



ERITREA THROUGH THE AGES AND ITS RELEVENCE TO WEST ASIA

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Eritrea had long been of geopolitical importance for West Asia since historical time. Its strategic location provides Eritrea a dominant position to command both the straits of Bab-al-Mandeb on the southern tip of the Red Sea, serving as gateway to the Indian Ocean, and the Suez Canal, leading to the Mediterranean on the north. Eritrea looks across the Red Sea to the Arabian Peninsula. Apart from the evolution of its own people, Eritrean has played a significant role in the historical development of North East Africa and West Asia also. Its climatic condition as well as geo-political importance has always been the subject of attraction for the foreign powers of the world. So, that this region attracted the Semitic people of South Arabia, and they began to cross the Red Sea from the eastern coast about to search new possibilities in Eritrea. These migrants belong to Sabean group of South Arabia and with the course of history they formed a highly developed civilization in the region known as Axumite Civilization. The migrants from South Arab Peninsula transferred their culture and traditions to the region through continuous migrations and historical intermingling, which started three thousand years ago and lasted until the dawn of the twentieth century. Eritrea was a central province of Aksum. The Empire of Aksum was formed of several small kingdoms founded by Semitic migrants from Yemen in the age of Sheba or Saba' and Hemyar between the land of Takkazzi and the Eritrean province of Akkele Guzai probably in the first century AD. Thus, it can be said that there is no territory in the world outside the countries of West Asia whose local culture and language bears such a Semitic imprint as the Eritrean Plateau. The various aspects of its civilization, culture, language and the basis of social life had been influenced by the Southern Arabian Peninsula before the introduction of Christianity into the region in the middle of the 4th century AD. The dawn of the 6th century AD witnessed that Axumite Empire was not only the ally of Byzantine Empire but also the protagonist of Christianity on the Red Sea. At the same time, the economic importance of Arabia began to increase due to constant wars between Byzantine and Persian empires and subsequently the Trade route that run directly across the Arabian Peninsula on down the Red Sea became increasingly dangerous. Then a third route which passed from Mediterranean through Mekka and Yemen became East-West trade junction where from Caravan traveled to Red Sea coast and later on it also became the cradle of Islam. The appearance of Islam in this region made it more important and even more powerful example of interaction between religion and empire. The existing relations among the people of the two shores of the Red Sea, the Arabs and the Aksumites had begun to change with the rise and growth of Islam.

Since the dawn of history, this geographical area has been a source of fascination for the outside world. Eritrea has been for millennia the home for people of a variety of ethnic

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origins and with diverse cultural traditions. This area has been a passage way for migration of peoples whose elements got mixed and whose blood was mingled through historical intermarrying. The Semitic people were one of them who entered in Eritrea between 1000 B.C and 400 B.C. by a series of transmarine migrations from south Arabia, what is today Yemen. The most important of the Semitic migration was that of the *Habashat* who migrated from the Sahartan province of Yemen. These people occupied not only Eritrea but also northern part of Tigray. Another important group was the *Ge'ez (Agazian)* who settled in the Shimezana, Akkele-Guzai and Agame. The constant immigration of Semitic tribes had cardinal significance, not only in the racial evolution of the people but also in the emergence of sophisticated civilization, including complex State organization, commercial network and elaborate military structure. Thus, new group of migrants brought with them different devices that revolutionized the life of the numerically dominant Cushites. The immigration process was so overwhelming that semitization of the people of the region in terms of language and religion, and civilization was completed between 1000 and 400 B.C. Thus, Eritrea has for the thousand of years been a home for the people of diverse living pattern, religion and traditions. One of the most important consequences of the historical intermingling of Cushitic and Semitic was the emergence of Afro-Asiatic languages, including early *Ge'ez* from which *Tigrinya*, *Tigre* and *Amharic* are derived, later on *Ge'ez* language became vehicle for the spread of Christianity in this region. *Ge'ez* is considered the oldest Semitic language in the North East Africa. Indeed the very word *Ge'ez* derived from the Southern Arabian tribal name *Agazian*, just as the geographical term Abyssinia follows from *Habashat*, another *Semitic* group from Yemen, which secured a foothold on the Eritrean plateau in the 5th century BC. The Semitic people who came from across the Red Sea included Sabeans, Agazians and *Habashat*, intermingled with the Hamitic people by historical intermarriages and they constructed a number of important towns in Eritrean and Tigrain regions like, Adulis, Kohaito, Yeha, Hawulti, Kaskasse, Tocondo and Matara. Thus, the ruins of these impressive towns in the highlands and the coastal areas of Eritrea witnessed the presence of an ancient civilization long before the foundation of Aksumite kingdom

