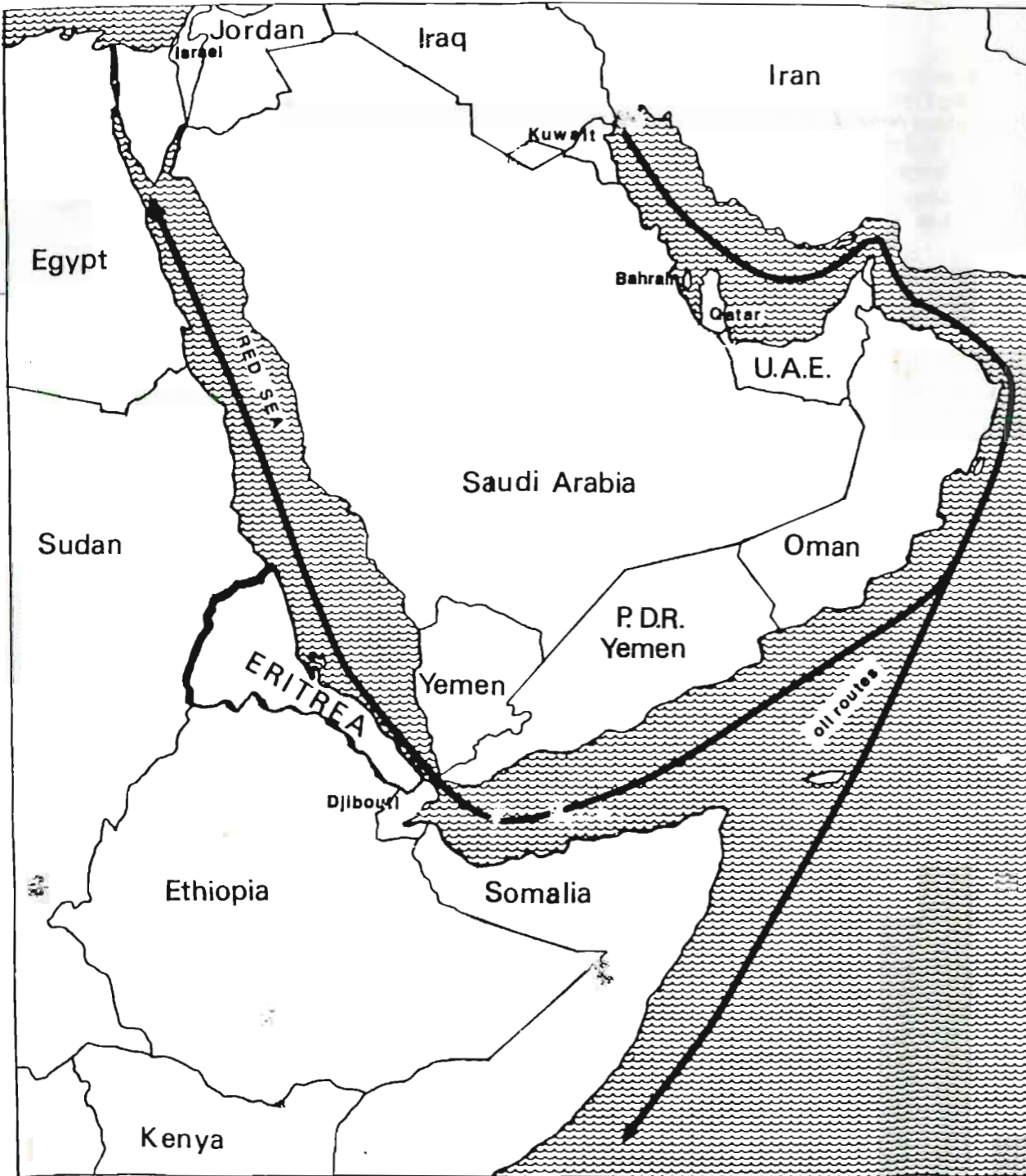


# The War for Liberation in Eritrea



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Since 1961, the people of the African country Eritrea have been fighting a war for their independence from Ethiopia, their colonial ruler.

With the slogan, "self-reliant protracted people's war is the only way to victory," the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) has mobilized and organized workers, peasants, women and students to take part not only in the war, but in the social revolution against feudalism.

The outcome of this war will have tremendous impact on the world-wide struggle against imperialism—because the EPLF understands that Eritreans must be their own liberators and Eritrea must be a truly non-aligned nation.

## HISTORY

Eritrea, a small country on the Red Sea coast, has resisted a series of colonial occupations for 400 years. Its present borders were drawn by Italian colonizers in 1885. At that time all of Africa was carved up by the Europeans; the boundaries defined by European conquest are the borders that exist in Africa today.

In 1950, the United Nations, deciding the fate of the colonies Italy lost in World War II, made Libya and Somalia independent but subjugated Eritrea to Ethiopia in a vaguely defined federation, a proposal sponsored by the United States. In exchange for arranging this federation, Ethiopia's Emperor Haile Selassie gave the United States the Kagnaw military base in Eritrea, which became the largest communications base in the world.

In 1962, Haile Selassie dissolved the federation, claiming Eritrea as Ethiopia's fourteenth province.

