

Report

Zigzag Diplomacy: Ethiopian-Qatari Diplomatic Relations and their Implications

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Given its ideal geopolitical location, Ethiopia's trade, economic, cultural and diplomatic ties to North Africa, the Mediterranean, the Middle East and South Asia and beyond predate Egyptian civilisation. Ethiopia is the only country in Africa that has had very close links to and interactions with the three major Abrahamic religions – Christianity, Islam and Judaism. It is not only this that makes the country unique. It is also the country of the first hijra (migration) in the history of Islam and the oldest Muslim settlement in Africa. This did not happen through invasion or forcible occupation. It occurred at the request of Prophet Mohammed and at the willingness and welcoming of the Christian Ethiopian emperor at the time. What is remarkable is that the historical ties between the Arab and Islamic world on the one hand and Ethiopia on the other was cemented by a Christian, peaceful, relatively stable and unified Ethiopia that was gracious and kind enough to cheerfully give refuge to the family of the Prophet and his followers. History tells us that in 615 AD, when faced with persecutions, the Prophet "instructed his followers to flee Mecca and cross the Red Sea to find a safe haven in the neighbouring Ethiopian Christian Kingdom." As a consequence, Ethiopia's relations with the Arab world in general and Islam in particular can be characterised as relatively unique and full of promise. Equally remarkable and noteworthy is the fact that, at the time, Ethiopia had access to and influence in the Red Sea, a fact that was subsequently rejected by some Arab governments. Nevertheless, this promise in relations between Ethiopia and the Arab and Islamic world assumes recognition of national interests,

sovereignty and territorial integrity and the unique cultural, social, political, economic, security and other attributes that characterise countries regardless of their level of development, ideological tendencies and religions. What matters most is the world that is unfolding in front of us.

With the exception of the five year interlude emanating from Italian Fascist aggression and occupation that interrupted its remarkable history of continuity, Ethiopia is the only continuously independent country in Africa and, arguably, the origin of humankind and one of the oldest civilisations in the world. It is also a mosaic of varied ethnic groups and home to three major religions. A substantial Jewish population that resided in the Ethiopian highlands for thousands of years settled in Israel in the 1980s. Its cultural imprints persist. In their 2012 book, *Abyssinian Christianity: The First Christian Nation*, Mario Alexis Portella and Abba Abraham Buruk Woldegabber, present a powerful and profound argument that “Ethiopia was the first Christian nation,” with the Ethiopian Orthodox faith decreed as a state religion in 218 AD, almost four hundred years before the country welcomed and hosted the followers of Prophet Mohammed in 615 AD. World history is replete with references to Ethiopia. Nowhere else is this more pronounced than in the Bible in which Ethiopia is mentioned more than 40 times. The country’s special relationship with the Arab world and Islam as well as Israel is, in part, linked to its strategic geopolitical position in the Horn of Africa and at the heart of the Blue Nile or Abbay River. Ethiopia’s identity and history is linked to its rivers and waterways.

Ethiopia Today

Ethiopia is not part of North Africa or the Middle East. However, its trade, economic, cultural and historical linkages and interactions have been primarily with North Africa and the Middle East – especially Egypt, Sudan, Israel, Palestine, Yemen, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf region. Its faith has consistently been monotheistic, reinforcing its links to the world’s Abrahamic faiths and the Old Testament. In referring to Ethiopia over and over again, the scriptures, Romans, Greeks and others refer to the notion that the “Garden of Eden” may be in the vicinity of the Ethiopian Highlands and its river basins. This may or may not be true. However, what is important to note is the contention that is now backed by archaeological findings in the Danakil Depression that Ethiopia is among the world’s hubs in the creation and evolution of humankind and world civilisation. Here, I refer to the discovery of Lucy or what Ethiopians call “Dinknesh.” This augments the argument that Ethiopia is indeed one of the oldest civilisations in the world. Why is this so significant in terms of diplomatic relations with Qatar and other Arab and Islamic nations? From time immemorial, Ethiopia’s relations with the outside world have been governed and guided by its access to the Red Sea; its legitimacy and right to access its rivers and water basins; its unique history, culture and identity as an

independent and sovereign nation; its determination to grow its national economy and join the family of developed nations; and its current resolve to defeat “terrorism” in the Horn of Africa. These national interests require cultivating relations with a variety of nations that may not necessarily be ideologically and culturally compatible. Ethiopia and Ethiopians have always fought for legitimacy and acceptance; and this will persist for ages.