The course of Semitic migration stopped momentarily in this area owing to the Ptolemaic Greek occupation of the western shores of the Red Sea. From which they pushed the Semitic migrants into the interior. They acquired political and military influence on both sides of the Red Sea and founded the famous port of Adulis in the middle of the third century B.C.. However, Adulis was one of the most important port cities of the ancient world and was a gateway to the hinterland to the ancient towns of Kohaito, Kaskasse, Matara and Axum. The author of the important travelogue, the *Periplus of the Erythrean Sea* states that Adulis was of great commercial importance as it was a port for exporting various kinds of ivory, rhinoceros horns and skins. He further revealed that there was big Greek community in Adulis and also Persian, Arab and African communities. He also

emphasized that this land, the coast of the Red Sea, had no one king to whom everybody owes allegiance, as every market and city on the coast has a chief. Some of the chiefs of these coasts are independent while other owes allegiance to the state of Himyar in Yemen.

Many historians believed that Aksum arose as a result of process of an amalgamation of various city-states, which had been founded by the Hamitic-Semitic people such as Adulis, Matara, Kohaito and Tocondo in Eritrea and Aksum and Yeha in Tigrai. At the zenith of its expansion, Aksum extended as far as Meroee around the vicinity of Khartum in Sudan in the west, and of southern Arabia (Yemen) in the East. It has been argued forcefully, however, that it is the Eritreans, rather than Ethiopians, who have better claim to be the legitimate descendants of Aksumite civilization. Thus one can conclude that the Eritreans are the real descendants of the Aksumites. Aksum prosperity began to develop and came handled by the ancient port of Adulis in Eritrea. So, during the 3rd century A.D. Aksum ranked third among the great powers of the world. The well-known Roman historian Cosmas Indicopleustes was in Adulis when the Axumite expedition was transported to Yemen. He described it in his book that Adulis was a prosperous port in close maritime commercial relations with Byzantine, Persia, Arabia, India and Ceylon. The Aksumite civilization had highly developed infrastructure with in its area of influence, together with flourishing political and religious life. Christianity was undoubtedly the most significant import in to the region during Aksumite period. The acceptance of Christianity by the Aksumite king Ezana cemented the economic and political ties with Eastern Roman Empire that gave to Aksum a sense of mission and direction, which made the kingdom unique in Africa

The arrival of Islam had brought another drastic change in this region. This may be illustrated by the fact that when the followers of the Prophet Muhammad in Arabia were persecuted by the Quraish in the beginning of the 7th century A.D., the Prophet himself advised to find refuge in Aksum. He told his followers that:

“If you go to Abyssinia (Aksum) you will find a king under whom none are persecuted.

It is land of righteousness where God will give you relief from what you are suffering.”

The early followers of Islam certainly passed through the port of Adulis perhaps via Dahlak islands. Then they reached to Aksum where the sovereign of Aksum and its people offered them generous hospitality. Thus, began the relations of the Arabs after Islam with the African coast of the Red Sea. Already during Prophet Muhammad’s life time an Aksumite fleet attacked the Arabian port of *Shu’ayba*. It was now the turn of the Arabs to extend their influence over the Red Sea and its straits. Some years later the Caliph Umar was forced to send four ships and two hundred men against the Aksumites who committed many evil deeds to Muslims in Arabia. However, this expedition against Aksumites seems to have achieved little. In 702 AD the Axumite pirates attacked Hedjaz for the last time and they occupied Jeddah for a while, thus creating panic in Mekka. In any case as retaliation for the last attacks the Arabs occupied and destroyed Adulis and established themselves on the Dehlak Islands in the Gulf of Massawa. The occupation of Dahlak took place early in the Umayyad period and the islands were also used as place of political exile.

Subsequently, under the Abbasids the islands served as a base for ensuring a safe sea voyage for the pilgrims to Holy Places, at a time when the Red Sea was contaminated by the pirates. At the beginning of the tenth century and independent Muslim principality was established at Dahlak Islands. This state played a highly important role in the economic history of Aksum as well as in the spread of Islam in this region. In this way, the occupation of the Muslim Arabs of this strategic position was the beginning of their occupation of the rest of the naval centers on the African coast and of the gradual spread of Islam in East Africa.

