

WARID: Ethiopia (ELF, ELF-PLF, EPLF) 1964–1991

STARDATE: 15 March 1964

ENDDATE: 28 May 1991

Related cases: Ethiopia (TPLF, EPDM, EPRDF),
Ethiopia (OLF),
Sudan (SPLA, NDA)

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Conflict overview

The war waged by the rebel groups the ELF (Eritrean Liberation Front), EPLF (Eritrean People's Liberation Front) and ELF-PLF (Eritrean Liberation Front – Popular Liberation Front) against the central government of Ethiopia was a war of secession. After World War II, the United Nations decided to join the former Italian colony of Eritrea with the Ethiopian Kingdom creating a federation with special rights granted to Eritrea. Over the years, the Ethiopian emperor Haile Selasse gradually restricted Eritrea's federal rights until it became a mere province of Ethiopia, losing its special status in 1962. These developments gave rise to violent resistance among the Eritreans. The ELF, the oldest rebel group in Eritrea, was founded in 1958.

The ousting of Haile Selasse in 1974 did not change the situation. The Derg – the military junta who seized power under Mengistu Haile Mariam and became a Marxist one-party regime – did not want to lose Eritrea and fought bitterly for the country's unity. In 1973, discontented members of ELF started their own rebel organization with a stronger, Leninist-Marxist political agenda: the EPLF. The two rebel groups struggled for dominance during the 1970s and succeeded in seizing nearly all major towns in Eritrea. In 1976, the ELF-PLF, a splinter group of the EPLF, emerged as an additional competitor, finally prevailing in the fight for dominance. They cooperated with Ethiopian rebels fighting to topple the central government, namely the Tigray's People Liberation Front (TPLF), based in the neighboring Tigray region in Ethiopia. The TPLF later established the EPRDF (Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front), a coalition of several rebel groups with the same aim. When EPRDF seized the capital Addis Ababa and installed leader Melès Zenawi as president in May 1991, the EPLF simultaneously took control of the Eritrean capital Asmara. The new government in Ethiopia granted their former brothers-in-arms a referendum for independence; in May 1993, Eritrea became a new state with EPLF-leader Issayas Afewerki as president. During the next years, the relationship between the two new governments appeared very close and

cooperative. The first deteriorations in this relation became apparent with the introduction of a new Eritrean currency in 1997. When border quarrels escalated into a full-scale war in 1998, it became clear that substantial ideological differences such as questions of “nationality, ethnicity and unity” (Reid 2003: 395) between the two rebel groups had only temporarily been set aside during the war and were now boiling up to surface.¹

For the first two post-war years during which Eritrea was not yet an independent state, we evaluate all items in reference to Ethiopia, unless the item refers explicitly to the disputed territory of Eritrea. After 1993, most items will be coded in reference to Eritrea, unless the constellations in Ethiopia are highly relevant for the Eritrean post-war order. Furthermore, we consider the central government of Ethiopia as the EPLF’s adversary, not only the Derg regime. The EPLF struggle was a fight for independence; it therefore targeted any central government that opposed this aim or endangered the status quo it would later obtain. Should the Ethiopian position towards Eritrean independence change due to a change in government or other events, the Ethiopian army still would be the primary adversary of the EPLF.

For the EPLF-dyad, the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) determines victory to have marked the end of the war [**WARENDUC=4**], which corresponds to assessments by other case experts [**WARENDOS=4**].² Until that point, the country was at war for 327 months [**WARDUR=327**]. In addition to the 98,927 fatalities resulting from fights between the Eritrean rebels and the government, the UCDP counts 1,093 victims of one-sided violence carried out by the government from 1989 to 1991. As there were three active conflicts in Ethiopia at that time – namely about Eritrea, about the central government and about Oromia –, we attribute one third of the fatalities to the Eritrean conflict, resulting in a total death toll of 99,291 [**FATALUC=99000**]. Jakob Bercovitch and Richard Jackson estimate a death toll of 200,000 people in the Eritrean war for secession from 1965 to 1993 [**FATALOS=200000**].³ The population in the territory of Eritrea was 1.5 million in 1963, before the war started [**PREWARPO=1500000**].⁴ If we set this into relation to the death estimates according to the UCDP, the intensity of the war can be calculated at 6.6 [**INTENSUC=6.6**], 13.33 if using Bercovitch and Jackson’s estimate [**INTENSOS=13.33**].

The military balance at the end of war

The EPLF was successful with its insurgency (Pool 1998: 19). When Mengistu fled the capital in

1 For a conflict overview, see De Waal 1991; Ofcansky/Berry 1991; Pool 1993; Pool 1998; Tareke 2009; Yohannes 1993; Young 1996.

2 Spencer et al 1992: 89.

3 Bercovitch/Jackson 1997: 64.

4 <http://databank.worldbank.org/data/home.aspx> (24 Apr 2015).