Historically, the domain that is Ethiopia extended far beyond the Red Sea, and during the reign of Emperor Haile Selassie, Ethiopia’s internationally recognised geopolitical space or sovereignty extended from the northern tip of present day Eritrea on the Red Sea to the town of Moyale on the Kenyan border and to areas adjacent to today’s Southern Sudan and the traditional boundary with northern Sudan. Accordingly, Ethiopia had access to the sea; it had a relatively sophisticated navy and Assab served as the primary seaport for Ethiopian trade with the outside world. Today, Ethiopia is one of the largest landlocked countries in the world. This is one of the areas of diplomatic uneasiness between Ethiopia and the Arab world. The fact that Ethiopia had served as safe haven for the “family and followers of the Prophet” has not necessarily served Ethiopia well, many Ethiopian experts argue. Egyptian, Syrian, Iraqi and other Arab governments supported secessionists including Eritreans and this has a lingering and adverse impact on Ethiopia’s relations with Arab nations.

Since the introduction of Islam in the seventh century, Ethiopia has served as a model of peaceful and mutually respectful home for Christians and Muslims. Like Christians, Muslim Ethiopians hail from all ethnic groups. They live and work in almost all corners of the country and share the distinctive attribute of belonging to Ethiopia as Ethiopians. It is this commonality of belonging to one country above and beyond religion that helped Ethiopians to defend themselves in unison against foreign aggression for more than 3,000 years. Many Ethiopian and foreign experts contend that it is this distinctiveness in the evolution of Christianity, Islam and Judaism as well as other cultures and values that offer Ethiopians their own unique national identity as people. I imply that the Christian, Judaic and Muslim faiths have evolved as distinct creations of Ethiopians and must continue to retain their unique identities.

Ethiopia continues to be a predominantly Christian country. According to the Ethiopian government’s 2007 census, Christians account for 62.8 percent; Muslims for 33.9 percent; animists for 2.6 percent and others for 0.7 percent of the Ethiopian population. Of the Christian population, 18.6 percent are Protestant, 0.7 percent are Catholic and the rest are Ethiopian Orthodox. The country is therefore diverse both in terms of faith and ethnicity. Ethiopians and other independent observers opine that the Arab and

Muslim world is still uneasy about accepting Ethiopia as a predominantly Christian country with a substantial Muslim population that is fairly well integrated into the fabric of Ethiopian society. This uneasiness creates mutual suspicion.

Ethiopian-Qatari diplomatic relations are, therefore, essentially, mirror-images of the long and uneasy relations and interactions among Arab nations on the one hand and Ethiopia on the other. By and large, these relations are shrouded in long-held and culturally embedded mistrusts, suspicions, intrigues, hidden agendas, competition and rivalries for influence, ambivalences and misgivings that predate Egyptian civilisation under the Pharaohs.

Consequently, neither Ethiopia nor the Arab world has taken full advantage of the enormous potential for economic and trade links between and among countries that share geographical proximity, history, culture and complementarities that would benefit their respective societies in the long-term. The lag in realising the full potential of benefits that would accrue from mutually respectful diplomatic, economic, trade and other ties emanating from the respective evolutions of the two sides as distinct socioeconomic, political and cultural entities that seem antagonistic to one another and should not be. Ethiopia is one of the most ancient countries in the world and has a distinct civilisation of its own. It is the only independent black African country; and is, arguably, the first "Christian nation state" in the world. At the same time, Ethiopia is home to Christians (the majority faith in the country), Muslims (almost a third of the population according to the Ethiopian government's 2007 census), Jews (most of whom immigrated to Israel) and members of other faiths. Most experts agree that these faiths have evolved uniquely and distinctly as "Ethiopian" and have coexisted side by side peacefully for over a thousand years. Ethiopia possesses a heterogeneous population of more than 80 ethnic groups with distinct languages, values, history and cultures. Arab countries are much more homogenous. These and other contrasts are critical to note and understand when one assesses relations between Ethiopia and other countries, including Qatar.

