

# The Ghosts of the Ethiopian Empire Continue to Haunt the Horn

Part 2 (of a 2-Part Series)

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## **Abstract**

The article looks at the roots of the Ethiopian state's aggressive impulse against its neighbors. Ethiopia's current regional tensions stem, at least in part, from a historical legacy of imperial ambitions. The Ethiopian empire, though officially dismantled 50 years ago, still lingers in the collective consciousness of the Ethiopian state and the elites that sustain it. The current prime minister's declaration and campaign to secure maritime access "through negotiations or by force" has reignited fears among neighboring coastal nations, echoing past Ethiopian leaders' expansionist aims.

Ethiopia's historical disregard for neighboring states' sovereignty, driven by a quest for regional dominance, established a complex legacy that still shapes relations within the Horn of Africa. To foster lasting peace, Ethiopia must confront its imperialist legacy, adopting a cooperative foreign policy that respects the sovereignty of its neighbors to ease the current tension and move towards lasting peace.

## **I. Introduction**

When we try to pinpoint the drivers behind Ethiopia's persistent threats to violate the territorial integrity of the region's coastal nations, we don't often go far enough into the imperial foundations of the current Ethiopian state and its implications for regional peace. The Ethiopian empire, though officially dismantled 50 years ago, still lingers in the collective consciousness of the Ethiopian state and the elites that sustain it. To fully understand its continuous direct and indirect threats to the territorial integrity of neighboring countries, we must delve into the imperial roots of the modern Ethiopian state and their impact on regional peace.

In examining the Ethiopian prime minister's ongoing campaign to secure sovereign maritime access, we find a bewildering pattern of direct and indirect threats aimed at most Horn of Africa nations. While some view this as a cynical distraction from Ethiopia's economic and political crises, others see it as a prosperity-gospel-fueled delusion or a desperate play to rally ultra-nationalists amid the state's instability. These perspectives partially illuminate the prime minister's shift from a stance of regional peacebuilding to one resembling a declaration of war within a strikingly brief period.

However, these interpretations fail to address the imperial legacy at the heart of this crisis—a legacy evident in the historical patterns exhibited by nearly all leaders residing in the Menelik Palace. His actions toward Somalia, in particular, highlight his ambition as a destabilizing force, intensifying fears in Djibouti and raising alarm across the Horn of Africa. Many observers anticipate a looming conflict that could escalate into a regional war, with external powers like Egypt poised to station forces near the Ethiopian border, amplifying the stakes of this unfolding crisis.

Indeed, the likelihood of war is growing due to the current prime minister's actions. In an op-ed titled "The Coming War Nobody is Talking About" in *The New York Times*, Elmi and Hassan from the University of Mogadishu cautioned, "Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed of Ethiopia's expansionist ambitions and reckless policies have brought the Horn of Africa to the brink of a war that could destabilize the region and have global repercussions. It must be stopped before it's too late." They further argue that his "obsession with turning Ethiopia into a coastal state is the main catalyst for the conflict." Last year, in what many perceived as a declaration of war against coastal

neighbors, he asserted, "Ethiopia cannot remain landlocked and must gain access to the sea, either through negotiation *or by force*."<sup>1</sup>

Such a conflict could destabilize the entire Horn of Africa, disrupting trade routes, displacing millions, and worsening an already dire humanitarian crisis. The conflict could also fuel ethnic and political tensions, pulling neighboring countries into a broader regional confrontation. "The Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden are too important to become another war zone, and East Africa is too fragile for reckless adventures," warned Elmi and Hassan, urging the international community to intervene before it's too late.<sup>2</sup> Ethiopia, in turn, stated it would not "stand idle while other actors take measures to destabilize the region." Somalia's defense minister responded, urging Ethiopia to stop "wailing" and warned that everyone "will reap what they sow," referring to the months-long downward spiral in their diplomatic relations.<sup>3</sup>

Yet, these reckless moves by the prime minister alone don't fully explain Ethiopia's longstanding tendency to challenge the territorial integrity of its neighbors. To grasp the roots of this aggression, we must look to Ethiopia's imperial past, defined by a relentless drive for territorial expansion. The prime minister's campaign to secure coastal access mirrors a historical pattern stretching back over a century, starting with Emperor Haile Selassie. According to his American advisor, John Spencer, Haile Selassie repeatedly sought sea access at Massawa, Assab, Djibouti, Zella, and Berbera—efforts that were all rebuffed.<sup>4</sup> This pursuit of coastal access has long been a recurring theme in Ethiopian history.

