

Hybrid Wars In The Horn Of Africa: Ethiopia-Eritrea, “Greater Somalia”

Hybrid Wars 8

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Region: [sub-Saharan Africa](#)

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The final part of the Hybrid War research on the Horn of Africa region delves into the four most possible scenarios in which the region’s entire stability can be disrupted. The two preceding sections examined the state of affairs in this part of Africa and the distinct strategic situations surrounding each of the studied countries. Having established the appropriate backdrop of understanding, it’s now time to summarize the broader findings. To be succinct, they boil down to four different types of conflict scenarios: a hot war; a hybrid war; a terrorist-irredentist war; and a refugee-provoked war.

The Ethiopian-Eritrean Cold War Turns Hot

Because of the unpredictability of the Eritrean government and the opaqueness of the information environment within the country, it’s very difficult to tell exactly what sort of plans might be brewing in the Red Sea state. It can safely be assumed that Ethiopia will not provoke a potentially destabilizing conflict with its former province because it literally has nothing of strategic significance to gain by this, whereas Eritrea has everything of subjective benefit to acquire if it can overthrow its rival’s government, divide its territory into [Identity Federalized](#)-statelets, and possibly even repeat the Eritrean scenario over and over again until Ethiopia itself ceases to exist as a geopolitical entity.

Upping the ante in any potentially forthcoming conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea is Asmara’s newly christened relationship with the GCC, which might predictably end up getting drawn into the prospective conflict (whether directly through troops or indirectly through back-end assistance) or outright participate in conniving it as a means of derailing the rise of what would otherwise become the super region’s undisputed and multipolar leader. Any GCC support to Eritrea or even the pretense thereof would undoubtedly rattle China, which is soon to be basing some of its forces in its first-ever overseas military facility in Djibouti and has a vested interest in seeing one of its closest non-Asian allies remain stable and succeed in its fast-rising ascent. Key to China’s concern about Ethiopia’s well-being is the railroad that it constructed between that country and Djibouti, the first reliable access route since Eritrea’s 1993 independence that the African giant has for reaching the global economy. China envisions that Ethiopia will play a key role as a major node along the One Belt One Road (OBOR) global connectivity platform, and as such, it would likely respond in a negative fashion to any foreign military aggression against its pivotal ally.

Nevertheless, there is only so much that China can and is willing to do, and providing direct side-by-side military assistance in any potential conflict isn’t one of them. However, Beijing would likely work at a breakneck speed to reach some sort of diplomatic solution in ceasing

hostilities between Ethiopia and Eritrea as soon as possible, which might see it even offering its own troops up as trusted peacekeepers in the same manner as it's [already been doing](#) in neighboring South Sudan. If the GCC in any way flexes its muscles or intimates that it will do so vis-à-vis assisting its Eritrean ally, then China would most likely lodge diplomatic objections towards them and possibly consider economic or even military asymmetrical posturing countermeasures in sending them the message that it will not sit by idly while they endanger the viability of its entire Horn of Africa OBOR policy. This is pertinent to mention because the GCC and its affiliated Turkish ally already have, are suspected of having, or are on the verge of acquiring, bases in the following countries:



- * Eritrea – UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar
- * Djibouti – Saudi Arabia, Qatar
- * Somalia (Somaliland) – UAE
- * Somalia (Mogadishu) – Turkey

Positioned on a map, it's clear to see that the GCC and Turkey are forming an encirclement ring around Ethiopia that could easily be used to exert pressure against it, whether through their support of Eritrea or perhaps even Somalia's Al Shabaab. Speaking about the second subject and Somalians in general, if the GCC and Turkey use Somalia as a launching pad of destabilizing influence against Ethiopia, then it's obvious that this would involve some sort of disturbances in the Somali Region (formerly called Ogaden), whether this takes the form of outright terrorist attacks or masquerades as Color Revolution-focused "protesters". Correspondingly, if the two fronts of destabilization are timed to coincide with one another, then an eruption of violence near the Eritrean and Somalian borders could split the Ethiopian Armed Forces and make them vulnerable to internal destabilizations such as the Hybrid Wars that will be described in the following section. Of direct relevance to China is that violence in the northwestern part of the Somali Region in Ethiopia could lead to immediately negative consequences for the transnational railroad to Djibouti that transits through the area, which would thus prompt Beijing's previously described and projected involvement in the crisis.

