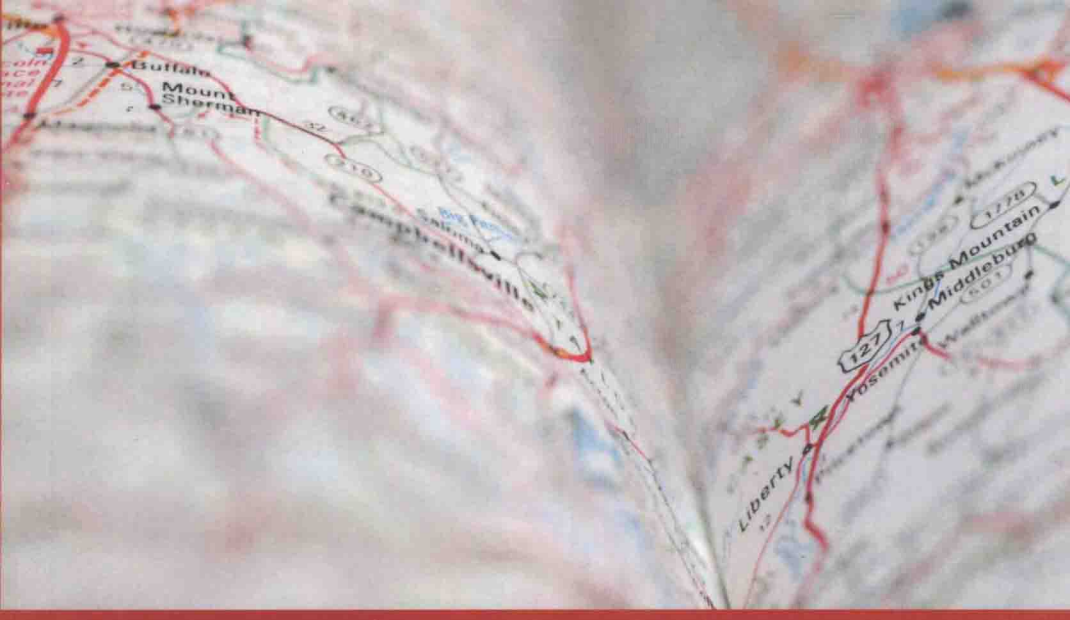

Meressa Tsehaye Gebrewahd

National Security Challenges in the Horn of Africa

The Case of Eritrea

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Meressa Tsehaye
28 June 2010

Addis Ababa

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

1.1. Background of the study

The debate over the meaning and referent object for security is not new because security has been considered as the most valuable and ever existing reality in the history of human beings. However, it remains as an ambiguous and contentious term that defies a universal definition, this is because it is possible to apply the term to a range of ideas that operate at many levels of analysis and difficult to properly locate its compatible boundary. It is also because of the changing natures and types of threats to security and responsible actors to promote it.

Traditionally, security has been exclusively defined as state's security .State security was simply conceptualized as the ability of the state to survive and promote its national interest in the anarchic international system (Wing, 2000). Furthermore, state security and national security was interchangeably used and conceptualized narrowly as the physical survival (its territory and population) of a state. State's national interest was also conceptualized as power politics specifically defined by military buildup and capabilities (*Ibid,* Rourke, 1993). Moreover, the threats to national security were viewed to be exclusively from external to the state sovereignty and

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are militaristic in their nature. Hence, war never to be fought in the home soil. Therefore states were considered as unitary and ultimate units of analysis *(Ibid)*.

The traditional state centric approaches remained as the dominant paradigm up until to the end of the cold war. Following the end of the cold war, however, the traditional narrow state centric approaches faced serious challenges due to the emergency of alternative voices (critical schools) within the security studies calling for widening and deepening of the subject(Hough,2004).

By widening, the critical schools argued for the horizontal inclusion of non-military threats and threats emerging from within the sovereign jurisdiction of the state in addition to military threats and threats originate from outside. The deepening schools, on the other hand, called for vertical reconfiguration of referents for security, i.e. transforming referent objects for security from state to non-state actors, mainly individuals (human security), and hence states to be among equals because states are not only referent and providers of security but also could be sources of insecurity.

At the center of their conception, the critical schools argued for a separate treatment of state and national security which was previously used as one and the same. Accordingly national security is not only consist of the physical (territory and population) and institution of state as its defining components but more critically and

essentially is about the very idea of the state (defined by the nation it consists of and its organizing ideology) that the traditional schools leap over in their analysis of national as well as state security (Buzan, 1991). Hence, they contended that national security to be the search for an agreed consensus on the idea of the state (*Ibid*).

Eritrea, the latest African state to join the UN family of nations, won its independence as a defacto state in 1991 and dejure state in 1993 through referendum. However, Eritrea had passed through historical ups and downs on the march to independence: first colonized by Italy and transferred to Britain as 'mandate territory' until 1952. Up on the United Nations' decision, Eritrea was federated with Ethiopia as an autonomous region, a situation that soon deteriorated. The federation was not well-come by all actors including the Eritrean contending parties and Ethiopian government. After ten years the federation was abrogated and Eritrea was re-integrated into Ethiopia in 1962. On the eve of the abrogation of the federation, the Eritrean, particularly the Muslim lowland Eritreans, and later joined by the highlanders declared the bloody armed struggle in 1961that lasted for three decades.

The struggle which was first led by ELF and later by EPLF defined as anti-colonial struggle against an "African colonizer"; Ethiopia. However, the Eritrean armed struggle was not only against the Ethiopian state but also among the Eritrean nationalist movements.

