to one local informant: "In Eritrea, Saho refers to people and language. In Ethiopia, Saho means language, not people".⁵

In order to understand another source of identity of this group and the emergence and consolidation of a distinction of the Saho who remained associated with the Ethiopian state, like the Irob (Lewis, 1998: 176), the next section will look into the divergent state trajectories of the Ethiopian and Eritrean states.

The Irob in relation to Ethiopia's and Eritrea's trajectories and to the border

Ethiopia, with the exception of the period of Italian occupation (1936-1941), was not under colonial rule, unlike the majority of the states in Sub-Saharan Africa. Eritrea, on the other hand, embarked upon a divergent trajectory of state formation with the beginning of Italian colonial rule in 1890.

Ethiopia and Eritrea were both part of the Abyssinian Empire thus sharing a common history, among other traits,⁶ until Italy colonised Eritrea (1890-1941). However, as Jacquin-Berdal rightly claims (quoting Halliday and Molyneux, 1981) "neither Eritrea nor Ethiopia as presently constituted existed in the pre-colonial period" (Halliday and Molyneux cited in Jacquin-Berdal, 2002: 85). When Ethiopia defeated the invading Italian Army at the historical battle of Adwa (1896) and Italy was forced to shelve its plan to expand further south of the Mereb River (the river between Eritrea and Ethiopia) the two countries followed divergent trajectories. However, the groups north and south of the Mereb, especially the ones based in the Ethiopian region of Tigray, continued to cross the border to inter-marry, visit relatives, attend weddings and funerals, worship, look for job opportunities other than agriculture, trade and search for pasture and water (Abbay, 1997). In short, the creation of the Italian colony did not prevent groups separated by the border (which remained porous as in other ex-colonies in Africa) from continuing their

⁵ Interview with the author, Irob woreda, November 2010.

⁶ Although Eritrea's coastal regions have experienced external influences over the centuries, Eritrea's highlands were closely bound to Ethiopia's Tigray. Indeed, the Eritrean Tigrinya are ethnically linked to the Ethiopian Tigrayans. The leaders of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) used to hold the positions of Heads of State. President Isaias Afewerki of Eritrea and late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi of Ethiopia are both Tigrayans. The Eritrean Tigrinya and the Ethiopian Tigrayans speak the same language, Tigrinya, and follow the same religion, Orthodox Christianity, among other features (Jacquin-Berdal, 2002: 82-83). The EPLF and the TPLF are locally referred as *shabya* and *woyane* respectively.

daily lives among their kin across the border. But Italian colonial rule did transform Eritrean society and contributed to the creation of a sense of difference among groups within Eritrea with regard to the southern neighbouring country.

Between 1936 and 1941, when Italy invaded and occupied Ethiopia, although Addis Ababa was the capital of the Italian East African Empire, Eritrea remained the main commercial and economic centre. Indeed, by 1940, 54.8 percent of the industrial firms in the Italian Empire were located in Eritrea, while 30.6 percent were located in the remaining Ethiopian provinces (Shewa, Harar, Amara and Oromo & Sidamo) and the remaining 14.6 percent were located in Somalia's Italian colony. With regard to commercial firms Eritrea's economic prominence within the Italian East African Empire was again undisputable: 56.2 percent of the firms were located in Eritrea, 30 percent in the remaining Ethiopian provinces and 13.8 percent in Somalia.

As a consequence of the opportunities available in the Italian Eritrean colony, for most of the twentieth century peasants from neighbouring Ethiopia, mainly from Tigray, also migrated north (to Eritrea and especially the capital, Asmara) when in need of supplementary income (Young, 1997: 72).

The borderland groups, like the Tigrayans, Kunama, Saho-Irob and Saho-Afar, as was the case in other borderland areas in Africa, were artificially divided by the border introduced with the creation of the Italian colony of Eritrea.

Indeed, as several interviewees mentioned reflecting local interpretations and narratives: "Eritrea did not exist. It was Ethiopia".⁷

With Italy's defeat in World War II, Britain administered the former Italian colony until Eritrea's future was determined (1941-1952). The destiny of Eritrea was fixed by United Nations Resolution 390 A (V) of 1952 which established its status as an autonomous region within the Federation with Ethiopia (1952-1962). However, the progressive deterioration of federal arrangements and Ethiopia's final abrogation of the Federation sparked dissent and contributed to the emergence of the armed struggle. Ethiopia forcefully incorporated Eritrea as its fourteenth governorate or province.