In the foreword of a book on the last Ethiopian emperor, Thomas Pakenham writes that when Haile Selassie "finally fell from power [in 1974], he seemed already *like a ghost from the past*."<sup>5</sup> Yet, nearly fifty years later, the legacy of the empire he expanded continues to resonate, marked by an enduring ambition for territorial control. While the empire no longer exists as a formal political entity, its influence remains visible in Ethiopia's actions within the region. As Puri notes, empires don't dissolve overnight; they gradually unravel, leaving "threads of a bond with the past" woven into both physical and psychological legacies. Though we now live without formal empires, their legacies still shape state behavior. Empires disintegrate "gradually, fraying like a rope under stress, before the strands separate," Puri says.<sup>6</sup> He then added: though now "for the first time in a millennium, we live without formal empires" [it] "does not mean we don't feel [their] presence rumbling through history."<sup>7</sup>

Historian Bahru Zewde describes Emperor Menelik as the "architect of the largest empire ever built in the Ethiopian region." Menelik's successors repeatedly attempted to gain coastal access, reaching out to the British for Zella, the Italians for Assab, and the French for a part of what is now

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<sup>1</sup> Afyare A. Elmi and Yusuf Hassan, "The Coming War Nobody is Talking About," *The New York Times*, August 26, 2024, retrieved August 26, 2024, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/08/26/opinion/ethiopia-somalia-conflict.html>,

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ian Wafula, "Why Ethiopia is so alarmed by an Egypt-Somalia alliance, BBC, August 30, 2024, Retrieved August 30, 2024, from <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cvg415vex37o>

<sup>4</sup> John Spencer, *Ethiopia at Bay: A Personal Account of the Haile Selassie Years*, Hollywood, CA, Tsehai Publishers, 2006, p.158; also, see Edward Ullendorff, *the Autobiography of Emperor Haile Selassie: My Life and Ethiopia's Progress 1892-193*, New York (1976).

<sup>5</sup> Asfa-Wossen Asserate, *King of Kings: The Triumph and Tragedy of Emperor Haile Selassie I of Ethiopia*, (translated by Peter Lewis), 2015, HAUS Publishers, London, p. x. [Emphasis added].

<sup>6</sup> Samir Puri, *The Shadow of Empire; How Imperial History Shapes Our World*. New York: Pegasus Books, 2021, p. 16. (Emphasis added)

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

Djibouti.<sup>8</sup> Even one of Prime Minister Abiy's immediate predecessors, Meles Zenawi, who came to power with a critical support from Eritrea, made several attempts to acquire Assab. During the late-1990s border war with Eritrea, Ethiopia's primary, though unstated, objective was to capture the port of Assab. Eritreans believed all along Zenawi's true aim was to secure this strategic port.<sup>9</sup>

As Rene Lefort observes, Ethiopia's current crisis "is not purely of the here and now" but rooted in conflicting narratives around its imperial history. He writes, "The Ethiopian empire was built in the second half of the 19th century. Its homeland was the northern highlands, its 'colonies' all around. Problems arising from this legacy have never been completely resolved, and it is still unclear what kind of state should be constructed on the remains of this empire that can achieve legitimacy among its citizens."<sup>10</sup>

This paper will examine Ethiopia's imperial past to assess how its expansionist legacy continues to drive tensions with neighboring countries.

## II. The Empire's Deep Historical Roots

Bahru Zewde argues Emperor Menelik's expansionist actions ultimately left Ethiopia landlocked as European powers dominated surrounding coastlines.<sup>11</sup> This was at a time when European empires of the day—namely the Italians, British and French—were carving up the coastlines stretching from the Red Sea, the Gulf of Eden to the Indian Ocean among themselves. Meanwhile, the Abyssinian Empire itself took part in the scramble for the Horn, expanding south, east, and west. According to Erlich, "While rebuffing imperialism successfully in its north, Ethiopia managed to practice it to the south," engaging in a southward territorial expansion that doubled Ethiopia's size by annexing regions with diverse ethnic and religious communities.<sup>12</sup>

Trevaskis, a British commissioner in Eritrea post-WWII, recalls that Menelik added the Danakil, Somalis of Ogaden, Arab-Somalis of Harar, and the Oromo to his empire while Europeans claimed Somali territories.<sup>13</sup> This consolidation mirrored global state formations in Africa, which Gebre-Medhin argues influenced Ethiopia's empire-building. As European colonialism introduced infrastructures and weakened traditional rulers in colonies like Eritrea, Menelik's rule bolstered Abyssinian feudalism in the south and undermined non-Shoan elites in the north, differentiating Ethiopian imperialism from European colonial practices.<sup>14</sup>

Menelik's southern focus during this era of border definitions impacted Ethiopia's pursuit of maritime access. The OAU, later the AU, upheld colonial boundaries from the Berlin Conference, enabling Ethiopia to retain territories acquired during the scramble. Gnamo argues that post-colonial

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<sup>8</sup> Bahru Zewde, *A History of Modern Ethiopia, 1855-1991*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, Ohio University Press: Athens, 1991, p. 84.