Depending upon if and when it happens, the more time that passes until a possible Ethiopian-Eritrean Continuation War, the more time that there is for the GCC to strengthen its strategic position in Eritrea and provide decisive assistance to its new ally in shifting the currently equitable balance of power against Ethiopia. If this turns out to be the case, then the chances that China would more loudly and visibly provide support to Ethiopia also increases, and this might even reach the point of sending frontline military advisors and urgent shipments of state-of-the-art battlefield equipment. Essentially, what could easily sprout up is a major proxy war between the GCC and China over control of the Horn of Africa, and in the run-up to this potentiality, both sides could even frenziedly build up their partners' military capabilities through what would amount to a rapid arms race in the region. Eventually, it might get to the point that the GCC compels Eritrea to 'test the limits' of the tense peace that it has with Ethiopia in order to acquire battlefield testing for what might then be its latest munitions, which could of course unwittingly get out of control and usher in a regional conflagration that raises tensions between the GCC and China to the breaking point by extension.

From Color Revolutions To Unconventional Wars

The next realistic scenario for regional destabilization is the launching of Hybrid Wars in Djibouti and Ethiopia. Both countries already underwent low-scale simultaneous Color Revolution tumults at the end of December 2015, which the author [examined](#) at the time for the Katehon think tank. In hindsight, the US was sending both governments the clear message that it is more than capable of increasing the intensity of its provoked unrest, basically attempting to put these countries in a position of indefinite strategic blackmail. Neither of them took the bait and their security services continued to respond to the riots, not letting them get out of control to the point where they endangered the large-scale stability of the state or the Chinese-built railroad between them. Even so, Addis Ababa and Djibouti were unable to root out the source of their Color Revolution threats, and it's possible that a repeat occurrence of their respective events might be enough to catalyze a burgeoning and self-sustainable Color Revolution movement that might end up generating a serious crisis. In that case, the authorities would likely respond to any militant threats against them with equal force, seeking to neutralize the terrorist provocateurs embedded within the 'pro-democracy' and 'protesting' crowds but unwittingly alarming the unaware and naïve masses duped into participating in the manifestations and inadvertently spiking their anti-government fervor.

There may not be a lot that the security services can realistically do to prevent this scenario from unfolding because if it was already preplanned to a large degree that the Color Revolution movement would serve as a temporary front for an inevitable Unconventional Warfare campaign, then the government's pacifying actions will be purposely misconstrued as "aggression" and used to fuel the Hybrid War flames no matter how relatively restrained and professional the state's response to these destabilizations might actually be. This means that both Ethiopia and Djibouti must prepare for the event that any Color Revolutions against them are merely fronts in carefully crafting a 'plausibly justifiable' pretext for the large-scale commencement of terrorist warfare against the state, one which would also be appealing to the 'hearts and minds' of foreign mass media-influenced observers. By producing international 'acceptance' of these developments via the deliberate manipulation of on-the-ground realities, the foreign patrons behind the unrest would be seeking to recreate the Hybrid War template that they've already unleashed in Syria and Ukraine and cultivate a coalition of '[Lead From Behind](#)' states to assist with their regime change mission.

In reference to Djibouti, it's been forecasted in the previous section how the country could once more become split according to ethnic-geographic lines just as it did during the 1991-1994 Civil War, where the northern Afars face off against the southern Somali-Issas. If one side or the other doesn't succeed in quickly bringing the conflict to a close (whether by diplomatic or forceful measures), then it's possible that the country could either end up as an Identity Federalized state or divided between an Ethiopian-dominated sub-state "Greater Afar" Region and a "Greater Somalia", with the latter possibility inevitably sparking a continuation war between Ethiopia and Eritrea as Asmara fights to prevent Addis Ababa from absorbing its eastern by-then formerly Djiboutian neighbor's territory. While it may not appear to the average observer that the US would have anything to gain by destabilizing Djibouti at what might end up becoming its own partial expense, it's a demonstrated fact that Hybrid War usually results in some sort of unintended blowback consequences that regularly bring about surprising dividends.