The glory of Aksum which lasted from the 4th century to the 7th century AD but in between 8th and 13th centuries, political, cultural and ethnological factors entered into action which led to the disintegration of the Aksumite kingdom and development of a post-Aksumite Eritrean history. The disintegration of Aksumite Empire brought the establishment of the Beja kingdoms in Eritrea. By the middle of the 6th century AD the Beja had overran the Eritrean plateau and at the end of the 7th century AD a Beja tribe known as Zanafij came to the Eritrean Highland through Barka Valley. However, the Beja tribes managed to occupy the coast of the Red Sea and settled in Masawa about 750 A.D. An Arab historian Ibn Hawkal visited the lands of Beja and he founded it divided into five kingdoms each with its own border and authority. Three of these kingdoms lay within present day Eritrean border and two within Sudanese border. Thus, the Beja people set up five kingdoms known as *Naqis*, *Baqilin*, *Bazin*, *Jarin* and *Qata* encompassing eastern Sudan and whole of present day Eritrea with exception of Dankalia region. All these independent kingdoms were in existence between 8th and 13th centuries AD.

II

Sultan Selim of Turkey had gained access to the Red Sea after occupying Egypt in 1517. It occurred to him to engage the Portuguese who had gained control of most of the Red Sea on the African coast: Sawaken, Massawa and Zaila. On the other hand, the princes of Massawa, Dahlak, Zaila and Sawaken did not fail to invoke the aid of the Turks to expel the Portuguese. The struggle between the Portuguese and the Ottoman Turks in the first half of the Sixteenth century over the mastery of Arabian Sea was destined to have a profound effect upon the fate of Eritrea. However, the Ottoman Turks managed to occupy Aden in 1538, and finally Sinan Pasha defeated the Portuguese fleet under Johan de Castro in the battle of Massawa and Sawaken in 1557. When the Turks were established in Massawa, they made its Balu prince who had invoked their aid against the Portuguese, a viceroy of the Ottoman Caliph to act as *Naib* or to look after the administrative affairs of the region. Turkish forces under Ozmudur Pasha penetrated and occupied the principality of Debarua, the Seat of *Bahri Negashi*, where they built fortifications in 1558. Their role was then expanded to Western Eritrea as far as Keren and Sahel and stayed there until the 19th century. Thus, the Ottoman Turks' presence in the coastal areas for over 400 years, has naturally left its imprint on the culture and the people of the region. The direct influence may still be seen in the port of Massawa with its exotic mixture of different style of architecture, heavily influenced by the Ottomans Turks.

After the opening of Suez Canal in 1869, Egypt entered the contest for the territory in the region because Egypt wanted to protect its position as well as sea route to India. With the opening of Suez Canal the coastal area of Eritrea became more important market and resource areas not only for the Egyptians but also for the Europeans in order to expand their trade route to India and the Far East. Thus, the two factors motivated Egyptians expansion towards this region: firstly, to control the sources of Nile River in the Abyssinian plateau and equator and secondly, the geopolitical transformation of Red Sea as an important waterway. In 1811, Muhammad Ali Pasha conquered Hedjaz in the name Ottoman Sultan and few years later he managed to occupy Sawakin, Massawa and entire western coast of the Red Sea and placed it under Egyptian administration. Muhammad Ali Pasha incorporated the state of Massawa into Hedjaz under the command of his son, Ahmad Tusun. But due to Egyptian Ottoman problem over Syrian wars, forced the Pasha of Egypt to evacuate the Arabian Peninsula and withdraw its forces from there in 1840. However, with the intervention of the European countries, the Egyptian domination returned once more in this region. Consequently, in September 1846, the Sultan of Turkey agreed to place the ports of Sawakin and Massawa under administration of Egyptian Khedive for the duration of his life. . The consolidation of Egyptian positions in eastern Eritrea was facilitated by the decline of the Ottoman power there. On 5th May 1865 the Ottoman power issued a decree (Firman) giving Pasha of Egypt the districts of Massawa, Sawakin and their dependencies in return for the payment of an annual sum of 17 thousand gold guineas. However, in the 1870s Egyptians occupied parts of western Eritrea and extended their rule over the former Ottoman Turks' areas. By 1872 Egyptian occupation of Keren and Massawa in Eritrea was completed without opposition. Their flag replaced the Turkish flag in Massawa and thus the authority of Cairo extended throughout most of Eritrea.