While Ethiopia's geographical location in the Horn of Africa has provided it with geopolitical space to play a bridging role between sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East and beyond, it is part of mainstream Africa. It is not and cannot be an Arab country. It is these historical realities that prompted successive Ethiopian governments to advance Pan-Africanism and the formation and evolution of the African Union, whose headquarter is in Addis Ababa. Until the secession of Eritrea, Ethiopia was a maritime country with access to the Red Sea. Today, it is one of the largest land-locked countries in the world. A significant area of challenge in the relations between Ethiopia and Qatar is the extent to which the latter understands and appreciates Ethiopia's long-term

security and economic interests with regard to access to the sea. Although Qatar is geographically tiny, with an estimated 1.8 million people, its influence is enormous. It is a homogeneous, enormously rich Arab and Muslim country, with per capita income per annum of \$88,000, one of the ten richest countries in the world (according to Forbes and IMF). In contrast, Ethiopia, one of the oldest civilisations in the world and the second most populous in Africa is, at the same time, one of the poorest on the planet, with a per capita income of \$370 (2012 World Bank and IMF estimates). As the largest aid recipient in Africa, Ethiopia is capital-poor; and Qatar investible financial capital-rich, with a sovereign wealth fund in excess of \$200 billion per year. On the surface, there is a match between a capital-starved Ethiopia and a capital-rich Qatar that is determined to diversify its economic assets while expanding its influence and reach in Africa. However, this possible match between Ethiopia's needs for capital and Qatar's enormous financial wealth is insufficient to describe the warming up of relations between the two countries. It is vital to remember that the two countries broke diplomatic relations in 2008. Why did this happen? What changes occurred since?

Perceptions of Qatar's Role in Foreign Affairs

Ethiopian scholars, general society and successive governments have been and continue to be suspicious of the Arab world, including Qatar. This is because of strong perceptions and evidence that they are "inimical" to Ethiopia's national unity, territorial integrity, access to the sea, rapid growth and development and stability. There is a strong perception that Arab support for the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) led by Isaias Afewerki was instrumental in the secession of Eritrea and in the loss of Ethiopia's legitimate and rightful access to its seaports, especially Assab. This is one of the areas of contention that will persist regardless of diplomatic overtures. As such, the strong and close tie between the Qatari and Eritrean governments has been a source of concern among Ethiopian policy makers for several years. Rightly or wrongly, the question had persisted: was Qatar using its substantial financial wealth to promote stability and peace in the Horn, or were its considerable monies and other support to the Eritrean government, opposition groups stationed in Eritrea as well as to fundamentalist groups in Somalia intended for the purpose of promoting instability in the region? Ethiopian and other African experts feel that the Qatar model of pouring millions of dollars in conflict prone and ridden regions such as Eritrea, Darfur, Somalia and Mali does not address the fundamental social, political and economic causes of conflict in these places. They also contend that oil and gas rich Arab Muslim countries finance fundamentalism in the Horn, including Ethiopia – a point of view of which there is anecdotal evidence. On the other hand, they contend that the fundamental objectives of fairness, justice, equity, political and social pluralism and sustainability within countries are often overlooked by outside state actors and powers such as Qatar, China, the West and others.