Relating to Ethiopia's internal Hybrid War, there's no definite telling which way it can go or

the specific manner in which it would be fought, although it's very likely that [last year's alliance](#) between five ethno-regional terrorist groups (including the pan-national Ginbot 7) could lead to a formidable "liberal"- "nationalist" coalition of broad interests that succeeds in gaining recruits and eventually presenting a menacing challenge to the authorities, especially if each geographic wing of this union enters into comprehensive and closely planned militant coordination with the other. If neighboring states such as Eritrea, Sudan, and South Sudan get involved in either official or non-state capacities in aiding this terrorist front just as Turkey and the GCC did vis-à-vis the anti-Syrian terrorists in the Levant, then it could exponentially catapult the lethal and debilitating effectiveness of this anti-government grouping and portend a more prolonged conflict in the centrally positioned and crucial Horn of Africa state. If the chaos migrates into the northwestern part of the Somali Region and also enflames the eastern portion of its Oromia counterpart, then it could deal a serious enough blow to the transnational railroad to Djibouti that its services become indefinitely inoperable and China suffers a major setback to its global OBOR plans.

Al Shabaab And "Greater Somalia"

The research has already explored this topic quite comprehensively, but for the sake of summarily including it in the final section, it's useful to revisit a few of the core ideas. Al Shabaab utilizes a combination of "Greater Somalia" nationalism, anti-Ethiopian sentiment, and Islamic extremism in order to mix an ideological cocktail that appeals to a diverse group of possible adherents, though mostly among the Muslim Somali demographic. The Cold War saw the nation state of Somali going to war against Ethiopia in order to promote its ethnic irredentist ideas of "Greater/Natural" Somalia, and while there's no such state-on-state capability to enforce this policy today, that hasn't stopped non-state nationalist actors from keeping the idea alive. Similarly, the Ethiopian anti-terrorist intervention in Somalia and subsequent prolonged military presence from 2006-2009 generated an immense amount of anti-Ethiopian sentiment that fused with the cross-border vision of "Greater Somalia" and led to the emergence of a latent threat. Compounding all of this is the GCC's promotion of radical Islamic ideologies such as Wahhabism in order to further its geopolitical goals in various global regions, with the Horn of Africa being no exception. These three regionally destabilizing factors have fused together in the form of Al Shabaab, although the terrorist organization has yet to fully market itself to each of its key ideological constituencies and remains largely known as being a Salafist group.

Having said that, Al Shabaab, even in its theoretically underperforming state, can generate a massive crisis in the Horn of Africa if it succeeds in launching attacks inside of Ethiopia, whether of the 'lone wolf' suicide bomber version or the Daesh-inspired form of physical territorial conquest. While Ethiopia is known for having very effective security measures in place to prevent these eventualities, it's impossible to be totally immune to them, especially in the instance of suicide bomber attacks or Paris- and Mumbai-like citywide assaults. More than likely, any of these aggressions would lead to a firm Ethiopian response, which might even see Addis Ababa launch air, drone, special forces, or even conventional land attacks into Somalia in order to target Al Shabaab's 'safe zones'. Furthermore, if for whatever reason the terrorists are able to gain a substantial following in Ethiopia's Somali Region, then it might necessitate an even larger military presence there than is currently in force. In turn, this might possibly tie down the armed forces in the sparsely populated and potentially Al Shabaab-targeted eastern desert instead of permitting them to focus more on the densely populated urban areas in central part of the country or what might by then become the possibly ethnic "restless" zones of the western regions whose affiliated terrorist groups recently allied with Ginbot 7.

Al Shabaab, like it was written earlier in the analysis, is the ultimate regional disruptor because it's so unpredictable in its actions and also has such strong potential to become an immensely varied security threat in the coming future. For the time being, it mostly culls its recruits from indoctrinated Wahhabis and fiscally motivated mercenaries, but it could adapt its recruiting techniques to augment its "Greater Somalia" and anti-Ethiopian appeal. Should the group boost its formidability and retain its suspected ties with Eritrea and Qatar, then it would most likely end up being used as a 'secret weapon' by them if a continuation war was ever launched against Ethiopia, providing the aggressors with the opportunity to open up a strategically valuable second front in dividing the focus of their target's armed forces and potentially encouraging the domestic Hybrid War threats that were previously enumerated upon into entering the larger fray.

