

These past days Stratfor, a rather prestigious global intelligence journal based in Austin, Texas, has circulated a report entitled “Eritrea: Another Venue for the Iranian-Israeli Rivalry.” The uncharacteristic shallowness and obvious intent of the ‘report’ does not elicit any serious rebuttal. Yet, we found it appropriate to respond to it given the tsunami-scale reproduction that it has generated.

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In less than 48 hours since this piece was posted in Stratfor website on December 11, 2012 at 11:15 GMT, the story was picked up [as a quick search by the title yielded some 152,000 and another hour or so later 269,000 results), from sites that range from blogs to established news papers.

Some of the sites even gave the story a life of its own. For instance, the UPI.com, which boasts “over 100 years of journalistic excellence,” picked up the story as a special report (Dec. 11, 2012 at 1:52) under the title “Israel, Iran vie for control of Red Sea,” this piece is full of quotes from the original piece but failed to quote the source.

The Eritrean Center for Strategic Studies (ECSS) in its review of the ‘report’ found several areas of concern, beginning with the intention, assemblage, and not to mention its unfounded accusations, passing remarks and unsubstantiated conclusions.

Let us first focus on the easily verifiable facts:

1. Eritrea enjoys normative diplomatic ties with Iran. This is nothing extraordinary; neither is the relationship particularly close or special. Indeed, it is not different, by any measurable yardstick, from the warm diplomatic ties that Eritrea enjoys with all other countries in the Middle East. Eritrea has in fact resident embassies in Saudi Arabia, Yemen, the Emirates, Qatar and Kuwait while it is represented in Iran by a non-resident Ambassador. Furthermore, Iran has much deeper economic ties and resident embassies (which is not the case in Eritrea) with all other countries in the Horn of Africa; including Ethiopia, Djibouti and the Sudan. True, Eritrea had signed a loan agreement³ worth 25 million Euros with Iran in April 2009, during the visit of President Isaias to Tehran. But this amount is much smaller than Iranian development assistance or investments in Ethiopia or the Sudan. Furthermore, according to Eritrean Government sources, the loan, which was essentially a commercial credit to buy construction materials and other commodities from Iran, was not executed in time due to various administrative delays and was dropped altogether later.

2. Eritrea also enjoys diplomatic ties with Israel. Again this is not peculiar or extraordinary in any sense of the word although both Israel and Eritrea have resident ambassadors in each other's capital. Investment and trade ties between the two countries are not that significant.
3. Eritrea has never granted Iran or Israel, or both of them as it is ridiculously maintained by Stratfor, military bases or outposts in its inland territories or waterways and islands. And yet, for reasons better known to its authors, these wild stories have been circulating intermittently for some years now. A couple of years ago, for instance, the London-based Sunday Times quoted obscure Israeli Security officials to ascertain, in a rather long article: "Israel is said to have two Eritrean bases, one a 'listening post' for signals intelligence, the other a supply base for its German-built submarines while ... Iran has a naval base in the Eritrean port of Assab". The Israeli Prime Minister subsequently lamented Iran's "increasing influence" in Eritrea in an interview with Fox News shortly afterwards although he reportedly retracted his statement later in an apologetic official communication to the Government of Eritrea⁴.
4. How Eritrea can be thought of simultaneously offering military bases and host two mortal enemies in adjacent patches of its territory is really mind boggling. One might argue that in abstract legal terms, Eritrea has, as a sovereign state, every prerogative and right to enter into military and economic alliances with any country of its choice and in accordance with the exigencies of its national interests. The signing of bilateral or multilateral pacts and alliances is indeed a matter of Eritrea's sovereign political choices. Various publications and official statements nonetheless confirm that the Government of Eritrea does not subscribe to the notion of providing military bases to major international or regional powers. The public statement⁵ issued by Eritrea's Foreign Ministry in response to the Sunday Times article in fact emphasizes that "Eritrea's sovereign choice has always been, and remains, that of aversion to dependency, polarized alliances and the suzerainty" of a big brother. In any case, Eritrea would not be so foolhardy, reckless or myopic to mortgage its land and territory as a battleground for two avowed enemies in exchange for possible short-term gains.

In the event, why Stratfor ignored, without serious research or validation, these well known facts and chose to recycle the mendacious innuendos that are already available in the market remains a mystery. Stratfor did not, in fact, bring new information or fresh and credible evidence to what it evidently considered was a "sensational scoop". And on the basis of this false presumption, it proceeded to dissect the "plausible explanations of motive and environmental constraints" that must have impelled the Government of Eritrea to play with fire! As we shall briefly demonstrate below, these presumptions are even more tenuous and flawed.

