

REVIEW ESSAY

Borderless Imaginations Under State Imposed Territoriality in the Horn of Africa

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Martin Plaut. 2016. *Understanding Eritrea: Inside Africa's Most Repressive State*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 253 pp.

Keren Weitzberg. 2017. *We Do Not Have Borders: Greater Somalia and the Predicaments of Belonging in Somalia*. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press. 274 pp.

Introduction

The Horn of Africa (HOA) is one of the most unpredictable, volatile, and complex regions in Africa and beyond. Unlike other parts of Africa, it is here where religion and ethnic-based identity politics, hydropolitics, extremely stifled public spheres, terrorism of some sort, and visible foreign hands ceaselessly and collectively function to render it virtually unsuitable for peaceful human existence. As of recently, the exodus of hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of citizens from this thorny region have been presenting major foreign policy challenges to many of the European states and the Middle East. Refugees from Eritrea and Somalia, the principal focus of this review essay, remain much higher. Understandably, there are many and intricate factors underpinning this phenomenon. Eritrea, ever since its independence, has never been able to move beyond the unflinching sterile polemics and stubbornness of its first and only president, Isaias Afewerki. Built around the negation of Abyssinian rule under its monarchical administration and the constant, real or imagined, “threat” of the TPLF (Tigray People’s Liberation Front) led EPRDF (Ethiopian People’s Republic Democratic Front) regime in Ethiopia, the Eritrean totalitarian rule, unable to provide for its citizens, made life a living hell for all Eritreans. Under Isaias, Eritrea got its independence but turned into a failed state, with no working constitution, no regular elections, no freedom of the press, forced conscription, and most importantly, no food to eat. Accordingly, the only option available for all Eritreans is either they chose to suffer under this arrogantly state-doctored underdevelopment and political oppression or flee their country hoping for the best. Yet, this unabated fiasco, in Martin Plaut’s latest book, *Understanding Eritrea*, goes much deeper than that.

An equally problematic condition in the HOA concerns the Somali people. This part of the HOA is like no other. Somalis were essentially forced to live in more than five distinct places and/or states for decades: British Somaliland (Hargeisa based Somalia), Italian Somaliland (Mogadishu centered Somalia), French Somaliland (Djibouti), Ethiopia

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<http://www.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v18/v18i2a7.pdf>

(Ogaden), and Kenya (Northern Frontier District). This is, of course, in addition to the thousands or even million (s) of Somalis “settled” in Europe, North America, and the Middle East. Yet, the postcolonial Somalis’ life is not essentially different in many ways either. There are as many loyalties and as much disfranchisement today as before in the different places where Somalis live. The people face, much like Eritreans, constant drought, famine, and food insecurity. However, unlike Eritrea, which has a deeply repressed society with less security challenges and thus relatively stable (or “stuck”), the case with the Somalis is fundamentally different.

The Somali people fight different wars at the same time in different places. For instance, Ethiopian Somalis in the South Eastern part of Ethiopia struggle to find a safety valve from the relatively relentless political oppression in the region. Hundreds and even perhaps thousands of Somalis were detained, raped, tortured, killed, and made to flee their place of residence due to the TPLF-backed Abdi Mahmoud Omar’s (“Abdi Iley”) dictatorship in Ethiopia’s Somali region until recently.¹ In addition, the region is known for its deep-rooted corruption, repression of human and democratic rights, poverty, famine, drought, and food insecurity in Ethiopia. The Somalis based in and around Mogadishu fight against many things on different fronts: terrorism, poverty, direct or indirect foreign interventions and invasions (for instance, Ethiopia, Eritrea, USA), food insecurity, an unreliable and unstable state, intra-and-inter group loyalty driven frictions, and others. The Somalis in Kenya, which Keren Weitzberg dealt with it effectively (and interestingly) in her latest work *We Do Not Have Borders*, struggle with different problems with different causes. One, among others, is the problem of belongingness and identity.

The Horn of Africa on the Move

In spite of all these existential crises, the year 2018 brought a convincingly new episode promising an optimistic future in the yet-to-be written political history of the HOA. With the increasingly encouraging reform efforts underway in the last three-to-four months, the EPRDF’s (TPLF led) induced twenty-seven year long crisis in Ethiopia has just recently been clearly appreciated.² Not only did the TPLF dominated EPRDF government cause unfathomable chaos in Ethiopia (political, ethnic, economic, and religious), but also to neighboring countries in the HOA (for instance, Somalia, Eritrea).³ However, with the advent of Dr Abiy under the OPDO (Oromo People’s Democratic Organizations) led EPRDF, many analysts and ordinary Ethiopian citizens alike are clearly realizing how much Ethiopia (and many Ethiopians) have lost under the TPLF rule. Now, unlike the last twenty-seven years, there are signs that religious and ethnic based sensibilities in Ethiopia are receiving appropriate attention.⁴

