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الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية

EMBASSY OF THE STATE OF ERITREA TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Eritrea: Sovereignty Is Never an "Old Narrative"

The Embassy of the State of Eritrea in Washington, D.C. has taken note of the Middle East Forum article, "Eritrea's Old Red Sea Narrative Meets a New Middle East," published on 21 September 2026, in response to the interview granted by Eritrea's Foreign Minister, Osman Saleh, to Middle East Eye.

The article presents a selective and fundamentally distorted account of Eritrea's history and consequently mischaracterizes the basis of Eritrea's contemporary position on the Red Sea. The most important correction concerns its persistent and misleading description of Eritrea as having simply "seceded" from Ethiopia. This formulation is not merely imprecise; it reverses the historical sequence and obscures the legal and political circumstances through which Eritrea became an independent state. Addressing this issue is critical not only to refute the specific claims made by the Middle East Forum, but also to correct a broader, pervasive myth. Eritrea was never a part of the Ethiopian nation, and any narrative that treats Eritrea as a simple territory seceded from Ethiopia misrepresents its distinct history formation as an Italian colony and nation building processes, its forced federation and subsequent military occupation, and the legitimate political and protracted armed struggle of its people to restore its full independence.

Historical Context, Colonial Formation, Imposed Federation and Subsequent Liberation Struggle

The History Eritrea's modern territorial identity did not originate as a subdivision of Ethiopia. Like many African states, Eritrea emerged within internationally recognized territorial boundaries shaped by the colonial period. Eritrea was constituted as an Italian colony in the late nineteenth century and was subsequently administered by Britain following the Second World War. The post-war disposition of Eritrea, however, was shaped not only by considerations concerning the territory and its population, but also by the strategic calculations of the major Allied Powers in the emerging Cold War. Eritrea's location along the Red Sea, its ports and strategic position overlooking vital maritime routes gave the territory considerable geopolitical importance at a time when the international order was increasingly being structured around competing strategic interests.

Against this broader geopolitical backdrop, and following extensive international deliberations over Eritrea's future, the United Nations General Assembly adopted Resolution 390 A (V) in December

1950, establishing a bogus "Federal Arrangement" between Eritrea and Ethiopia under the sovereignty of the Ethiopian Crown. The Federation formally came into effect in September 1952.

The historical record thereafter is not a matter of competing narratives. The Federal Arrangement was progressively dismantled, and Eritrea was forcibly annexed and incorporated into Ethiopia in 1962. The subsequent thirty-year Eritrean liberation struggle therefore cannot accurately be reduced to a conventional "secessionist" movement. It was a prolonged struggle over the political status and right of decolonization of the Eritrean people following the termination of the ill-devised and imposed "Federal Arrangement" and the subsequent, unlawful, incorporation of Eritrea into Ethiopia.

The Referendum and International Recognition

The question was ultimately settled not through an externally imposed geopolitical arrangement but through the exercise of the Eritrean people's right to determine their political status. Following the end of the armed struggle and the liberation of Eritrea in 1991, an internationally observed referendum was conducted in April 1993. United Nations Observer Mission teams covered almost all the 1,012 polling stations. Of 1,174,654 registered voters, 1,154,001 participated, representing a turnout of 98.24 percent. Of those participating, 1,098,015 voted in favor of independence. The official provisional result therefore recorded 99.805 percent support for independence.

The international legal and political status that followed is equally clear. On 26 May 1993, the United Nations Security Council recommended Eritrea's admission to UN membership, and on 28 May 1993, the General Assembly admitted Eritrea as a Member State without a vote. Eritrea's status as an independent and sovereign state is therefore, not a provisional political arrangement or an unresolved historical question. It is an established fact of international law and international relations.

This historical context matters because the language of "secession" is frequently employed as though Eritrea separated unilaterally from an otherwise continuous Ethiopian state. That is not an adequate description of the historical record. It ignores the colonial formation of Eritrea, imposed federation, its subsequent dismantling, the thirty-year liberation struggle, the internationally observed referendum, and Eritrea's subsequent admission to the United Nations as a sovereign Member State.

Principles Governing the Red Sea and Sovereign Equality

The Middle East Forum article also attempts to interpret Foreign Minister Osman Saleh's position primarily through the prism of Arab-Israeli rivalry and Cold War geopolitics. This again misses the central issue.

Eritrea's position is not an extension of an outdated ideological alignment. Nor is it reducible to nostalgia for an earlier geopolitical order. It is grounded in a principle that remains fundamental to the international system: the sovereignty, territorial integrity, political independence and legitimate security interests of Red Sea littoral states must be respected.

The Red Sea is not an empty geopolitical space available for strategic arrangements to be designed by external powers or regional actors without regard to the sovereign interests of the states that border it. Its significance to international commerce and security makes respect for those sovereign interests more important, not less.

Eritrea recognizes the right of every sovereign state to pursue diplomatic, economic and strategic partnerships in accordance with international law. Eritrea equally reserves the sovereign right to assess the regional implications of such arrangements and to oppose measures that it considers prejudicial to its sovereignty, territorial integrity, national security or legitimate interests.

This is not an exceptional position. It is a basic principle of interstate relations.