<sup>9</sup> Dominique Jacquin-Berdal & Martin Plaut, *Unfinished Business: Ethiopia and Eritrea at War*, Lawrenceville, NJ: The Red Sea Press, 2005, p. 154.

<sup>10</sup> Rene Lefort, "Mind over matter: Abiy Ahmed's aim to "Pentecostalize Ethiopian politics," *Insight magazine*, December, 24, 2020 [Emphasis added], retrieved, July 30, 2024, at <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2020/12/24/mind-over-matter-abiy-ahmeds-aim-to-pentecostalize-ethiopian-politics/>

<sup>11</sup> See Note No. 8, Zewde, above.

<sup>12</sup> Haggai Erlich, *Ethiopia and the Challenge of Independence*, Boulder, CO., Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1986.

<sup>13</sup> Sir Kennedy Trevaskis, *The Deluge: A Personal View of the End of Empire in the Middle East*, New York: I. B. Tauris, 2019, p. 90.

<sup>14</sup> Jordan Gebre-Medhin, *Peasants and Nationalism in Eritrea: A Critique of Ethiopian Studies*, Trenton, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1989, p. 23.

adherence to these boundaries safeguarded Ethiopia's territorial integrity.<sup>15</sup> Menelik's expansion southward aimed to consolidate power and access fertile, resource-rich lands, which set the stage for lasting geopolitical complexities.<sup>16</sup>

Harold Marcus suggests Menelik's ambitions may have stemmed from his grandfather who stressed control over resources and trade routes by expanding southward.<sup>17</sup> These newly incorporated regions differed from Ethiopia's traditional highlands, sparking resistance as Ethiopia imposed its systems and laws, akin to European colonies. Menelik's campaign success was bolstered by modern weaponry, which Hendrick notes gave Ethiopia a well-equipped army, leading to the Italian defeat at Adwa in 1896.<sup>18</sup> The defeat resulted "as much from the [Italians'] own Treaty of Wichalle, by which they had agreed to supply Menelik with arms, as from any tactical blunders on the battlefield."<sup>19</sup> There is no question that "superior military power accounted for the swift success of Menelik's campaigns."<sup>20</sup> Expanding the point, Markakis notes, "It was estimated that Ethiopia possessed about 200,000 carbines when the Adwa war erupted." Following Italy's defeat, Menelik's "campaign of expansion [southward] resumed immediately afterwards at a furious pace, and the subjugation of the entire plateau was completed with the occupation of the Oromo state of Jimma in 1897."<sup>21</sup>

While Menelik's campaigns in the south were effective, they were marked by violence, cultural erosion, and economic strain. Indigenous belief systems and governance structures suffered, and imposition of Christianity and feudal structures led to ongoing ethnic tensions and calls for greater cultural autonomy. As Waugh notes, Abyssinian methods of conquest resembled European colonial tactics, with territorial gains achieved through force and coercive treaties. The British writer who characterizes the Abyssinians as "notorious administrators of subject peoples in Africa," describes the expansionist undertaking this way:

The process (the creation of the Ethiopian empire) was closely copied from the European model: sometimes the invaded areas were overawed by the show of superior force and accepted treaties of protection; sometimes they resisted and were slaughtered with the use of modern weapons which were being imported both openly and illicitly in enormous numbers; sometimes they were simply recorded as Ethiopian without their own knowledge.<sup>22</sup>

However, the hegemonic historical narrative frames Menelik's conquests as modern state-building. Supporters argue that Ethiopia's survival against European encroachment necessitated exploiting the south's resources to revive its economy and bolster defenses. McClellan notes that

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<sup>15</sup> Abbas H. Gnamo, *Conquest and Resistance in the Ethiopian Empire, 1880-1974: The Case of Arsi Oromo*, Leiden: KONINKLIJKE BRILL, 2004, p. 100.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Harold Marcus, (1971). *The Black men who turned White*. Archiv Oriental, 39, 1971, 155-166.