The war for Eritrea's independence lasted until the defeat of the Derg regime by the combined forces of the EPLF and the TPLF in 1991. Eritrea's independence was formally recognised in 1993 in the aftermath of a referendum that enshrined its 30-year fight for self-determination. At this stage Eritrea's independence had no ramifications for the daily lives of borderland groups. Indeed, borderland groups continued their daily business regardless of the border as they had done in different periods, as mentioned in the introductory section.

As several Irob living in remote rural areas closer to markets in Eritrea than in Ethiopia mentioned, "All the people used to go to Senafe, not Ethiopia. Our town before the war was Senafe. We

⁷ Interview with the author, Irob woreda, November 2010.

are farmers. We sent honey (baska), butter (subay), ox (aurr), cows (saga), goats (lahe) and sheep to the market in Senafe. In Senafe we bought clothes, shoes, food and wheat". However, this situation changed dramatically with the outbreak of hostilities between Eritrea and Ethiopia in 1998. In the aftermath of the 1998-2000 war between Eritrea and Ethiopia the porous border was transformed into a wall leading to its closure and the hampering of established movements of people and goods across the border.

The next section provides an analysis of the legacy of both the civil war and the interstate war (1998-2000) for several Irob living in the borderland area.

The legacy of armed conflicts in a rural borderland area

During the imperial period in Ethiopia, Irob traditional territory remained on the periphery of the state. The mountainous nature of the landscape and its topographical location contributed to its isolation. Indeed, as late as 1969 (still during the imperial regime) Alitena, the old capital of Irob, was inaccessible by road. In this year the first efforts were made to build a road between the border town of Zalambessa and Alitena. This corresponded to a distance of around 35 kilometres or a 5-6 hour journey on foot. Most residents of this area are used to performing and calculating their daily activities in terms of walking distances and hours, and this is still the case in other localities within the Irob woreda. The building of a road was followed by a combined initiative of an international non-governmental organisation (NGO), Caritas-Switzerland, and a local NGO, Action for the Development of Adigrat Diocese (ADDA) to build a dam near the present woreda capital, Dawhan. The project to build Assabol Dam was initiated in the 1970s in the aftermath of the internationally reported famine during the 1973-75 drought. The drought combined with poverty, the political situation and difficulty of access to many areas in Tigray contributed to this large-scale famine. During the Derg period, with the increasing presence of insurgent movements in this area, the Assabol Dam Project was interrupted. The dam was only officially opened on 12 October 2008 (O'Mahoney and Troxler, 2009). The difficulties of building roads and completing this project further confirm the peripheral status of the area.

The first insurgent movement that emerged in Irob traditional territory was named after one of its mountains, Assimba. The movement was created around 1974 (1967 in the Ethiopian calendar)⁸ and mobilised support among a number of Ethiopian groups. The movement also mobilised supporters among the Irob, and its leader Tesfay Debressae identified with the Irob. The movement evolved to become the Ethiopia People's Party and its base was in Gamada, another well-known remote location in Irob's traditional territory. Even the TPLF used Irob traditional territory as a rear base and its combatants were based in several remote locations, near Weratle, and on a well-known mountain in Irob traditional territory, Dambakoma. However, during the civil war period, characterised by the armed opposition of insurgent

⁸ The Ethiopian calendar differs from the Gregorian calendar. The differences are as follows. The Ethiopian calendar has a total of 12 months with 30 days and a 13th month, referred to as Pagume, which has only five or six days, in the case of leap years, and is seven to eight years behind the Gregorian calendar.

movements against the Derg regime, due to its peripheral position in a remote borderland area, Irob traditional territory was not the centre stage or the theatre of armed conflict. The insurgent movements took advantage of the area's remoteness and peripheral situation to rest, re-assemble, escape, move freely, organise and prepare their combat operations against the Derg. This context further highlights the isolation of Irob traditional territory from state institutions and agents.

The Derg military socialist regime launched the first plan to teach Saho language in the context of a national campaign that came to be known as *zemacha*. The National Working Campaign (*zemacha*) was part of the Derg's national policy of promoting literacy. It envisaged the distribution of university students across the country, and particularly in rural areas, in a one-year voluntary scheme to contribute to the "campaign against generalised illiteracy" and to promote teaching in local languages. The first manual written for the teaching of Saho, which was written in the Ge'ez script, dates from this period.⁹ But during the Derg period the presence of state institutions or agents was kept to a minimum and their visits to the area remained sporadic. For all purposes this borderland area retained its peripheral status in relation to the state.

The outbreak of hostilities between Eritrea and Ethiopia in 1998 and the armed confrontation between the fighters for the Eritrean Defence Force (EDF) and Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF) marked a significant rupture with previous periods. From one day to the next, Irob traditional territory became a theatre of armed conflict and was under effective occupation, and in some areas closer to the border, like Weratle, the EDF remained until the end of hostilities (2000).

