

The role of Qatar in mediating Ethiopia and Eritrea

Last month the International Crisis Group (ICG) presented a report on future scenarios for Eritrea, whose repressive government has shown recent signs of instability. According to this report, the Ethiopian army incursions in 2012 revealed Eritrean capacity to defend itself is at its weakest since its independence in 1993.

ICG said several defections - from ordinary citizens to elite pilots, and Information Minister Ali Abdu, a close ally of Pres. Isaias Afewerki - and a mutiny by soldiers who took control of the Information Ministry, are just some of the incidents in one year alone that show how the regime in Asmara is becoming fragile.

The report urged the international community to pay more attention to Eritrea, which has remained mobilized for war since a ceasefire ended its conflict with Ethiopia in 2000, and to plan to help avert internal chaos and wider regional conflict in the event of a further breakdown of order in Asmara.

However, Ethiopia, which remains in conflict with Asmara, does not seem interested in confronting the Eritrean government at this critical time where it is becoming evident that a regime change in Asmara is fast approaching either with a natural death of the 67 years old ailing President or in a more violent way such as coup d'état.

However, a change in either way doesn't seem to provide much needed solution for the ongoing stalemate between the two countries as there is no clear succession plan at all and the possibility of a more aggressive hardliner groups to emerge to power.

On Dec. 5, Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn told Qatar's Al Jazeera network that he is willing to negotiate with his counterpart, the Eritrean President Isaias Afewerki without any precondition, even if it takes him to Asmara. Hailemariam also noted that his predecessor had made the same offer to Eritrean regime several times to no avail.

According to reports, President Isaias Afewerki asked Qatar to negotiate between the two arch rivals shortly after Hailemariam's statement. If true, this is a surprise because all previous requests made by Ethiopia for dialogue had been rejected by Asmara in protest at Ethiopia's refusal to implement the United Nations ruling that puts the flashpoint town of Badme in Eritrea.

Notably, in April this year, a week after President Isaias Afewerki visited Qatar and held talks with Sheikh Hamed Bin Khalifa Al-Thani, Emir, the Emir paid a two-day official visit to Ethiopia. Although officially the visit was to boost bilateral relations, the issue of Ethiopia and Eritrea was unlikely to be ignored in such a high-level meeting, especially as Qatar is striving to become an internationally-recognized peacemaker.

Current developments between the two states stem from the causes and consequences of the 1998 to 2000 war.

Before and even during the war, Eritrea was perceived to have gained the upper-hand on the diplomatic front. The rapid economic progress, its geo-political advantage, and signs of democratic transitions helped Eritrea drawing the international community's support.

A good example of this is the arms ban imposed by the UN on for both countries: while the world was aware that Eritrea had already purchased enough rifles before the war as it had already planned to attack Ethiopia, Ethiopia was not ready at all.

However, after the war, Ethiopia started to become a regional power. The commendable economic success and poverty reduction it has achieved in the last decade in addition with its excellent relations with the Western world were some of the great achievements of Ethiopia under the late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi. The case of Eritrea has been the opposite: it has become more repressive, isolated and is considered the rogue state of the region.

In 2008 Eritrea engaged in a conflict with Djibouti over the Ras Dumeira area. The aftermath of this conflict led to the UN Security Council resolution 1907 (2009) on Eritrea. Further sanctions were imposed, following Eritrea's alleged involvement in support of Al-Qaeda linked Islamist militants, mainly Al-Shabaab and Hizbul Islam, working against the international community effort to bring a lasting peace in Somalia. The US government also threatened to include Eritrea on the "state sponsors of terrorism" list in 2007.

In addition to the above disputes, the actions of the Eritrean government have also isolated the country. Eritrea boycotted the African Union (AU) for more than a decade and only reinstated its ambassador to the AU in January 2011, fiercely protesting what it described as the AU's 'failure' to condemn Ethiopia for its alleged violations of a peace agreement that ended the 1998-2000 border war. Additionally, the regime withdrew its membership of Inter-Governmental Authority on Development, East Africa's primary regional body, after a rift with its arch-foe, Ethiopia, when a meeting on Somalia threatened to divide the region in 2007.

It seems clear that the withdrawal from important African regional organizations cost Eritrea dearly. In addition, the imposition of the UN Security Council sanctions on Eritrea, which included arms and travel sanctions for Eritrea's support of insurgents trying to topple the nascent government in Somalia, was a severe blow to Eritrea. It is significant too that for the first time since their establishment, the AU and IGAD called upon the United Nations to introduce sanctions against a member state. Due to the ill-conceived political strategies of the Asmara regime, the country's image has been tarnished. The behavior of Eritrea has prompted at least one observer and scholar to refer to Eritrea as the 'North Korea of Africa'.