Respect for Border Agreements and Territorial Integrity

Indeed, the contemporary history of the Horn of Africa provides a particularly important reminder of why sovereignty and territorial integrity cannot be treated as outdated concepts. The 2000 Algiers Agreements established a framework for the settlement of the Eritrea-Ethiopia conflict that stemmed from a putative border dispute regarding the small town of Badme and its environs in western Eritrea. The Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission (EEBC) subsequently issued its delimitation decision in April 2002. The United Nations Security Council expressly described that decision as having been embraced by the parties as final and binding under the Algiers Agreements.

The principle of respecting established borders is, therefore, not an abstract historical concern for Eritrea. It is directly connected to the experience of the region, and to the international agreements that were intended to provide a durable basis for peace.

Ethiopia's full, even if belated, acceptance of the 2002 Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission decision in 2018 was followed by the Joint Declaration of Peace and Friendship between Eritrea and Ethiopia, which reaffirmed the same principle. The Declaration stated that the state of war had ended, provided for the resumption of diplomatic, economic and communications links, and explicitly affirmed that the decision on the boundary would be implemented. It also committed both governments to jointly pursue regional peace, development and cooperation.

It is therefore difficult to understand why a position grounded in sovereignty, territorial integrity and respect for established boundaries should be dismissed as an "old narrative." If anything, the growing strategic competition surrounding the Red Sea demonstrates the continuing relevance of these principles.

Strategic Importance, Regional Cooperation and Maritime Access

The Red Sea today is experiencing increasing geopolitical attention because of its location, maritime trade routes, proximity to the Suez Canal and Bab el-Mandeb, and its connection to the wider Indian

Ocean and Gulf regions. These realities make the sovereignty of littoral states a matter of direct regional consequence.

For Eritrea, the issue is therefore not whether the Red Sea should be open to international commerce, diplomatic engagement or mutually beneficial economic cooperation. Eritrea has consistently recognized the importance of regional connectivity and cooperation. The question is whether such cooperation takes place based on sovereign equality, consent, reciprocity and respect for territorial integrity, or whether the strategic interests of some actors are allowed to override the legitimate interests of the states directly concerned.

There is an important distinction between access to international trade and claims to sovereign rights over the territory or maritime domain of another state. Landlocked states have interests in securing reliable and efficient access to international markets. Such interests, however, do not create sovereign rights over another state's territory, ports or maritime space. Commercial access is a matter that can be addressed through appropriate negotiated agreements and mutually accepted arrangements; sovereignty is not transferable by unilateral assertion.

It is precisely because Eritrea supports peaceful regional cooperation that it insists on this distinction.

Independent Foreign Policy Outlook, Economic Endowments and National Capacity

The Middle East Forum article also attempts to place Eritrea's contemporary position within an "Arab-Israeli" or Cold War framework. Such an approach risks overlooking Eritrea's own historical experience and its independent foreign policy outlook.

Eritrea's geographical position on the Red Sea gives it direct and legitimate interests in the security and stability of this maritime corridor. Its foreign policy positions should therefore be understood first and foremost, through the country's own national interests, its historical experience, and its commitment to sovereign equality, not through assumptions that every Eritrean position must be an extension of an external ideological alignment.

The article's reference to Eritrea's alleged "decades-long stagnation" is similarly a sweeping characterization rather than a substantive assessment. The impact of perennial hostility and military conflicts imposed by Ethiopia cannot be brushed aside. Eritrea is otherwise endowed with substantive economic endowments – the blue economy, the extractive industry, tourism, strategic locational advantages, and above all, unparalleled soft power in terms of an industrious people and a cohesive society within religious and ethnic diversity. Its judicious policies that eschew structural dependence is another vital component which will ensure and propel its rapid economic growth in congenial environment of durable regional peace and stability.

Regarding broader international cooperation, Eritrea remains committed to constructive engagement with countries and institutions based on sovereign equality, mutual respect, reciprocity and shared

interests. Its position is that international cooperation should strengthen national capacity rather than create structural dependence, and that regional economic integration should proceed through mutually agreed arrangements rather than through unilateral claims.

Conclusion and Core Principles

Ultimately, the issue is straightforward. Sovereignty is never an old narrative. Territorial integrity is not an outdated concept. Consent is not an obsolete principle.

These are foundational principles of the international system.

The strategic importance of the Red Sea does not diminish these principles. It reinforces them.

Eritrea will continue to engage constructively with its neighbors, regional partners and the wider international community. It supports peaceful cooperation, economic development, regional connectivity and the responsible utilization of the Red Sea's immense potential. But such cooperation must be founded with respect to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the littoral states.

Eritrea therefore rejects attempts to rewrite its history, to portray its independence as a simple act of "secession," or to reduce its contemporary Red Sea policy to an outdated geopolitical narrative.

The historical record is clear. Eritrea's independence was the culmination of a long struggle over self-determination, followed by an internationally observed referendum and recognition through admission to the United Nations. Its sovereignty is established, its territorial integrity is protected by international law, and its national interests are its own to define.

Eritrea remains committed to peace, cooperation and constructive engagement with all states based on sovereign equality, mutual respect, reciprocity and shared interests.

It will continue, as it has done, to defend its independence, territorial integrity and legitimate national interests, and to insist that the same principles be respected for every sovereign state of the Red Sea and the wider Horn of Africa.

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