Strategies and shifting identities of a borderland group in a post-conflict context (2000-2011)

The leaderships of the two countries negotiated while fighting. What had begun as a minor border dispute in a borderland area, Badme, escalated to a proportion beyond any expectations leading to an estimated 100,000 death toll (Steves, 2003; Triulzi, 2002). Analyses of the causes of the war have led to divergent interpretations, with some placing emphasis on the political dimension and on the falling out between the leaderships of the two countries (Negash and Tronvoll, 2000; Abbink, 1998) and others putting arguing that territory was the central bone of contention (Dias, 2008; Jacquin-Berdal and Plaut, 2005). Indeed, with Eritrea's independence Ethiopia became a landlocked country. The Eritrean port of Assab remained central to all imports and exports to and from Ethiopia.

According to local accounts, when the hostilities began, the Irob residents were taken by surprise and many took up arms in order to hinder the advance of the EDF into traditional Irob territory. For the first time, Irob traditional territory was the theatre of armed conflict. The trenches carved in the mountainous

⁹ The official dictionary was finally released in 2008 in the context of the EPRDF political project of promoting learning in local languages. In the current education system, first grade students learn in Saho. After grade 1 up to grade 8 they learn in Tigrinya, and among other subjects they learn Saho. In grade 9 up to university all the subjects are taught in English.

terrain remain the physical marker of the 36-month border war. At the time of the first Eritrean offensive the EDF had the upper hand. Indeed, continuous and compulsory military service in Eritrea meant that the EPLF/ People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) regime could count on at least 150,000 new conscripts, trained, equipped and ready for deployment, whereas Ethiopia needed to recruit and train new contingents of troops.¹⁰ The final Ethiopian offensive on 12 May 2000 allowed the EPRDF to win an indisputable victory on the battlefield.

During the hostilities, Irob woreda's residents and other groups in the borderland areas sought refuge, regardless of the border. As the intensity of the fighting escalated they started to fear reprisals from the EDF and sought alternative routes back to Ethiopia (Dias, 2008; Abebe, 2004).

As the EDF was forced to withdraw from several locations deep inside Eritrean territory on the celebration of the 7th anniversary of Eritrea's Independence (24th May 2000), the Eritrean government announced its troops had withdrawn from all disputed border areas that were occupied after the 6 May incident in Badme. The ceasefire agreement was signed on 18 June 2000. The Peace Agreement was finally signed in Algiers on 12 December 2000.

In the Algiers Peace Agreement the parties agreed on the creation of a United Nations Mission for Eritrea and Ethiopia (UNMEE) whose mandate was to monitor the implementation of the peace agreement and of the Temporary Security Zone (TSZ). The TSZ was a buffer zone along the 1,000 kilometre-border, with a margin of 25 kilometres which remained mostly within Eritrean territory. The parties also agreed to create two independent commissions. The first, the Eritrea - Ethiopia Border Commission (EEBC) had total independence and autonomy to decide on the delimitation of the border on the basis of the colonial treaties of 1900, 1902 and 1908. The Eritrea-Ethiopia Claims Commission had to decide on compensation claims from both sides.

Initially, the good-will line, which was unconditionally accepted by Eritrea, left Irob land inside the TSZ. Ethiopia's failure to provide a map of the borderline with precise coordinates led the UNMEE to include large swathes of territory that had been previously administered by Ethiopia within the Temporary Security Zone. After realising this inaccuracy, Ethiopia complained and urged the UNMEE to redraw the line, placing it further north. UNMEE was later able to provide an operational map that already included Irob land within Ethiopia's territorial jurisdiction. Local actors contested the EEBC decision to recognise Eritrea's jurisdiction over places in Indalgueda which are considered traditional Irob territory. In this respect, the role of a transnational non-state actor, the local representatives of the Catholic Church, played a critical role in mediating between UNMEE, the local state representatives and the local group (Dias, 2010).

¹⁰ Interview, Addis Ababa, July 2005.

This redrawing of the line according to Ethiopia's later coordinates caused Eritrea to protest and claim that Ethiopia had not withdrawn from "occupied territory". Eventually, this misunderstanding raised Eritrea's suspicions as to the UNMEE's impartiality in dealings with both states. Finally, the TSZ was formally declared in mid-April 2001.