In 2008, the Ethiopian government led by Prime Minister Meles Zenawi broke diplomatic ties with the government of Qatar accusing it of “being a major source of instability in the Horn of Africa,” i.e. supporting the Eritrean government and Al-Shabaab (an extremist and terrorist group) in Somalia. Eritrea’s first and only president, Isaias Afewerki, who is a major adversary to the Ethiopian government had befriended Qatar and was a frequent visitor of the country. His government benefited from Qatar’s largesse and diplomatic clout, arguably at the ‘cost of Ethiopia.’ The tense and dangerous relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea to which Qatar and others contribute persist and will most likely continue until new and genuine modalities of peace and reconciliation between Ethiopia and Eritrea take place. Many Ethiopians find it ironic that the same Qatari government that supported the Arab revolutions, especially that of Libya, would also support dictators like Afewerki of Eritrea. It is this irony that makes Qatar’s diplomatic initiatives in Africa rather enigmatic. The Ethiopian government’s decision to break diplomatic relations with Qatar reflects long-held suspicions among Ethiopian policy-makers and civil society that the Arab world has ‘consistently’ tried to undermine Ethiopia’s unity, territorial integrity and sustainable development. At the center of this accusation and suspicion is the long war with Eritrea; the support offered by governments of Egypt, Iraq, Sudan and the Gulf states that ultimately led to Eritrea’s secession and Ethiopia’s loss of access to the sea.

Most Ethiopians, intellectuals and many government officials do not make clear distinctions between various Arab governments and their attitudes towards Ethiopia. There is a tendency to lump all of them together for good or bad. Qatar’s off and on diplomatic relations with Ethiopia may be a victim of this suspicious culture. This may be unfair but the perception persists. For example, on 26 February 2013, Saudi Arabia’s Deputy Defence Minister Khalid bin Sultan unleashed a brutal, inflammatory, unwarranted and undiplomatic attack against Ethiopia’s decision to build the Grand Renaissance Dam on the Abbay River (the Blue Nile) saying, “Egypt is the most affected party because they have no alternative water source compared to other Nile Basin countries and the establishment of the dam 12 kilometres from the Sudanese border is for political plotting rather than economic gain and constitutes a threat to Egyptian and Sudanese security.” Although the Saudi government distanced itself from this clearly confrontational and inimical statement, the barrage against Ethiopia’s interest reinforces a political tradition that has prevented Ethiopia from utilising the Blue Nile to develop its economy, irrigate its vast lands and feed its growing population. The Eritrean government that Qatar supports opposes Ethiopia’s right to build the Renaissance Dam; and one wonders where Qatar stands on the issue.

A New Government and Approach

The diplomatic reengagement between Ethiopia and Qatar is a positive development for both. Following the passing of Prime Minister Meles in 2012, Hailemariam Dessalegn, the new Ethiopian prime minister, took the initiative to restore diplomatic relations with Qatar. In welcoming the Qatari prime minister, Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim bin Jaber Al Thani, to Ethiopia, the Ethiopian prime minister welcomed the diplomatic thaw on 5 November 2012 and made the following statement: "We are in a time where we can flourish and strengthen our relationship and our relationship is based on mutual trust as well as a good heart." Four years earlier, this "mutual trust" evaporated and Meles accused the Qatari government of meddling in and destabilising Ethiopia and the Horn. The perception then, and among civil society now, is that as a strong supporter of the Eritrean government, Qatar had undermined Ethiopia's legitimate and rightful access to its seaport of Assab. (Ethiopia invested heavily and claims the port as its own.) It is not clear to most observers of the Ethiopian and Qatari rapprochement whether anything has changed substantially to restore mutual trust at all. Perhaps, Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim bin Jaber Al Thani's statement in Addis Ababa that "We believe peace brings development and these countries in this part of the world (i.e. the Horn of Africa) need a lot of development" is most timely and appropriate. Peace is essential for development.

The Economic Factor

With the Ethiopian ruling party government reported and the World Bank and IMF accepted growth rate of 11 percent per annum, Ethiopia is one of the fastest growing economies in the world. At the same time, it remains among the poorest in Africa. It has immense natural resources, especially irrigable farmlands, minerals, hydroelectric potential, a consumer base of 94 million people, a strategic geographical location that serves as a hub of the newly emerging, youth-led, fast growing and changing African continent. China, India and other non-traditional trade and economic partners are active in the country. The Ethiopian government is investing heavily in infrastructure, especially hydroelectric power generation and irrigation. It has leased out hundreds of thousands of the most fertile farmlands to thousands of individuals and firms from 36 countries. Hundreds of thousands of Ethiopia's indigenous people in farmland rich regions such as Gambella and the Omo Valley have been forced out of their ancestral lands to make room for domestic elite and foreign investors. Resentment against land grabbers, including domestic ethnic elites as well as Saudi Arabia, India and others is growing. Although Ethiopia is relatively stable, it is beset with internal political, social and religious divisions and political repression.