The 2011 Arab uprising that toppled a number of dictators across the Middle East and North Africa has also impacted Eritrea enormously. Before the revolution, President Isaias had three important friends even if his regime was isolated by most of the countries in the region and beyond. These countries were Libya, Egypt and Qatar.

To win the race to become an influential figure in the region and the African Union with Ethiopia and the late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, the former Libyan ruler, Muammar Ghaddafi provided Eritrea all round support. Between the years 1998-2010 Libya has given hundreds of millions of dollars to Eritrea to help to improve its ailing economy.

Libya under Ghaddafi has also showed its support to Eritrea in being the only security council member state in voting against the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1907, adopted on December 23, 2009, which imposed an arms embargo on Eritrea, travel bans on its leaders, and froze the assets of some of the country's political and military officials after accusing the Eritrean government of aiding Al-Shabaab in Somalia and reportedly refusing to withdraw troops from its disputed border with Djibouti, following a conflict in 2008 even if the African Union, the IGAD and other organizations which Libya itself is a member had been calling in favor of the resolution.

In return Eritrea had been supporting Muammar Ghaddafi in all the time and denouncing the revolution against him labeling it as a Western plot against the will of the Libyan people and this in the long run has also negatively affected its relation with the new Libyan government established after the downfall of Muammar Ghaddafi.

Egypt under Hosni Mubarak had also been supporting Eritrea for the mere reason of avoiding the perceived threat on the river Nile. Eritrea has also reiterated its support for the Egyptian claim of its rights over the river emanating mainly from the controversial 1929 and 1959 agreements which Ethiopia regards as unacceptable on the ground that the 1929 pact is colonial and the 1959 one is unilateral Egyptian and Sudanese ploy which had been rejected by Ethiopia outright.

However the new Egyptian administration seems more interested in negotiation and cooperation with Ethiopia than trying to threaten Ethiopia using Eritrea. The previous relationship between President Hosni and President Isaias also negatively affected the current Egypt-Eritrean relationship significantly as the later reiterated its support to the former even at the midst of Egyptian revolution at 2011.

The last friend Eritrea now has is therefore Qatar. Eritrea and Qatar have long standing relations since decades ago since Eritrea attained its independence in 1993. However, Qatar-Ethiopia relation was not so good. On 21 April 2008, Ethiopia announced it was severing ties with Qatar, accusing Qatar of supporting armed opposition groups within Ethiopia and others such as

Islamist insurgents in Somalia. This also created conducive environment to Eritrea to enjoy the friendship with Qatar as the later has been becoming one of the most influential countries in the region especially in the last couple of years.

However, during the Arab uprising their commendable relationship started to show fracture as Qatar was a main advocate of a regime change in Libya and the supporter of the rebel groups, Eritrea decided to remain loyal to Col. Muammar Ghaddafi. For many analysts this was the first, perhaps also the most contentious issue that started to make a rift between the two countries. In addition to this the ever increasing influential role of Ethiopia in the region and the African Union also pushed Qatar to seek an amicable solution for the diplomatic row between the two states. The two countries have expressed their wish to conduct diplomatic relations and work together in regional issues with mutual consent and cooperation during the Qatari emir visit to Addis Ababa on 10th April 2013.

In considering the above facts it is clear that Qatar has a big role in resolving the problem between the two countries once and for all. The Eritrean regime may make some retreats from its preconditions and push forward to settle its dispute with Ethiopia if Qatar insisted as it is now the only country in the world to have amicable relations with Asmara.

Qatar can also influence Ethiopia as Ethiopia is very aware of the increasing role and influence of Qatar in regional and international affairs.

The normalization of relations with Ethiopia would definitely help Asmara in improving its relationship with important regional and international organizations in which Ethiopia's influence is seen quite crucial, like IGAD and the AU. It will also give Eritrea the chance to exploit the big market inside Ethiopia.

Peace with Eritrea would also bring some important benefits to Ethiopia mainly in providing access to well established ports of Assab and Massawa. Due to the high cost of trade, Ethiopia has been looking for alternative port services to Djibouti.

Peace between the two countries would also help to improve the security situation of the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea region.

But most importantly, peace between the two countries would benefit the citizens who share the same culture, religion and identity. Other peace dividends would be redirecting military spending in both states towards critical areas such as health and education.

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