May 1991, the EPRDF subsequently assumed power in Addis Ababa and the EPLF in Asmara. Surrounded by multiple insurgencies, the Ethiopian army suffered a "crushing blow" (Spencer et al 1992: 89). The rebels clearly won the war [**VICTORY=1**].

In Eritrea, the EPLF controlled territory and implemented state-like structures in liberated areas during the war [**REBTERR=1**].⁵ In 1988, the EPLF defeated the army in Afabet and thereby captured an important military base of the Ethiopian army in Eritrea. From that point on, the Ethiopian army controlled a minority of the disputed territory: the Keren-Asmara-Massawa triangle and the port of Assab in the southeast. Massawa fell in February 1990 and Assab one year later. Asmara had been under siege since February 1990, and when the EPLF also captured two important air force bases of the Ethiopian army, the garrison at Asmara finally surrendered on 25 May 1991 (De Waal 1991: 243-253). The EPLF therefore controlled more territory in the disputed area by the end of war [**MORETERR=1**]. The fighting capacity of the rebels was 'moderate' according to Cunningham et al. [**REBFIGHT=0**].⁶

When Asmara was captured, about 75,000 remaining Ethiopian soldiers in Keren and Asmara decided to fight their way out to Sudan. Many were killed or captured by the EPLF on their way (De Waal 1991: 243-253). This chaotic retreat shows that the Ethiopian army was unable to continue fighting in the disputed territory in more than a sporadic manner [**CONFIGHT=1**]. During that time, no leaders were killed or captured [**LEADER=0**].

The military balance at the end of the war displays a clear advantage for the rebels [**WARBAL=0.67**].

The military balance in the post-war period

With the victory of the rebels, the national armed forces of Ethiopia factually ceased to exist. As described above, many of the surviving soldiers fled to Sudan. Until 27 April 1993, when Eritrea gained independence, rebels on both sides maintained order with their own forces. As no official state forces existed, we consider this item as not relevant for the first two years [**STATEFOR 1991-1992=n.r.**].⁷ Only the state forces of Eritrea are relevant for the period after Eritrean independence in 1993. The EPLF disposed of some 80,000-95,000 men in its territory. In late 1993, demobilization efforts started. Approximately 12,000 former soldiers were employed in the administration of the new government. 35,000 fighters were supposed to serve in the new Eritrean army and 48,000 were demobilized (Zimprich 1996: 60). Conscription for a reserve army started in

5 Cunningham et al 2009; Ofcansky/Berry 1991: 46; Pool 1998: 32.

6 Cunningham et al 2009.

7 IISS 1991-1993.

1994. Until 1998, Eritrea had conscripted 90,000 reserve soldiers (Trivelli/Zappatelli 2006: 225). According to IISS, the Eritrean army remained at 46,000 until 1998, more than previously planned (IISS 1993-1998). Since former EPLF fighters comprised the vast majority of the soldiers in the new Eritrean army, we consider the state forces to be in the rebel's hand [**STATEFOR 1993-1998=1**]. Although the new governments of Ethiopia and Eritrea closely cooperated after the war and their respective armed forces did not directly constitute a threat to the other side, we must take the forces of Ethiopia for all post-war years into account. Ethiopia also founded a new army after Eritrea's independence with approximately 100,000 soldiers, mainly consisting of former EPRDF rebels; this included additional recruits from other ethnic groups that did not participate in the previous war (IISS 1993-1998). Before the new army was founded, the EPRDF kept its armed forces of approximately 110,000 (IISS 1992) and therefore also constituted a separate force [**SEPFORCE 1991-1998=0**].

Although the Derg regime's army was dissolved at the end of war, it serves as a reference point for the changes in the number of troops during the post-war period. With 638,000 soldiers, the Derg army was 7.98 times larger than the Eritrean rebel force; the separate EPRDF forces in the first post-war year as well as the national armed forces in later years were both tiny in comparison to that. If a new war were to have broken out, the EPLF would have been confronted with an army only 1.08 times larger than their own. This should be reflected as an advantage for EPLF, as they were accustomed to fighting against a much larger army [**TROOPS 1991-1998=1**]. However, it should be mentioned that the ratio between Ethiopian and Eritrean forces increased from 1.08 to 2.5 through 1998. The frame of reference requires us to code these numbers as advantage for the EPLF – 2.5 is still much lower than 7.98. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize this increase in the Ethiopian armed forces. If the reference point were 1.08, this would be a significant change to the advantage of the Ethiopian armed forces. The military assets ought to be divided between the two new armies. Eritrea was meant to take some air and naval assets from Ethiopia since Ethiopia had lost its coastal access when granting independence to Eritrea. However, detailed information about the distribution of equipment in the two countries is not available [**ARMS 1991-1998=n.d.**].⁸