Civil and religious freedoms have been repressed and political competition is non-existent. Corruption and illicit outflow of funds are widespread. Muslims and Christians

have been protesting for greater freedom and autonomy to no avail. The stalemate in relations with Eritrea continues and there is uneasiness with regard to relations with Sudan and Egypt, arising in part due to the misunderstanding of the potential impact of the Great Renaissance Dam, one of the largest civil works projects in Africa today. Interestingly, the vast majority of Ethiopians in the country support the project and have contributed their salaries and invested heavily by buying bonds to finance this project. For this reason, it will be unwise to underestimate the enormous public sentiment and support for the project.

The Role of the Media

Those in the Ethiopian opposition feel that the most important contribution that the Qatari government could make in support of Ethiopia and its people is to use its most popular media outlet, Al Jazeera, to publicise the plight of a substantial segment of the population for fairness, equity, the rule of law, justice, religious and civic freedom, anti-corruption and empowerment. The fact that both Ethiopia and Qatar have close ties to the United States and the West might provide Qatar the leverage it needs to advance sustainable peace without which sustainable and equitable development will remain elusive both in Ethiopia and rest of the Horn.

The Ethiopian public, especially the youth, was enamored with Al Jazeera's pioneering role in promoting and covering the Arab spring when other media was literally absent from the scene. Ethiopia today is home to one of the largest political prisoner populations, including prisoners of conscience, in the world. Many have been imprisoned under the government's anti-terrorist law that is intended to accuse any peaceful dissident who struggles for freedom and justice, including spiritual and religious leaders. The Ethiopian government is quick to react against and censor any independent reporting whether it is Qatari, American, German or Ethiopian. This is the reason why Al Jazeera's coverage of Arab protests was viewed as "interference in the internal affairs" of the country, a government practice applied to the Voice of America and the German-Amharic radio station a number of times. In each case, the government accuses independent media that exposes human rights violations of being "destabilising."

Arguably, the single most important contribution that Qatar and Western governments could and should make in support of Ethiopia's long-term interests, peace, stability and sustainable and equitable development is the promotion and defence of the rule of law, and the protection and institutionalization of freedom of the press and civil, political and human rights. The Ethiopian people and the entire Horn of Africa deserve to live without fear of their own governments and leaders.

Prospects of a Brighter Future

Given peace, stability, accommodation of the needs of its diverse population and mutually beneficial relations with its neighbours and countries in the Middle East and North Africa and elsewhere, Ethiopia possesses geopolitical and demographic advantage unmatched by many other states. This enormous potential suggests the necessity of acquiring the political and economic governance of the country. Ethiopia's population of 94 million--the second largest in Africa-- will reach 278 million by 2050, becoming the tenth largest in the world. This dramatic demographic shift will have profound economic and political impact not only in the Horn but also in the rest of Africa and the Middle East. This in itself foretells the need for positive and constructive changes in the relations of countries in the Horn of Africa, including accommodating Ethiopia's need for access to the port of Assab. Ethiopia's right to such access is as firmer as is its ability and right to use the waters of the Nile for its development without harming others. Given sound resolution of the issues identified, there is no doubt that Ethiopia will emerge as a leading economy in the next 25 to 50 years. The key variable is its ability to resolve its current political crisis and decide to establish inclusive and participatory governance. In this case, Ethiopia will no longer be a food aid dependent nation. In fact, it will benefit the entire Horn as well as the Middle East and North Africa in the decades ahead. A prosperous Ethiopia will also serve as a beacon of peaceful coexistence among its religious groups, especially Christians and Muslims.

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