The face of Ethiopia, which, for the last two and a half decades, has been like the face of a gangster bullying other states in the HOA, is beginning to send out signals of hope and peace in the region.⁵ The recent Ethio-Eritrean rapprochement, initiated by the newly appointed Ethiopian Prime minister Abiy Ahmed, is a very relevant instance that would potentially transform the overall political landscape of the HOA. Previously state sanctioned people-to-people socioeconomic and cultural interaction between Eritreans and Ethiopians is now a practical possibility. Within days of this initiative, people of the two states immediately started moving in both directions, many of whom overwhelmed by the idea that they will be meeting with their close relatives and friends: father and son, husband and

wife, mother and daughter, and others. Unsurprisingly, the majority of Eritrea's ethno-linguistic stocks have their close siblings in Ethiopia and vice versa. State sanctioned artificial territoriality might have hampered the organic interaction of the same people, with the same religion, ethnicity, and culture, living in different and bordered nation states, the trans-territoriality of interaction, although having gone through a period of hibernation, remained well and alive to these days.

Both Martin Plaut and Keren Weitzberg deal with these issues in their own ways. While Plaut essentially wrote his book in more of journalistic (for which he has significant experience working for BBC) rather than the academic manner that Weitzberg employed. Methodologically, unlike Plaut, she effectively utilized a wide array of data sources, including in depth archival and field researches. In addition, it is less likely that one would find such putative statements and generalizations as "Eritreans (and Ethiopians) are culturally disposed to being closed and secretive" or "Ethiopians and Eritreans are reserved by nature."⁶ A close engagement with the book would also reveal that Plaut's principal data source was limited, measured by the frequency of references and citations, to the various reports of the United Nations. Except for being extremely loaded with information, and therefore, taking significant time to properly comprehend it timely, Weitzberg's balanced and penetrative engagement with the people of Somalia, especially among those living in Kenya was a complete success.

Understanding Eritrea and Somalis in Kenya

Plaut divides his book into eleven parts. Essentially, however, it deals with three major issues. It begins with the political history and background information up to the point of Eritrean independence in 1991. Here Plaut closely examines the birth and evolution of EPLF (Eritrean People's Liberation Front), later renamed as PFDJ (People's Front for Democracy and Justice); Isaias Afewerki's quick step up in political leadership; the Eritrean civil war between ELF (Eritrean Liberation Front) and EPLF; and others. The second important issue he addressed mainly concerns the relationship between Ethiopia and Eritrea both in historical and contemporary perspectives. On the one hand, he explores the nature of the relationship between the Eritrean quest for independence and the response of successive Ethiopian governments since the last monarchical government under Haile Selassie I. On the other hand, he tried to account for the cooperative turned hostile interaction between Isaias Afewerki's EPLF and Meles Zenawi's TPLF. Lastly, the other important focus of the book is its appraisal of Eritrea's regional and international roles. In this regard, three relevant points are worth mentioning: security, informal economy, and migration crisis. Of these, he shows how Eritrea's only legally licensed and currently ruling PFDJ party played key roles in destabilizing neighboring countries, especially Ethiopia, Somalia, and Yemen. This has been done through the various military groups (such as Al Shabab and Islamic Courts Union) trained and financed by the PFDJ government in the Greater of Horn of African countries.

Another point is the PFDJ's elite run "hidden" or "covert economy" through its "clandestine networks" of transnational companies and businesses in East Africa (Tanzania, Sudan, South Sudan, Uganda, Kenya, and Somalia) and the Middle East (Dubai and Qatar). Although this involvement is not officially recognized (or "registered") in Eritrea, it assumes "a global financial structure" which enjoys, among other things, "tax havens." Of these party-controlled companies, the biggest commercial operation remains the "Red Sea Trading Corporation" specializing in import and export. Other commercial fronts included hotels,

publishing houses, insurance companies, contraband, and smuggling.⁷ Finally, the last critical point in Eritrea's international relations is the never-ending outflow of Eritreans. Plaut asks: "Why do as many as 5,000 Eritreans flee across borders every month?"⁸ He explains that there are economic and political factors underpinning this growing nightmare effectively making Eritrea depopulated. However, he found out that, unlike any other problem, it was the forced and undefined conditions of conscription that drives this.