<sup>18</sup> Daniel R. Hendrick, *The Tools of Empire: Technology and European Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1981, p. 120, quoting R.A. Caulk, "Firearms and Princely Power in Ethiopia in the Nineteenth Century," *Journal of African History*, 13 (1972): 610-26).

<sup>19</sup> Daniel R. Hendrick, *The Tools of Empire: Technology and European Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1981, p. 120, quoting R.A. Caulk, "Firearms and Princely Power in Ethiopia in the Nineteenth Century," *Journal of African History*, 13 (1972): 610-26).

<sup>20</sup> John Markakis, *Ethiopia: The Last Two Frontiers*. James Currey: Boydell & Brewer Inc, Rochester, NY, 2011.-p. 89: p. 91

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, p. 92.

<sup>22</sup> Evelyn Waugh, *Waugh in Abyssinia*, New York: Longman: Green and Co., 1936, p. 22.

Ethiopia's expansion helped create a buffer against colonial powers.<sup>23</sup> Some historians such as Toynbee, argue Menelik expanded defensively to safeguard Ethiopia from European colonialism, effectively participating in the scramble to protect the nation.<sup>24</sup>

Another aspect of the dominant framework is the "Narrative of Restoration," a device of influence Ethiopia's ruling elites frequently deployed to justify expansion, presenting annexed lands as historically Ethiopian. One example of this is Ethiopia's post-colonial unfounded claim over Eritrea, casting it as a "lost child" reuniting with its "mother," though Eritrea had developed into a distinct nation under colonial rule. Ethiopian leaders often invoke this rhetoric to reclaim territories, portraying expansion as a return to a unified Ethiopian identity despite the complex and diverse nature of the region's history.

However, others, such as Jalata, view Menelik's southward expansion as imperialist conquest akin to European colonial brutality. They argue Menelik relied on European arms and strategies to dominate the Horn of Africa, eroding southern cultures and establishing a feudal hierarchy where conquered peoples were often reduced to "gabbar" (serfs). This legacy of conquest continues to fuel ethnic tensions in Ethiopia.<sup>25</sup>

### III. Inescapable Gravity of Imperial Legacy

Let's examine whether the successors of Ethiopia's last emperor escaped the gravitational pull of the empire's deeply rooted imperial past. The first test came in 1974, the year Emperor Haile Selassie was deposed. In a period of radical change, Ethiopia abolished its monarchy and moved toward a socialist regime under a military junta. However, despite these sweeping shifts, many of Haile Selassie's domestic and foreign policies continued to influence governance in Ethiopia. For instance, when the new regime faced its first challenge regarding Ethiopia's colonial possessions, it adhered to the expansionist ethos of its predecessor rather than breaking away from it.

In 1974, revolutions in two different countries brought down their respective dictatorships—signaling the end of two empires, one in Europe and the other in Africa.<sup>26</sup> In Europe, a military coup ended Portugal's authoritarian regime, ushering in the Carnation Revolution and paving the way for the independence of colonies such as Angola and Mozambique. At the same time, in Ethiopia, Haile Selassie was overthrown, but the military junta that replaced him chose, not to decolonize but to escalate the colonial conflict in Eritrea, guided by the last monarch's imperial playbook. Erlich notes:

New contestants may have joined the struggle for power in Addis Ababa, but the implications for Eritrea remained the same. The new ruling body that replaced the old political establishment in Ethiopia soon became the arena for a violent contest of elimination fired by the desire for power. Once again, the Eritrean issue played a pivotal role. Once again, hardliners advocating a military solution defeated those who favored a political solution for the problem of Eritrea.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Charles W. McClellan (Abstract) "Reaction to Ethiopian Expansionism: The Case of Darasa, 1895-1935" (doctoral dissertation, Michigan State University, Dissertation, 1978, quoted in Gnamo, pps. 114-115.

<sup>24</sup>Toynbee, A. J. *Between Niger and Nile*. London: Oxford University Press, 1965, p.44.

<sup>25</sup>Asafa Jalata, *Oromia & Ethiopia: State Formation and Ethnonational Conflict, 1868-1992*, Lynne Rienner Publishers: Boulder, CO, 1993, p.50.

<sup>26</sup>Technically, Macao, now a special administrative region of China, was a Portuguese territory until 1999.

<sup>27</sup>Haggai Erlich, *The Struggle Over Eritrea, 1962-1978*, Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1983, p. 14.