Stratfor's 'analysis' is anchored on "two key geopolitical constraints and multiple security concerns," that, in its view, afflict Eritrea and that it has to grapple with as the new kid-in-the-block. One of these is described, in very hyperbolic terms, as "the existential threat of invasion from Ethiopia." Stratfor does not analyze and tell us, in the first place, why and how a border war, that is fully resolved now to all legal purposes and intents, morphs into an "existential and permanent threat of invasion". Surely, both countries can co-exist and cultivate mutually beneficial ties of friendship, cooperation and alliance if both countries subscribe to, and abide by, normative principles of international law. Past and current Ethiopian regimes may not

as yet be beholden to these objectives although the new Government in Addis Abeba is going out of its way “to talk the language of peace”. However this plays out in reality in the months ahead, the border problem between Eritrea and Ethiopia does not, objectively, fall into the category of “existential conflicts”.

But there may be external forces that are wedded to, and are prodding, Ethiopian internal agendas that could trigger another round of conflict and war. Stratfor’s report may be alluding to the centrality of the external dimension when it confirms US endorsement of Ethiopia’s past practices and perhaps inchoate agendas. Although Stratfor chose to gloss over the issue, Ethiopia could not have managed to violate fundamental pillars of international law to occupy sovereign Eritrean territories with impunity without overarching US political and diplomatic support and protection. But it is instructive to note that the report tacitly legitimizes Ethiopia’s belligerent ambitions when it cryptically amplifies Ethiopia’s drawbacks as “the largest landlocked country in Africa.” This is the repackaging of the old ‘head-and-hectare-mentality’, which justified that Eritrea, with small territory and population, should be sacrificed at the altar of big regional [Ethiopia] and international [mainly US] interests. This old strategic thinking has been repackaged to justify the possibility of another Ethiopian attempt of re-invasion of Eritrea.

Stratfor’s gross anti-Eritrean bias is further demonstrated when the report gullibly parrots the false narrative that “Eritrea lost the war”. What criteria did Stratfor employ to reach such a conclusion? There are much deeper issues that the ‘report’ needs to dig out regarding the conduct of the Eritrea-Ethiopia war if it really wishes to form an informed opinion. What transpired during those fateful three Ethiopian offensives is now history. However, just to highlight the sloppiness of the report: while categorically stating that “Eritrea had lost the war”, it simultaneously asserts, in the next sentence, that Eritrea “repelled the Ethiopians and safeguarded its independence.” Still, it wrongly insinuates the death toll of 70,000 as the casualties suffered by Eritrea. Eritrea’s losses in the war were less than a third of this figure even if this remains horrendously high in terms of its population size. Ethiopia’s losses exceeded 70,000 by its own official admissions. But the central issue at stake is not the arithmetic of each country’s human losses. War cannot be justified under any conditions; there is no acceptable threshold as far as human losses in either country is concerned and the unnecessary death of even a single person cannot be condoned.

Stratfor further drifts into what it considers geopolitical chess games to casually assert: “Eritrea has turned to the Middle East for alliances and assistance.” And without factual evidences or solid premises, it simply tells us that Eritrea has become a close ally of Iran, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt and then concludes that “Eritrea and its waters have become another venue for Iran and Israel’s rivalry”. As we intimated before, these assertions are not substantiated by facts and figures that illustrate the depth of these “close” ties. They are not put in regional perspective to gauge whether Eritrea’s ties with these countries are on a higher plane than those of the Sudan, Ethiopia or Djibouti. There is no investigation to find out whether these “close ties” begun after the war between Eritrea and Ethiopia or whether they predate them and have thus no correlation with the antagonistic relationships that obtain today between the two neighboring countries.

In as far as Iran is concerned, the report alleges that Eritrea had struck a deal with Iran “to

maintain a military presence in Assab - officially to protect the state-owned, renovated, Soviet-era oil refinery there.” Stratfor does not provide us with the plausible evidence that such an agreement ever took place. As described before, the two countries did sign a commercial loan agreement in April 2009 and this document is in the public domain. Secondly, the Assab refinery, which was built by the Soviet Union in 1968 has not been renovated in the last twenty years and it has not been functional for almost ten years now. Third, what would be the rationale for Eritrea to seek Iranian military presence in order to protect a small, outdated, oil refinery?

How Stratfor can publish such a flawed and silly report without checking its facts is really surprising. The more so as the journal has earned a well-deserved reputation for insightful and original analysis of issues and events of critical geopolitical importance. Although we would not like to speculate without any substantial information and thus fall into the same trap, we would nonetheless hope that it has not been lured by tabloid considerations of publishing any “sensational story” for commercial gains. We also hope that it has not served, unwittingly, as a credible platform and conduit for some intelligence agencies that may have an interest in planting a fabricated story in pursuit of their sinister objectives against Eritrea. Whatever the case, there are no military bases of Iran and/or Israel in Eritrea. Indeed, at this age of preponderant cyberspace technology, the locations and details of these bases would have long been publicly available with all the required resolutions and precisions unless, i.e., they are mere phantoms that exist in the crooked minds of the detractors and arch-enemies of Eritrea. These cannot, after all, be matters of sheer speculation, sinister disinformation or seemingly informed guesswork.

Eritrean Centre for Strategic Studies (ECSS)