Eritrean nationalist movements had been engulfed in civil wars based on religion, region, and ideology which believed negatively affected the struggle and the post independent state and nation building process. The civil war between the nationalist movement (mainly ELF and EPLF) also believed to have negative implications to democratic nature of the liberation war and ever increasing contradictions and factionalism within the intra-Eritrean political sphere which in turn planted an emerging and divergent strategies on the ideas and nature of the Eritrean state and Eritreanism .

The colonial experience of Eritreans by Italy and Britain had contributed to the development of new Eritrean identity formation apart from their historical Ethiopian identity. The formation of new identity further strengthened by the 1952 UN-federation approach with Ethiopia as it signaled that Eritreans were not Ethiopians like the Tigreans and other Ethiopian.

The Eritrean nationalism, unlike the orthodox [1]European and African nationalism, was viewed as a result of historical grievances, and evolved to be anti-Ethiopian nationalism. It was also grounded in Eritrea's 30-years struggle for independence. This further contributed to the development of ultra-nationalism defined by internally highly mobilized and controlled with strong xenophobic

[1] It refers to European nationalism that the nation is the prerequisite for statehood (see page 37 of this thesis) but African nationalism is based on commonly oppressed and colonized people, and territorial feature of national struggle against colonialism(see page 37-38)

attitude towards the external relevant[2] others which was continued in post independent political realm.

The post independent state and nation- building process was framed to be from above under the slogan "Hade Hizbi, Hade Libi"[3] so as to ensure a collective and single national identity in order to defuse

[2] Actors who are considered as important to the internal cohesion of a group or an entity. In this thesis the concept "relevant" or "significant" others refers to actors who are relevant to the conception ,evolution and existence of Eritrean nationalism, and nation and state building . Internal relevant actors refer to Eritrean individuals, groups, and political and nationalist movements who have significant influences to the current national security challenges that Eritrea is facing today. The most important internal "significant" or "relevant" other in Eritrean politics was the relationship of the ELF and EPLF as well as their ideological and national conceptions. Today the remnant of ELF and its ideological conception sectarian (Islamic)nationalism and forming an Islamic pro-Arab Eritrea is considered as internal relevant to the secular and territorial conception of EPLF nationalism and nation-building process because the former's Islamic or sectarian national ideology is considered divisive and destructive to Eritrean state and nation building as its excludes the Christian Eritreans. External "relevant" or "significant" others are basically refers to Ethiopia and Sudan because both have strong socio-cultural, political economic ties with and influences to Eritrea. Moreover, external significant others also include regional institutions (like OAU/AU) and international organizations (like UN) and superpowers mainly united states.

[3] Tigrigna for "one people, one heart", national slogan to indicate the unity of Eritrean people in overcoming all forms of challenges as demonstrated during the 30 years armed struggle for liberation. It also connotes the mobilization, discipline and invincibility of Eritrean people and used as national rhetoric in post-independence to replicate in nation-building on Principle of self –reliance. However, my informants (Debesai, Gebre- Hiwote, and Tesfu), criticized it manifestation of the EPLF chauvinist and exclusionist policies undermining other political organizations and their social base. See page 58 of this thesis.

sectarianism and regionalism which are commonly defined as sub-national entities, and the formation of political parties along ethnic or religious lines were prohibited.

In line with the above strategies, the government introduced national military service with the stated objective to build the defense capacity of the new state in order to defend from possible threats and to support the post war reconstruction as well as to ensure the inter-generation transition between 'Yika'alo'(able)-the old generation, and 'Warsay'-the new generation. The national service thus resulted in huge military buildup and militarization (both in human and material).The national service and its resultant militarization together with the longest protracted liberation war aggravated the securitization and militarization of the nation building process. This resulted in conflictual relations with its neighbors based on boarder, religion, economic, political and geopolitical reasons.

Ethio-Eritrea war, however, resulted in a negative repercussion to the Eritrean national security as it signified the failure of the invincibility of the Eritrean army, the inter-generation transition, and negative implications to the historical intra-Eritrean divisive factors. Furthermore, the war forced Eritrea to redefine new policies: internally the government issued "national emergency" with tight control to contain internal problems; externally the state engaged in proxy wars to maintain its external power balance.

The post independent state of Eritrea not only inherited internal contradictions but also depicts external challenges mainly from Ethiopia and Sudan. Eritrea, defined national security challenge from Ethiopia for its historical relations, Ethiopia's post 1991 federal approach and its implication for its Trans- border community and Ethiopia's power balancer in the Horn of Africa. It also defines national security threat from Sudan for its Islamic ideology and the revival of Eritrean Islamic nationalism. Hence, all the above factors are posing grave challenges to the nation building and national security of Eritrea.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

Eritrea's post independent state and nation-building process is not smooth even though the success of the liberation struggle sparked prospects for a strong, united and stable Eritrea .But, this is not solely the result of the challenges of new state building process. The evolution of Eritrean nationalism and its foundation; the contradictions and divisions among Eritrean nationalists on the idea of future state of Eritrea and Eritreanism and the resultant civil wars negatively affected the inclusive nature of the armed struggle. Following the civil war between ELF and EPLF, the later able was to dominate and lead the liberation struggle but the former drove out of the field and fragmented into a number of factions with their sectarian outlooks. The post-civil wars formation and evolution of the nationalist revolution was mobilized, controlled and dominated

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