This move was, in large part, a response to the armed struggle that broke out in 1961, led by Eritrea's first liberation front, the ELF. While expressing the genuine desire of the Eritrean people for national independence, the Eritrean Liberation Front was unable to educate and politicize the masses of Eritrean workers and peasants. The ELF's aim was military victory against Ethiopia, with the social revolution to come later. However, within the ELF, a growing number of revolutionaries saw that Eritrea's armed struggle was laying the basis for class struggle. They saw that organizing the masses to fight against tribalism, sexism, and feudalism in Eritrea was integral to organizing them against Ethiopian colonialism. In 1971, these social revolutionaries broke from the ELF, formed the EPLF, and began organizing the "self-reliant protracted people's war."

## ETHIOPIA

In 1974, the Haile Selassie regime, weakened by the continued war with Eritrea, was overthrown by a popular uprising in Ethiopia. He was replaced by a military junta, the dergue, which from 1974 to 1976 vacillated between the United States and the Soviet Union, seeking arms. In 1975-1976, the U.S. sold Ethiopia 22 M-60 tanks, 16 F-5E jet fighter planes, and six coastal patrol boats, and made an agreement to modernize the entire Ethiopian armed forces for approximately \$300 million—all this to defeat Eritrea, a country the size of Pennsylvania. But when it became clear that the dergue's position was shaky due to lack of popular support, the U.S. withdrew its offer and the dergue, proclaiming itself socialist, turned to the Soviet Union for aid.

## SOVIET SUPPORT FOR THE DERGUE

The Soviet leaders responded with massive support—from MIG-23 jets to napalm and cluster bombs to actual troops. Under the guise of supporting a socialist country against a secessionist movement, the Soviet Union launched a genocidal attack, forcing the EPLF to stage the 1978 strategic withdrawal of masses of Eritreans into their base area. From the mountainous northern base area, the Eritrean People's Liberation Army (EPLA) staged the 1979 counteroffensive and, over the past three years, has regained control of seven of the nine Eritrean provinces.

## THE DIPLOMATIC OFFENSIVE

As provinces are liberated, the EPLF and its mass organizations set up programs to serve the people. In 1980 the Medical Department treated

1,250,000 people. Local governments are elected, enabling the Eritrean people to have a say in such matters as land distribution and industrial production for the first time.

Through these programs, as well as their obvious commitment to defeat Ethiopian colonialism, the EPLF has won the support of the Eritrean people.

Having won this support, the EPLF introduced their seven point peace plan in 1981. This plan is the diplomatic basis on which the fighting could be ended. It calls for a referendum in Eritrea, allowing the people to decide democratically what their relationship to Ethiopia would be. Once the Eritrean people make clear their desire for independence, they would exercise their right to elect their own government from the existing political organizations.

This peace proposal is a key part of the diplomatic efforts launched by the EPLF in 1977 to overcome the lack of international support. Two important targets of the campaign were the confusion created by the dergue's declaration of socialism, and the Organization of African Unity's failure to recognize the Eritrean people's right to self-determination.

As the war in Eritrea has made gains, so has the diplomatic offensive. Algeria, Guinea, Malagasy and Mozambique have been won to support Eritrea; nineteen African nations now support Eritrea. The Islamic Conference of 26 African, Asian and Middle Eastern nations has issued a statement of support.

## INTERNAL STRUGGLE IN ERITREA

One of the problems the EPLF has faced in its diplomatic offensive is confusion created by the existence of the ELF. The EPLF has repeatedly called for unity between the two fronts, the basis of unity being that the political differences between the two are secondary to the commitment to the war against Ethiopian colonialism. The ELF, however, has directed its major military drives against the EPLA.

Understanding that in order to defeat Ethiopia's army they had to fight the enemy at their back, the EPLA in 1980 fought the ELF in the province of Barkha, an ELF-held territory for twenty years.

## EPLF ORGANIZES THE MASSES

After defeating the ELF, the EPLF set about their program of mobilizing and politicizing the masses. The political differences between the two fronts are sharply etched in Barkha. The ELF had brought few changes in twenty years. But in six months the EPLF has launched a literacy campaign and a cultural program aimed at defeating tribalism, organized a people's militia, begun a program of land reform, initiated democracy in production, and opened schools and clinics. These programs are carried out through the four mass organizations of women, workers, peasants and students.

At the beginning of 1982, they are carried out under a daily barrage of Soviet bombs dropped from U.S.-made jets.

## SOLIDARITY IN THE U.S.

As the socialist cover of the dergue becomes more transparent, the possibility of open U.S. involvement becomes greater. The U.S. has already increased its activity in the area, making friendly overtures to Sudan. Supporting the Eritrean revolution is a militant way people in the U.S. can oppose U.S. military intervention in Africa and the Middle-East.

The Eritrea Material Aid Campaign was formed two years ago to build political and material support for the Eritrean People's Liberation Front. One of the main reasons organizations and individuals got together to build the campaign was an understanding of the truth of the EPLF's politics. The slogan "self-reliant protracted people's war is the only way to victory" is the basis on which a non-aligned war for independence and freedom can be waged. In the end it will be nations struggling for independence and socialism that will defeat imperialism. Eritrea's victory will show that a self-reliant people revolutionary movement can win against colonialism backed by the world's big powers.

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