When the EPLF and EPRDF were victorious in 1991, EPLF assumed control over Eritrean territory. The borders of this territory were those of the former Italian colony. Ethiopia remained in control of the rest of the country [**TERRCON 1991-1998=0**]. In some areas, the exact demarcation of the Ethiopian-Eritrean border was not clear and some border-crossings by both countries were reported, ones that had always been settled locally until 1998 (Abbink 1998: 555). These small uncertainties

8 IISS 1990-1998.

do not constitute a gain of important territory; therefore, neither side won additional territory during the post-war period [**TERRWIN 1991-1998=0**]. With the independence of Eritrea, Ethiopia lost its coastal access and became a land-locked country, which constitutes a substantial economic disadvantage. In 1992, Ethiopia and Eritrea declared Assab, the most important port in Eritrea, a ‘free port’. Eritrea waived the port dues for Ethiopia. In the following years, 95% of the wares came from or went to Ethiopia (Connell/Killion 2010: 102-104). As Connell and Killion point out, “many saw the capture and annexation of this strategic port as Ethiopia’s primary but unstated objective during the border war at the end of the 1990s” (ibid: 101). As the port did not yield substantial advantages for Eritrea except some reduced port fees agreed upon with Ethiopia, we consider its proximity to Ethiopian territory and the high Ethiopian interest in it as a source of instability and therefore vulnerability for the EPLF [**VULNERAB 1991-1998= -1**].

After the war was over, there were no armed peacekeeping troops in Ethiopia or in Eritrea [**PEACKEEP 1991-1998=n.r.**]. During the war, the Derg regime in Ethiopia enjoyed the support of the Soviet Union (Young 1996: 112), but this support waned with the end of the Cold War. None of the permanent members of the UN Security Council would have intervened in the case of a new conflict [**P5ALLY 1991-1998=n.r.**].

The post-war balance exhibits an equilibrium for the first two years [**POSTBAL 1991-1992=0**] followed by a small advantage for Eritrea [**POSTBAL 1993-1998=0.17**]. This leads to an overall military balance value of 0.33 for the first two years [**BALANCE 1991-1992=0.33**] and 0.42 for the following years [**BALANCE 1993-1998=0.42**].

Economy

According to UN data, the (gross domestic product) GDP per capita increased from 117 to 221 USD during the post-war period. It did not drop with the start of the new war in 1998. The population also shows a steady increase.

Table 1: GDP per capita in current USD⁹

Year	Population (total)	GDP per capita
1991	3311719	117
1992	3331918	131
1993	3344626	151
1994	3365933	187
1995	3407812	188
1996	3473399	215
1997	3560353	220
1998	3668350	221

⁹ Data on the population at <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?page=3> (24 Feb 2015), data on the GDP per capita at <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/snaama/dnltransfer.asp?fID=9> (15 Apr 2015).

The scale of compromise after the war

From the end of the war in May 1991 until the referendum in April 1993, Eritrea was in a transition stage and experienced “semi-statehood” (Pool 1993: 392). Though it was still a province of Ethiopia during the first two post-war years, the EPLF immediately assumed governmental power as though Eritrea were already an independent state. The Central Committee of the EPLF formed a provisional government (Yohannes 1993: 17-18). After the referendum – in which the majority of Eritreans voted for independence – internal arrangements did not substantially change. In February 1994, an EPLF congress adopted the National Charter as the first step towards a national democratic constitution. From then on, the EPLF renamed itself PFDJ (People’s Front for Democracy and Justice) and attempted to transform itself from a military organization to a political party amongst others (Markakis 1995: 126). However, this development did not take place. The PFDJ remained the single, unchallenged ruling party in the disputed territory [**GOVERN 1991-1998=1**].

In July 1991, the new Ethiopian government approved a plan to hold a referendum in 1993 (HRW 2003: 12). In July, it also adopted a Transitional Period Charter that established the right of self-determination, including secession, for ethnic groups (Praeg 2006: 93). From then on, there were no formal or informal arrangements that would have given the Ethiopian Government a veto in political decisions [**VETO 1991-1998=1; VETOSAT 1991-1998=n.r.**].¹⁰

Elections in Eritrean territory as well as in Ethiopia are relevant for the first two years. There were no national elections to the advantage of the EPLF and EPRDF during that time. The status quo established by the rebels remained unchallenged [**ELECT 1991-1992=0**]. From 1993 onwards, only elections in Eritrea are relevant; though they did not take place. In 1997, the new constitution was adopted and elections were planned for 1998, but the outbreak of war forestalled any election plans. This was to the advantage of the EPLF [**ELECT 1993-1998=1**].¹¹ A semi-democratic system with some voting rights was only established on the provincial level, but the provincial representatives were limited to advisory functions (Tronvoll 1998: 460).