Portugal's decolonization marked the final phase of European empires in Africa. In contrast, Ethiopia, which had expanded over a century, never pursued decolonization. Ethiopian leaders retained control over territories through coercive means and never acknowledged the imperial nature of their governance, particularly concerning Eritrea. Emperor Haile Selassie annexed Eritrea following World War II under a bogus federation engineered by the United States, sparking fierce Eritrean resistance. This conflict strained Ethiopian resources, further alienated Eritreans, and fueled nationalist movements among the marginalized groups within Ethiopia.

As the early post-1945 decolonization era shows, relinquishing imperial territories was a painful process for the empire builders. Trevaskis, a British colonial administrator, described how the decline of British rule in India had a profound impact on his status in Eritrea. Reflecting the imperial mindset, Trevaskis noted how figures like Ibrahim Sultan, a pro-independence leader, increasingly treated him with "offhand disrespect," signaling the erosion of colonial authority. His experience underscores the deep resistance empire-builders often have toward decolonization and its implications.<sup>28</sup>

Despite Ethiopia's shift from monarchy to socialism, and later to ethnic federalism, Haile Selassie's principal strategies—territorial ambitions and regional dominance—remained central to Ethiopia's leaders. Mengistu Hailemariam, who led Ethiopia's Marxist-Leninist regime after Haile Selassie, maintained Ethiopia's stance on Eritrea. His regime was fiercely expansionist, escalating military efforts in Eritrea and recruiting the USSR and Cuba for support. He led one of the most brutal expansionist regimes Africa had ever seen; he increased the size of its 35,000-man army in 1974 when it took power to nearly 500,000 at the height of the war in the 1980's and its willingness to purchase \$12 billion worth of armaments at a time when the rest of the world was scrounging funds to feed Ethiopian and Eritrean famine and drought victims. He also invited foreign forces, the USSR and its allies such as Cuba, to militarily intervene in its wars in Eritrea and with Somalia over the Ogaden. It took nearly two more decades of death and destruction before he was forced out of Eritrea—following a decisive military defeat—and flee to Zimbabwe where he has been living for nearly four decades now.

Under Meles Zenawi (1991–2012), Ethiopia introduced ethnic federalism. Yet, many of Haile Selassie's imperial policies persisted. Meles maintained centralized control over regional administrations and continued Ethiopia's interventions in Somalia, mirroring Haile Selassie's focus on regional dominance. The current leader, Abiy Ahmed, initially promoted reconciliation and liberalization but has also upheld Ethiopia's military stance in the region, especially in the ongoing intrastate conflicts in the war-ravaged country.

Furthermore, during the post-9/11 period, Meles Zenawi's regime, taking a page from Haile Selassie's playbook, positioned Ethiopia as a "bulwark against Islamic extremism," securing international support, particularly from the United States. This strategic alignment with global counter-terrorism allowed Ethiopia to receive backing despite complex internal and regional dynamics. Ethiopia's intervention in Somalia in 2006, with U.S. support, highlighted this approach, framing the country as a key player against extremist ideologies.

In sum, though Ethiopia experienced political shifts away from monarchy, the essence of imperial policy remained. Leaders like Mengistu, Meles, and Abiy continued and still continue to push for Ethiopia's regional dominance and centralized governance, reflecting the lasting influence of Haile Selassie's strategies on Ethiopia's path forward.

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<sup>28</sup> Trevaskis, *The Deluge*, p. 136.

#### IV. The Myth of Ethiopian Exceptionalism

The past is not merely a historical record; it is a battleground for narratives and identities. This is particularly evident in Ethiopian history where myths have played a crucial role in shaping national identity, notably the myth of Ethiopian exceptionalism. This myth asserts claims of 3,000 years of continuous statehood, biblical connections, and the narrative of Ethiopia as an "Island of Christianity." These narratives have not only influenced Ethiopia's self-perception but also shaped its geopolitical approaches, particularly in its relations with neighboring nations.

Ethiopia exemplifies how mythmaking can sustain imperial influence. The creation and propagation of glorifying narratives serve to legitimize authority, foster collective identity, and justify expansion. In Ethiopia, as in other empires, such myths have shaped collective memory, legitimized ruling elites, and helped maintain control over diverse groups. Farer notes, "History shapes the present in part through the collective memory of its heirs."<sup>29</sup> Ethiopian rulers and elites have adeptly leveraged mythologies to solidify control, intertwining religious and imperial narratives to sustain their influence and assert dominance over neighboring regions.