"Weapons Of Mass Migration"

The last region-wide destabilization template that could be applied in the Horn of Africa is the utilization of the two forms of "Weapons of Mass Migration" against Ethiopia and Eritrea that were earlier described in the research. Pertaining to Ethiopia, the influx of nearly a quarter million South Sudanese refugees into the region of Gambella (which has just a slightly larger population than that) might become a majorly disruptive element if not properly dealt with. The geographic peculiarities of Gambella are such that it lies on an equal plane as South Sudan does, separated from the rest of Ethiopia by the mountains that run along its north-to-south western-oriented axis. This reality is both a facilitative factor for incoming refugees and a potentially inhibitive one for the armed forces in responding to any forthcoming disturbances there.

Provided that there aren't any other significant internal conflicts at the time, the Ethiopian security services should be able to concentrate their forces enough to keep the peace in Gambella, despite the Gambella People's Liberation Movement being one of the five terrorist groups recently united under last year's militant umbrella and likely endeavoring to use the refugees in a self-interested Hybrid War manner. For example, this organization might be working to either arm them or the locals, seeking to sow the seeds of discordant hatred between the new arrivals and their endemic hosts so as to foster a bloody provocation that would force a military response. In turn, this might be used as per tried-and-tested Color Revolution techniques in order to smear the military for "killing civilians and/or refugees" and propagated as a rallying symbol for domestically provoking a Color Revolution (whether in the region, the capital, or all throughout the country in coordination with its regime change allies), internationally 'isolating' the authorities, and painting them in a negative light that preconditions the global public for accepting the intensification of regime change Hybrid War. Moreover, Gambella is so important precisely because it neighbors the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Region and could be the source of a destabilizing contagion of ethnic violence that turns the diverse area into Ethiopia's domestic version of a South Sudanese bloodbath.

The other version of "Weapons of Mass Migration" that are being deployed in the Horn of Africa is the Western-originated strategy to prompt a large-scale outflow of "refugees" from Eritrea. The domestic push factor of the policy of indefinite military service mixed with the pull factor of the EU's 91-93% acceptance rate of Eritrean "refugees" has created such a massive demographic crisis for the country that 400,000 of its slightly more than 6 million total citizens have already left over the past six years. The effect has been to weaken the economic, military, and social strength of the country with the anticipation of prompting a political crisis in the coming future, the effect of which might be a lot more unpredictable

and far-reaching than what the West might expect to be a simple Rose Revolution-esque regime change operation. More than likely and owing to the specific domestic and regional circumstances that Eritrea presently finds itself in, a concerted anti-government movement within the country (whether composed of Color Revolution ‘protesters’ and/or Hybrid War ‘rebels’) might lead to the total collapse of the government, which itself could unleash a swarm of refugees to Ethiopia and Europe and possibly even elicit a militarized response from rival Addis Ababa.

Additionally, the procedurally shifting strategic balance between Ethiopia and Eritrea as a result of the latter’s artificially created demographic crisis might lead Asmara to seek to strategically compensate by intensifying its new ties with the GCC, which as described earlier, could then unleash a GCC-China proxy arms buildup and even a potential war. Regardless of how far this scenario would eventually go, it would certainly lead to these out-of-regional actors doubling down on their support for their respective allies, with a distinct scenario focus being the reinforcement measures that the GCC could take in propping up its ally in Asmara from collapsing due to the weaponized demographic strain that it will definitely come under if the human outflow isn’t halted in the near future. Once again, this would trigger the cyclical security dilemma of the GCC upping aid to Eritrea while China does the same to Ethiopia, which would move the region close to an all-out continuation war, albeit one which owes its most immediate cause to the cumulative enfeebling effect that the West’s “Weapons of Mass Migration” would unmistakably have on Eritrea and its leadership’s need to strategically compensate by seeking out GCC assistance.

To be continued...

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