The main conflict item in this war was the question of whether Eritrea should belong to Ethiopia or not. Although Eritrea gained independence in 1993, it enjoyed de facto independence from 1991 onwards, as we can see in the immediate rule of the EPLF. Therefore, the EPLF clearly prevailed in this issue while the central government did not have any say in the matter [**EXBORDER 1991-1998=1**]. As the warring parties did not fight about the internal arrangements in Eritrea, other items are not relevant [**INBORDER 1991-1998=n.r.; COMPETEN 1991-1998=n.r.; ECONOMY 1991-1998=n.r.; SPECPRO 1991-1998=n.r.; ISSUE 1991-1998=n.r.; ISSUE2 1991-1998=n.r.**].

10 Tesfagiorgis 2010: 74-76; Negash 1997: 168.

11 <http://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/1998/eritrea> (24 Apr 2015).

Several disputes preceded the war that broke out between Eritrea and Ethiopia in 1998. Two items are often cited as precursors to the armed confrontation: a dispute about the exact demarcation of the border between the two countries and economic disputes. The EPLF and TPLF always had different understandings of the border, even during the liberation struggle; from 1991 to 1998, there had been some small disputes about its boundaries. Both sides agreed to settle this issue and set up a joint border commission (Abbink 1998: 554). As Mussie Tesfagiorgis explains, “little is known about either this commission’s tasks or its findings regarding the issue” (Tefagiorgis 2010: 89). The existence of this commission was not public knowledge as neither Eritrea nor Ethiopia published any information about it and until 1998. While most observers state that the dispute escalated in May 1998 when Eritrean armed forces occupied several towns and villages that were previously under Ethiopian authority (Abbink 1998: 552), other sources speak of Ethiopian troops invading the Eritrean city of Adi Murug in 1997 (Tefagiorgis 2010: 89). Due to the scarce amount of information about the commission, it is impossible to say which side prevailed in this dispute before the war broke out [NEWCON 1991-1998=n.d.].¹²

Another conflict item was Eritrea’s struggle to gain greater economic independence from Ethiopia. To this aim, Eritrea replaced the Ethiopian Birr with its own currency, the Naqfa. The separate currencies went on to hinder extensive trade between the two countries and worsened Ethiopia’s access to the Eritrean ports. Ethiopia reacted harshly, demanding that all trans-border trade above 2,000 Birr to be conducted in hard currency and also declared any remaining Birr in Eritrea to be null and void. Later, Ethiopia agreed to exchange old Birr from Eritrea into new Birr (Abbink 1998: 559). In this dispute, Eritrea prevailed by keeping its new currency, though advantages gained from these steps are doubtful [NEWCON 2 1991-1996=n.r., NEWCON2 1997-1998=1].

The question as to who benefitted more from the compromises is not relevant as there were no compromises implemented [BENEFIT 1991-1998=n.r.; BENEFIT2 1991-1998=n.r.].

Altogether, the scale of compromise shows that the EPLF gained full control of its new state and did not need to make concessions [COMPROM 1991-1992=0.75, COMPROM 1993-1998=1].

The stability of peace

Since we consider the EPLF and the central government of Ethiopia to be the warring parties – not only the Derg regime –, the war between Eritrea and Ethiopia is defined as a renewed war according to the strict definition [SAMEWAR=1; ANYWAR=1]. In less than one month, the threshold of 1,000 fatalities was reached [DATESAME=31 May 1998; DATEANY=31 May 1998]. Until then,

12 Ito, Tim: Ethiopia-Eritrea: A Troubled Relationship, Washington Post (Online Edition), March 1999, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/inatl/longterm/eritrea/overview.htm> (24 Apr 2015).

Eritrea and Ethiopia were at peace for 84 months [PEACMON1=84; PEACMON2=84].

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Annex

Table 2: Troops in post-war Eritrea/Ethiopia (IISS 1990-1999)

<i>Year</i>	<i>Government</i>	<i>EPLF</i>	<i>Ratio</i>	
1990	638000	80000	7.98	1
1991	65000	60000	1.08	1
1992	110000	85000	1.29	1
1993	100000	80000	1.25	1
1994	120000	70000	1.71	1
1995	120000	55000	2.18	1
1996	120000	55000	2.18	1
1997	120000	46000	2.61	1
1998	120000	47100	2.55	1

Table 3: Equipment in post-war Eritrea/Ethiopia (IISS 1990-1999)

<i>Year</i>	<i>Government</i>	<i>EPLF</i>	<i>Ratio</i>	
1990	1300 MBT ¹³	n.d.		
1991	n.d.	n.d.		
1992	n.d.	n.d.		
1993	n.d.	n.d.		
1994	n.d.	n.d.		
1995	n.d.	n.d.		
1996	n.d.	n.d.		
1997	n.d.	n.d.		
1998	350 MBT	n.d.		

13 Main battle tanks.