One of Ethiopian historiography's most enduring myths is the claim of an unbroken 3,000-year-old statehood, tracing back to the biblical Queen of Sheba and King Solomon. According to a 14th century Ethiopian chronicle called the *Kebra Negast*, meaning "The Glory of the Kings" in Ge'ez, and tells the story of how the Ethiopian Solomonic dynasty is descended from King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. Sorenson argues that these "mythological assertions of continuity" empowered modern Ethiopian rulers by emphasizing their sacred, ancient authority. These "mythological assertions of continuity served to project the power of the modern Ethiopian state into the distant past."<sup>30</sup> Today, the Solomonic "legend and the associated myth of a *continuously existing Ethiopian state* acted as ideological signifiers on two hegemonic levels," Sorenson continues. "On the level of local power, they endorsed the legitimacy of the Amhara elite by emphasizing the antiquity and sacred authority of their rule. On the global level, they were used to endorse or condemn political alliances."<sup>31</sup>

Bruce Strang also notes "Ethiopian leaders pointed to a more-or-less unbroken independent political history that dates back to Biblical times." He then added: "Haile Selassie claims in his memoir that "Ethiopia is a realm which has lived steadfast in her independence for more than three millennia."<sup>32</sup>

And these myths are no historical relics of bygone days. Successive leaders have been deploying them to bolster domestic legitimacy and counter external threats. For example, during the Ethio-Somali conflict in the 1960s, Ethiopian officials invoked the myth to dismiss Somali territorial claims, emphasizing Ethiopia's "3,000 years" of continuous history and independence. In a statement at the Organization of African Unity (OAU) summit in 1963, a high Ethiopian official dismissed Mogadishu's claim out of hand this way:

Ethiopia has always existed in history for centuries as an independent state and nation, for more than 3000 years. This is a fact. Second fact: the historical frontiers

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<sup>29</sup> Tom Farer, *War Clouds on the Horn of Africa: A Crisis for Détente*. New York: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1976, p. 8.

<sup>30</sup> John Sorenson, *Imagining Ethiopia: Struggles for History and Identity in the Horn of Africa*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1993, pps. 23-24. [Emphasis added]

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> G. Bruce Strang (editor), *Collision of Empires: Italy's Invasion of Ethiopia and its International Impact*, Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company: 2013, p. 35.

of Ethiopia stretched *from the Red Sea to the Indian Ocean, including all the territory between them*. Third fact: there is no record in history either of a Somali or a Somali nation. That too is a fact.<sup>33</sup>

Here is also a reiteration of Haile Selassie's perception of his country's place in the region and the world as well as in history—going even beyond the 3000-year marker. Below are a few but telling excerpts from his interview with the famous Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci focusing on the question of royal succession:

Ethiopia.... exists even since man first appeared on earth. My dynasty has ruled ever since the Queen of Sheba met King Solomon and a son was born of their union. It is a dynasty that has gone on through the centuries and will go on for centuries more. A king is not and, besides, my succession is already ensured.<sup>34</sup>

The myth of continuous statehood has also affected Ethiopia's relationship with Eritrea. After Eritrea's independence in 1993, tensions persisted, culminating in the 1998–2000 border war. Ethiopian narratives, influenced by the myth of an ancient, unbroken empire, often portrayed Eritrean independence as an anomaly, complicating reconciliation by suggesting Eritrea's independence was illegitimate.

The Solomonic myth also links Ethiopia directly to biblical history, suggesting that Ethiopian emperors are the rightful heirs of a sacred lineage. However, historical evidence challenges this unbroken continuity, revealing fragmentation, rivalries, and periods of non-Solomonic rule. Yet, the myth tried to reinforce a sense of historical legitimacy and Ethiopian exceptionalism within Africa.

Another enduring narrative is Ethiopia's role as an "Island of Christianity" within Africa. This myth portrays Ethiopia as a unique Christian nation, set apart from its predominantly Muslim neighbors. This narrative has sometimes generated friction, particularly with neighboring states of different religious identities. Although Ethiopia developed a unique Christian tradition, the myth downplays religious diversity, including the significant Muslim population within Ethiopia itself. Ethiopian rulers promoted the "Island of Christianity" idea to portray the nation as a holy Christian bastion.