The independent Boundary Commission to decide on the border's delimitation and demarcation (EEBC) was set up on the premise that the final decision on the disputed border areas would be final and binding. The EEBC finally announced its decision on 13 April 2002. After the initial euphoria and claims of outstanding victory by both parties, ambiguities contributed to an exacerbation of suspicion and animosity between them. The key problem was the ambiguity with which the award of Badme was approached. The EEBC only mentioned Badme twice and both parties manipulated this initial ambiguity to claim that the town had been awarded to them. Badme was the place where the incident that triggered the crisis took place. In the end, the contentious situation surrounding Badme took precedence over the extensive areas where agreement could have been reached, which offered promising areas for incremental measures towards a rapprochement between the parties. This initial resistance led both sides to submit their own observations and evidence to contest the EEBC's April 2002 Decision. After examining the cases submitted by the parties, on 21 March 2003 the EEBC announced the final, binding decision to recognise Eritrea's legitimate sovereignty over Badme on the basis of the Colonial Treaty and, especially, of the legal line that had crystallised in 1935, prior to Italy's invasion and forcible occupation of Ethiopia.

Due to the problems between UNMEE and Eritrea's government, the UNMEE civilian and military staff left Eritrea on January 2008 and United Nations Security Council Resolution 1827 of 30 July 2008 formally extinguished the mission. As a result, the Temporary Security Zone ceased to exist and at the time of writing the EDF and ENDF still keep soldiers deployed along the international border. In some places the soldiers are literally face-to-face.

For the Irob, EDF's occupation of the area was resented because of the destruction and looting of property and disrespect for places of religious practices, such as churches. A sense of security was recovered when the Eritrean troops were finally dislodged by the Ethiopian army. However, communities in the central sector still resent the persisting militarisation of the border. The frontier has been transformed into a garrison area and the continuous presence of soldiers in the region was a transformation brought about by the war with significant social implications for the borderland group in this sector.

Movements of goods and people are formally hindered by the closure of the border. As one local interviewee mentioned, "We don't go to Eritrea because the soldiers are there. They are dangerous. If we go there we are enemies". Another one added, "If I go to Eritrea, I am treated as the enemy. They can come here. If we go there we are treated as spies".¹¹ Movement of people across the border has not been totally curtailed. Many have taken the risky option of crossing the border under the cover of night. Since

¹¹ Interview, Irob woreda, November 2010.

2000 the number of Eritreans who have been granted refugee status in Ethiopia has been steadily increasing. Unofficially, the estimates point to a total of 20,000 Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia.

The daily business of Irob citizens living at the borderland has become more difficult as they have to face five to eight hours on foot to go to the market in Adigrat, whereas before the war it would take them between 30 minutes and one hour to get to the Eritrean market of Senafe.

In addition, those who embark on the long journey of irregular migration to Saudi Arabia, Israel or Europe have been forced to attempt much more difficult itineraries and fall prey to criminal networks organised around irregular migrants. Whereas before the closure of the border they would take boats from small Eritrean ports near Adulis, presently they either take the dangerous itinerary across Somaliland and Puntland (Somalia) to reach the port of Bosasso, or they go via Sudan and attempt to reach Europe or take the dangerous journey through the Sinai Desert to reach Israel.

The development of the region remains a hostage of the “no peace, no war” situation. Although the border war contributed to the extension of the state’s institutions and agents to the borderland, continuous militarisation of the border and its closure has led to continuous isolation of several locations within the Irob woreda near the border.

At the beginning of the war and in its immediate aftermath many would claim that they and the Eritreans were the same people, even repeating their astonishment with statements such as: “How can we fight our brothers? We are the same people”.¹² The notion of Eritreans as foreign citizens is now more ingrained and mentioned frequently. The whereabouts of almost 100 Irob citizens remain unknown as they were forcefully taken to Eritrea when the EDF withdrew from Irob traditional territory.¹³

Conclusion

The process of state formation and of extending the state’s institutions to a peripheral area was accelerated and consolidated by the armed conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia (1998-2000). However, the absence of normalisation of relations between the ruling parties in Asmara (Eritrea) and Addis Ababa (Ethiopia) compromises the region’s development and the borderland group’s daily activities.

The borderland group is a hostage of the contested status of the international border and of the failure to normalise relations between the two governments. From a porous border, the post-conflict situation changed it into an invisible wall.