Plaut's *Understanding Eritrea* makes an important contribution to our understanding of the HOA in general and Eritrea in particular. Through his close diagnosis of Eritrea's political history, he found out that understanding Eritrea meant understanding its political torch bearers and the historical and political circumstances within which they functioned. He rightly noted without exaggeration that Isaias Afewerki "is the individual who controls the destiny of Eritrea and whose decisions . . . have serious implications for the rest of the Horn of Africa."⁹ This makes sense, partly because we have not seen any strong opposition, armed or not, that can withstand this totalitarian regime either from within or outside except for some fragmented efforts and dispersed voices of protests and activism. Another important contribution of this book was its misplaced prediction but having critical implications for the future of Eritrea. If Plaut knew what we know today in early 2019, he would probably choose to rewrite one third of this book. Given the unprecedented developments currently unfolding in Ethiopia and, by implication, the HOA, things appear much less gloomy than some three to five years ago. The point here is the OPDO led reforms in Ethiopia and changes in the nature of relation between Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa. A very important development in this regard is the resumption of Ethio-Eritrea relations in different spheres. Interestingly, instead of Eritrea, Plaut's misplaced scenario of prediction applies exactly to Ethiopia. He pointed out that:

A group within the current hierarchy would take the reins of power. They would then be in a position to reach out to the opposition movements. An intense dialogue could take place leading to an interim administration and elections. The way would then be open for a legitimate government to be formed, guaranteeing the rights of all citizens.¹⁰

Keren Weitzberg's *We Do Not Have Borders* seeks to cast a critical eye on what it means to be a Somali and citizen in Kenya. She explores various factors conditioning the loyalty and identity of the Somalis in the HOA in general and Kenya in particular. She examines the relative efficacy of what she called "exclusionary nationalism" and "settler colonialism" on the one hand, and the socioeconomic and cultural organizations of Somalis and the borderless transnational networks on the other hand. The former captures the burdens and limits of modern nation states and postcolonial Africa. The British and the postcolonial Kenya, for a considerable period of time, operated on the assumption that there were "natives" and others ("aliens") in the land. The British colonialists thought that the Somalis were different both in their physique and cultural practices (including religion) and as such preferred them for certain activities over the "native" Kenyans. However, it should be noted that many Somalis themselves played important role in this (re)negotiation of identity, some of them claiming that their origin was linked in some ways with Arabs. This had its own consequences. On the one hand, it allowed the Somalis in Northern Frontier District (NFD) to navigate the possibilities of ascertaining their presence and legitimate position in the country, and on the other hand, it enabled the Somalis to develop organizational and

institutional mechanisms to deal with the (changing and) challenging circumstances in which they found themselves. This, in turn, helped in the later advent of the Somali nationalism in the form of unity and greater Somalia project, fuelled by both Somalis' own experiences in the Horn of Africa and the growing presence of Somalis in the diaspora.

The other important aspect of the book is its appraisal of the borderless and trans-territorial bond among the Somalis living in Kenya, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Somaliland, Somalia, and the diaspora, and how it developed through time, both as a response to the never ending us-and-them discursive dialogue wherever they live, and the need for a place where all Somalis will be living with own close kinsmen and culture. The retrospective (re)imagination and construction of what it means to be a Somali, by the politically active, those in diaspora, and elite classes, as one people with common sense of origin and culture played a very important role. Weitzberg clearly observed that there were Somali "political entrepreneurs" who effectively instrumentalized "pastoral life style," "Islamic ties of brotherhood and Ummah," "overarching lineage," and "non-territorial and non-secular affiliation" in the service of Pan-Somali nationalism and the "territorial nationalist project."¹¹ However, it did not simply go unchallenged. In fact, as Weitzberg rightly noted, the Ethiopian state, among others, took it as an existential threat that needed to be squashed at any cost. All in all, Weitzberg's engagement with these issues was very penetrative and multilayered. Apart from being well balanced in terms of the triangulation of data and self-reflexivity, the cases she included throughout the text effectively made her arguments and nuanced positions unique, relatable, and rewarding to readers.

Conclusion

Given the unpredictability of changes causing chains of events, it is yet to be seen what actually goes beneath the surface of the seemingly ceaseless state violence and interethnic conflicts ravaging the Horn of Africa. There are researches and theories which rely heavily on historical, economic, religious, political, cultural, identity and related other internal factors to account for this. There are, on the other hand, those who base their explanations on the role of external actors in the region, both in the past and present. However, some others tried to synthesize these dimensions in a manner that recognizes the challenges and problems of the Horn as another human experience embedded both in the circumstances of the past and present. Weitzberg's *We Do Not Have Borders* is one among the few eclectic works in the post 2000 period that brilliantly showcases a commendable measure of sagacity. This is a very important and original contribution to the study of Africa, especially North East Africa. Political Science, African Studies, and Somali Studies students definitely gain more than what a typical 250+ pages long book can offer. Almost a third of the book is packed with directly relevant materials for future and further reading and research. Although less of an academic venture, Plaut's *Understanding Eritrea* can be a valuable asset for those who are interested in the political history of Africa's most repressive state, Eritrea.

Notes

1 Zelalem 2018.

2 Berhe 2001.

3 For TPLF's ill-intentioned moves against Ethiopian Muslims, see Miftah 2015.

4 *The Guardian*.

- 5 Miftah 2018.
- 6 Plaut 2016, pp. 4, p. 32.
- 7 Ibid., pp. 134-48.
- 8 Plaut 2017, p. 2.
- 9 Ibid., p. 130.
- 10 Ibid, p. 214.
- 11 Weitzberg 2017, p. 92.

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