Imperial myths were reinforced through public ceremonies, such as the grand coronation of emperors in Aksum, which symbolized divine authority. Haile Selassie's successors continued to manipulate religious identity for geopolitical advantage, depicting Ethiopia as a Christian stronghold against a "Muslim sea" to garner Western support, especially during the Cold War. During the protracted struggle against Eritrean independence, Ethiopian leaders leveraged Islamophobia, casting Eritrea's bid for independence as a Muslim threat, seeking Western backing by framing the conflict as a fight against Islamic extremism. This strategic use of Islamophobia was also intended to delegitimize Eritrean nationalism, casting it as sectarian rather than a broad, multi-faith movement for self-determination.

These narratives have left a lasting impact on Ethiopia-Eritrea relations, fueling mistrust long after Eritrea's Independence. Such manipulation of religious fears continues to influence relations, illustrating how myths rooted in imperial agendas can shape regional dynamics well into the modern era. During the Post-9/11 period, Meles Zenawi and his Western partners tried extremely hard to link Eritrea to an extremist Islamic group in Somalia.

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<sup>33</sup> Gnamo, *Conquest*, p. 114.

<sup>34</sup> Haggai Erlich, *Haile Selassie: His Rise, His Fall*. Lynne Rienner Publishers: Boulder, CO, 2019, 161.



Under Emperor Haile Selassie, the Ethiopian Empire sought to assert dominance over neighboring nations. This imperial legacy still influences Ethiopia's regional relationships, particularly with nations like Eritrea, Somalia, and Sudan. Contentious relationships with these countries can often be traced back to Ethiopia's historical attempts to present itself as a regional power, frequently at the expense of neighboring nations' sovereignty and territorial integrity. For example, the protracted conflict with Eritrea, which led to its independence in 1993, stemmed from Ethiopia's refusal to recognize Eritrea's distinct identity and right to self-determination. Likewise, Ethiopia's involvement in Somalia's affairs—driven by security concerns and historical animosities—has contributed to tensions in the Horn of Africa. These examples underscore how Ethiopia's imperial legacy and its sense of historical superiority have often complicated its ability to engage in equitable, peaceful relations with its neighbors.

Ethiopia's complex ethnic and cultural landscape, with a history of centralized rule that marginalized certain regions and ethnic groups, further complicates its regional relationships. Although the imperial era has formally ended, the centralization of power in Addis Ababa, along with the dominance of specific ethnic groups, continues to perpetuate inequalities and internal tensions. This centralized, often authoritarian governance model also clashes with principles of equality and mutual respect in diplomacy. The lingering notion of an Ethiopian Empire remains embedded in the state's consciousness and among nationalist elites. Consequently, Ethiopia's foreign policy has often prioritized dominance, sometimes through military intervention or coercive diplomacy, which has strained relations with its neighbors and contributed to regional instability.

Ethiopia's self-perception as an "Island of Christianity" has also influenced its complex relationship with neighbors. This narrative has fostered a sense of cultural and historical distinction, complicating Ethiopia's interactions with predominantly Muslim neighbors such as Somalia and Sudan. By emphasizing its Christian heritage, Ethiopia has occasionally downplayed the Islamic and diverse religious elements within its own society, sometimes fostering a sense of separation from Muslim-majority countries in the region. This perspective has resurfaced in modern conflicts often framed as security actions but perceived by some as assertions of regional dominance. This myth has, at times, led to diplomatic strain and contributed to an atmosphere of distrust.

Ethiopia's longstanding self-image as an ancient, exceptional state has sometimes hindered its participation in regional integration efforts. This inward-facing posture can challenge regional cooperation initiatives, as seen in Ethiopia's approach to organizations aiming to promote collaboration in the Horn of Africa. Ethiopia's historical self-conception can make it challenging to find common ground with neighbors, who may perceive this as undermining their own experiences and achievements.

All in all, the myth of Ethiopian exceptionalism has shaped both national identity and regional politics, with narratives of religious and historical uniqueness casting Ethiopia as distinct from its neighbors. This perspective has, at times, created barriers to understanding and cooperation, contributing to misunderstandings and diplomatic tensions. A more nuanced appreciation of Ethiopia's history—one that acknowledges the interplay of identities and regional dynamics—could pave the way for Ethiopia to build more collaborative and peaceful relationships in the region.

## **V. Conclusions**

Ethiopia's current territorial ambitions cannot be fully understood without examining the enduring influence of its imperial past—ambitions that can be traced to a legacy of imperial designs and expansionist policies that have left deep-rooted challenges for both Ethiopia and its neighbors. Understanding and addressing the impact of its imperial history is essential for lasting

stability and peace in the Horn of Africa. Ethiopia must confront the imperial mindset that have historically defined its interactions with neighboring states, if it hopes to evolve into a nation that promotes cooperation and mutual respect.