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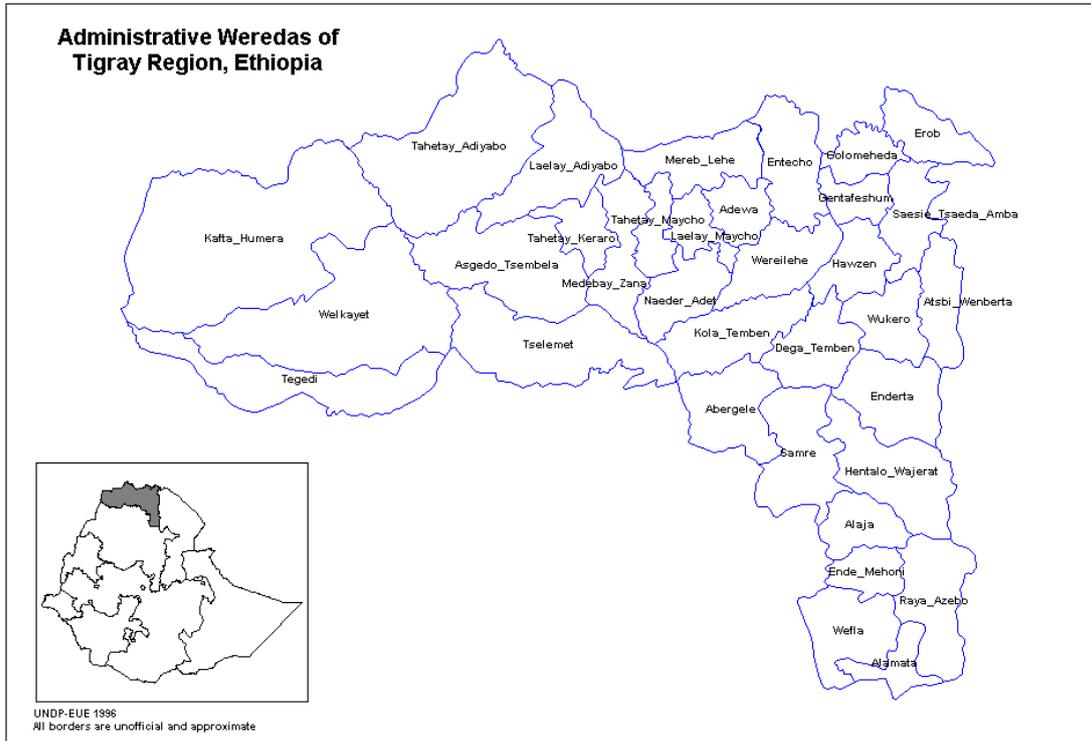
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¹³ Interview, Irob woreda November 2010.

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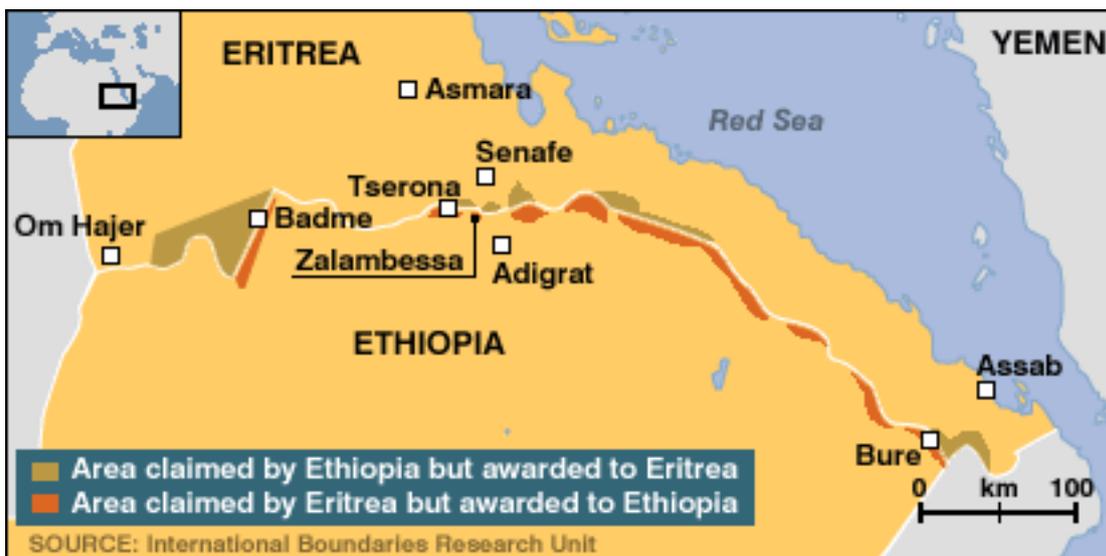
ANNEX: Illustrations

Map 1: Tigray Region (capital: Mekele), Eastern Zone (capital: Adigrat) and Local District (Irob woreda, capital : Dawhan).



Source: http://www.africa.upenn.edu/eue_web/r1_d.gif

Map 2: Areas of contested sovereignty according to the EEBC decision.



Source: <http://news.bbc.co.uk>