In November 1869 an Italian Rubattino Shipping Company had purchased a harbour from Sultan Ibn Ahmad of Asseb to serve as fueling station for its commercial vessels. But with the transformation of Red Sea as strategic waterway, the Italian Government decided to buy out the Rubattino Shipping Company and in 1882 the Italian Government took over the harbor at Asseb. Then the Italians installed a local administration and setting up a permanent garrison. In this way colonization had begun in Eritrea. Despite the protest of Egyptians and the Turks the Italians extended their area of occupation into Eritrea. However, the Italians occupied the whole of Eritrea and officially on 1st January 1890 declared Eritrea as Italian colony in East Africa. As a result of the defeat of the Italians in the Second World War, the Italian African Colonies became fair game and it came under the British Military Administration (BMA) as former enemies territories.

III

From 1941 to 1947, Eritrea remained under the British Middle East Command. During 1940's different political parties emerged in Eritrea that reflected the political awareness of Eritrean people and started a new phase in the history of the struggle for Eritrean Independence irrespective of religious differences. Despite the majority wish for independence, the UK with USA, France, Italy and Ethiopia combined to deny the right to independence. The Eritreans strongly protested against such maneuvers and their leader Sheikh Ibrahim Sultan made an appeal to the UN that Eritrean wish was complete and

immediate independence. It was an open and clear demand for independence by the Eritrean people but the United Nations went ahead and adopted a United States sponsored Federal Act joining Eritrea to Ethiopia in accordance with at General Assembly Resolution 390 A (V) of 2nd December 1950. The several delegations spoke in favor of Eritrean independence and criticized the Anglo American draft formula for federation on the ground that it imposed several restrictions on the right of the Eritrean people to self determination. Sir Zafarullah, the Pakistani representative, warned the Adhoc Committee in the following words:

“An independent Eritrea would obviously be better able to contribute to the maintenance of peace (and security) than an Eritrea federated with Ethiopia against the true wishes of the people. To deny the people of Eritrea their elementary right to independence would be to sow the seeds of discord and create a threat in that sensitive area of the Middle East.”

However, the General Assembly rejected the Pakistan and Iraq sponsored proposals to grant Eritrea independence and adopted the Adhoc Committee’s recommendation to federate Eritrea with Ethiopia. In this way a federal constitution with dual autonomous parliaments in Addis Ababa and in Asmara came into exist in September 1952. After federation with Ethiopia, Eritrea suffered a lot, slowly and gradually the political activities were banned and the Eritrean flag was replaced with Ethiopian colors in 1958. At last Ethiopia annexed Eritrea in November 1962. As a result of this Eritrean patriots were left only one choice to continue their struggle by arms. The dissolution of federation called forth a militant nationalist resistance from a people subjected to continued colonial domination. Thus, the birth of an armed struggle took place in Eritrea against the hegemony of Ethiopia

The Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), founded in 1958, had proclaimed an armed struggle when a squad of demobilized colonial soldiers led by Hamid Idris Awate fired the first shots in September 1961 which became Africa’s longest war of Independence. The war with Ethiopia proved long and destructive. Organizational and ideological differences produced splits and civil strife within the ELF, culminating in the emergence of the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF) as a disciplined and effective military challenge to the Ethiopian government in the late 1970s. During this period Eritrea was really facing multi dimensional hardships. Nevertheless, the Eritrean nationalists never knelt down and they continued their struggle with the help of neighboring countries of Africa and West Asia. Ultimately in March 1988, EPLF captured Afabet. It was the beginning of the end of the war. Massawa was captured in February 1990, Dekemhare fell in May 1991 and finally they entered in Asmara on May 24, 1991. In this way the Liberation was completed. It had taken thirty long blood drenched years and untold sacrifices of the people of Eritrea. Accepted internationally as a provisional government, the EPLF agreed to hold a referendum on independence that was also approved by the new Ethiopian government. The referendum in April 1993 provided a virtually unanimous vote in favor of independence. On 24th May 1993 Independence was proclaimed with Issias Afwerki, EPLF Secretary General as Head of the State of Eritrea. The Independence of Eritrea and its territorial sovereignty were immediately recognized by the World. On May 28, 1993, the United Nations formally admitted Eritrea to its membership. In this way with the dawn

of 24th May 1993 a new era started for the Eritrean people and long cherished dream come to be true.