As demonstrated, the Ethiopian state's efforts to secure access to the sea through both diplomatic overtures and military threats echo a long-standing ambition for regional dominance, rooted in the expansionist policies of its past leaders. While Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's actions appear to reflect immediate political motivations—such as addressing internal instability or garnering nationalist support—their resonance with historical patterns reveals a deeper continuity in Ethiopia's geopolitical behavior.

The myth of Ethiopian exceptionalism has also significantly shaped Ethiopia's national identity, diplomatic posture, and relationships within the Horn of Africa. Anchored in narratives of uninterrupted statehood and divine royal lineage, this myth has fostered a self-image of Ethiopia as a distinct, superior entity within a turbulent region. These narratives have complicated its interactions with neighboring countries by fostering a sense of entitlement to regional dominance.

Ethiopian leaders, from Haile Selassie to modern-day officials, have skillfully leveraged these myths to assert their authority and justify interventionist policies. By invoking Ethiopia's "3,000-year" legacy, leaders have legitimized centralized control, marginalized local identities, and pursued territorial claims over former European colonies in the region. This perception of an ancient, continuous empire has also led Ethiopia to dismiss the sovereignty of its neighbors, treating them as peripheral actors in a region it has historically dominated. Ethiopia's resistance to Eritrean independence, ongoing interventions in Somali politics, and attempts to maintain influence over Sudan as well as Djibouti are manifestations of this imperial legacy, often leading to strained, hostile relations across the Horn of Africa.

The myth of an "Island of Christianity" has further shaped Ethiopia's regional identity, distinguishing it from its predominantly Muslim neighbors and underscoring a narrative of religious exceptionalism. While Ethiopia's Christian heritage is undeniably significant, the myth has often downplayed Ethiopia's religious diversity, overlooking its substantial Muslim population and nonbelievers. In external relations, Ethiopian leaders have historically utilized this "Christian bastion" identity to garner Western support, particularly during the Cold War, framing regional conflicts as struggles between Christian Ethiopia and surrounding Muslim states. This narrative has fostered suspicion and alienation among its neighbors, particularly with predominantly Muslim countries like Somalia and Sudan, and has sometimes led to perceptions of Ethiopian policies as Islamophobic or dismissive of non-Christian identities.

For Ethiopia to play a constructive role in fostering regional stability, it must critically reassess these myths of exceptionalism. By adopting a more inclusive and realistic understanding of its history—acknowledging both its imperial legacy and the importance of equitable relations—Ethiopia could foster a foreign policy that values cooperation over dominance. Only through this recalibration can Ethiopia hope to build trust with its neighbors, paving the way for lasting peace and regional integration in the Horn of Africa.

The persistent quest for coastal access, exemplified in Ethiopia's approach to Somalia, Djibouti, and Eritrea, highlights the way imperial legacies persist in modern state policy. The ambitions of the Menelik and Haile Selassie eras, marked by relentless attempts to extend Ethiopian influence over strategic port cities, underscore how former imperial goals continue to shape Ethiopia's regional posture. These historical threads, far from mere relics, remain woven into the fabric of Ethiopia's modern identity and foreign policy, influencing its complex relationships with neighboring nations.

As tensions escalate across the Horn of Africa, the implications of this legacy are profound. A regional conflict driven by Ethiopia's longstanding maritime ambitions could disrupt critical trade routes, deepen humanitarian crises, and draw neighboring states into a prolonged and destabilizing confrontation. To avert such an outcome, the international community must recognize the imperial dynamics that underpin Ethiopia's current policy and address these deep-seated tensions before they erupt into broader regional instability.

Moving forward, Ethiopia's foreign policy must be rooted in cooperation, dialogue, and respect for the sovereignty of neighboring states, marking a shift away from the imperialist approach that has often defined its regional relationships. Historically, Ethiopia's foreign policy focused on extending control and influence, contributing to tensions that have affected the stability of the Horn of Africa. By fostering peaceful engagement, Ethiopia can position itself as a stabilizing force and a constructive partner in regional security and development.

Finally, Ethiopia now stands at a crossroads, with an opportunity to redefine its role in the Horn of Africa and move past its imperial legacy. Whether it can transform into a force for peace and cooperation remains to be seen, but without this shift, it risks perpetuating the same conflicts that have hindered its progress. Embracing a new approach that values sovereignty, stability, and shared prosperity will enable Ethiopia to play a leading role in building a peaceful and prosperous future for the region.

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