The revolution which was started by the Eritrean nationalists in order to achieve independence was no doubt a spark, not only inside the country but also in the neighbouring countries. It is considered the most important revolution in Africa as well as in West Asia. It is the Eritrean question which constitutes a dangerous upheaval to both the super powers Russia and USA because of their security interests respectively in Ethiopia and Saudi Arabia. As Ethiopian tighten their grip on Eritrea after Federation, steady stream of rebels and many prominent Eritreans went into exile in neighbouring countries from Eritrea. Among them were Idris Muhammad Adam, Ibrahim Sultan Ali and Woldeab Woldemariam. Woldeab Woldemariam started radio broadcasts from Cairo in order to make Eritreans aware of the brutality which accompanied Ethiopian occupation. Jamal Abdul Nasser gave only verbal support for Eritrean Independence because he valued good relations with Haile Selassie, Ethiopian membership in the commission for the organization of the Suez War provided a break to Emperor Haile Sellassie to force Jamal Abdul Nasser to quieten Woldeab Woldemariam in exchange for Ethiopian support in favour of Egyptian claims. Apart from this Ethiopia is the source of waters of the Nile River which is essential for Egypt's survival. There were also Eritrean exiles in Saudi Arabia who called upon Idris Muhammad Adam and Ibrahim Sultan Ali who paid the visit to country to start an armed struggle against Ethiopian rule in 1961.

Israel played an important role in Ethiopia's campaign against Eritrean rebels, though there is long history of Jewish settlement in the Eritrean-Tigrean region. Many Irgum and Stern Gang terrorists including former Israeli Prime Minister Yizak Shamir, were interned in Eritrea during the Second World war. Then they developed some contacts with local businessmen and politicians also. As a result Israeli and Italian Jewish business were involved in Eritrea. Even a Synagogue was established to serve the Jewish community in Asmara but later on it was destroyed during the 1975 fighting. However, on the basis of secret pact between Ethiopia and Israel in 1954, Israel extended her military support against Eritrean rebels. Israel began to train Ethiopian police officers in counterinsurgency commando tactics to end the guerrilla or *shifita* actions of the Eritrean Liberation Front. Col. Ben Nathaw headed the training school at Dekkamare in Eritrea and Col. Don was in charge of Ethiopian Marine Commando Forces training team. Even an Israeli officer was serving as a military attaché to Asrate Kassa, the Governor General of Eritrea from 1964-1970. Actually this liberation movement was seen by Ethiopia, Israel and the United states as Arab-backed, and if it would be successful, then it would be hostile to Israel and thus they enforced a blockade of the *Bab al Mandab* straits at the southern end of the Red Sea.

The ELF's most significant West Asian supporter was Syria. Three months after Baath officers' coup in March 1963, an ELF office was opened in Damascus and Osman Saleh Sabbe began to make radio broadcasts attacking Ethiopian policies in Eritrea. In addition to this, twenty Kalashnikov rifles were supplied by Syria to the ELF. According to one writer, Syrian support enabled the ELF to expand a force of 2000 men. It seems unlikely that Syrian assistance could have been that significant, as by May 1966, it was estimated

that the guerilla forces numbered merely 500 men, and only 370 had modern weapons. Syrian support remained consistent over the years unlike that of many Arab states. Iraq had provided significant help for the freedom struggle of Eritrea. When the Baath Party army officers mounted a successful coup in July 1968, gave assistance to ELF and trained the officers. Iraq had continued to give minimum assistance to the Eritrean Liberation Front Revolutionary Command-a small body which split from the ELF and has no military presence in Eritrea. Yemen also played a role in the Eritrean struggle for independence. People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) regime has become a valuable friend of the Eritrean after 1967. During 1971-1972, arms given to the EPLF by friendly states were brought through the way of Aden Even Osman Saleh Sabbe operated from Aden and the PDRY was the main channel for finance and arms.

According to the testimony of Wolde Kahsai, a defector from ELF, financial and military support from Arab states dried up after the June 1967 Arab-Israel War. But on the other hand Israeli sources emphasized that Eritrean links with Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO).The Eritreans have been involved in the Arab-Israel Conflict by proxy, so to speak. Haile Selassie tried to turn the Eritrean liberation struggle against his regime into an Arab interference designed to dismantle his empire. He at once won Israeli support, militarily, diplomatically as well as economically. They shared intelligence and military services at the expense of Eritrean people. However in these relations the Eritreans have taken a progressive and anti- imperialist principle stand. They regarded the Israelis as an occupying power in the land of the Palestinians just as they regard Ethiopia as an occupying power in the land of the Eritreans. Israeli claim that Osman Saleh Sabbe was rejected by the Syrian and Iraqi Ba'ath trained young commanders of the ELF and while in Jordan based Palestinian camp in November 1969, gathered support for a splinter group of the liberation movement.Eritrean nationalists were always kept awaiting by their Arab supporters, and according to Al Amin Mohammad Said, EPLF Director of Information, not until 1971 did they receive any significant arms supplies from these sources. Most Arab regimes have tried to manipulate different factions of the Eritrean opposition as explained by Isaias Afwerki, then Assistant General Secretary of EPLF in an interview with Labour Party MP, Stuart Holland, inside Eritrea on 21st April 1984:

“Every regime tries to find a group that can be used at the moment and in the future for their own national tactics in this area. We are not prepared to serve strategies of neighbouring countries in the area. The problem with the Saudis is that they are in full contradiction with the aspirations of our society. the Saudis strategy is to use the Eritrean struggle as an external buffer area for balancing, creating pressures here and there to influence the situation in the Horn as a whole and Ethiopia in particular. For them Eritrea is an instrument. Theirs is not a genuine interest in supporting the self-determination of the Eritrean people. For that matter they don't want an independent organization to survive inside Eritrea.”

Some observers subscribes to the thesis that when Ethiopia was weakened by revolution, the neighboring Arab states agreed to increase support to the guerillas. For example, Saudi Arabia was reportedly generously aiding Osman Saleh Sabbe's group from June 1974 with small arms, anti aircraft batteries and landmines. Osman Saleh Sabbe visited ten Arab countries in August-September 1974, and declared that, “all support our just cause in one way or another and some of them give full backing.” An EPLF commander stated that from 1980, no country gave the EPLF military aid; before that, Iraq, Kuwait and

certain Palestinian Organizations provided it with limited aid, especially shells and ammunition. Such support for Eritrea from West Asian countries led to immediate diplomatic and media counter offensive by Ethiopia. When Syrian Baath Party called for the liberation and independence of Eritrea, the Provisional Military Administrative Council (PMAC) of Ethiopia made a statement accusing Idris Mohammad Adam and Osman Saleh Sabbe of selling the country to the highest bidder. Such attacks in media continued through March 1975.

The ELF and the EPLF were well aware that it was not only necessary to gain support of all sections of the Eritrean population and win military victories over Ethiopia, it was also essential to gain support in order to destroy empire's legitimacy. A 1975 tour of nine Arab states by a joint ELF-EPLF delegation was successful in eliciting verbal support. Conservative Arab governments began to support the more traditional and conservative ELF to a greater extent from 1977 as the Dergue became increasingly aligned to with the Soviet Union. The Saudi monarchy regards the EPLF, as Communist and therefore a serious threat to her internal stability. A liberated Eritrea under people's own leadership, in the eyes of the Saudi monarchy, is much worse than the Soviet presence in Ethiopia which helps to stabilize the status quo in the Horn of Africa. The battle for Arab diplomatic backing continued when Isaias Afwerki, then vice secretary of the EPLF, visited Saudi Arabia and in an interview with the paper *Al Medina Al Manawarrah* denied that either he or the EPLF were Marxist. Although this remark would presumably have pleased the Saudis, the fact remains that the EPLF received no significant assistance from Saudi Arabia.

The EPLF held its first congress in Eritrea in January 1977: It was attended by delegates from Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan and Syria, as well as representative from the radical Palestinian groups DFLP and PFLP. Representatives from Iraq, Egypt, Syria, Somalia and the PLO attended the First Congress of the ELF-PLF held in Eritrea in March 1977. In August, the Arab Information Minister's Council issued a statement in support of Eritrea. In December 1977, Fidel Castro unequivocally supported the Dergue; he said that although the liberation movement had initially been led by progressive it was now controlled by reactionary Saudi Arabia and Sudan. Ahmad Nasser, Chairman of the ELF Revolutionary Command countered this charge immediately. The Thirteenth Congress of the Baath Arab Socialist Party of Syria, meeting in August 1980, passed a resolution supporting the Eritrean struggle for self-determination-ironically. The Arab People's Congress meeting in Beirut in June 1981, called upon Dergue to enter into direct and democratic dialogue with the Eritrean people. The Islamic Conference held in Saudi Arabia in 1981, supported Eritrea for the first time. Following an official EPLF visit to Syria, Muhammad Haydar, Chairman of the Foreign Relations Office gave, "firm and unwavering support" for the Eritrean Struggle. There was also a lot of sympathy in Kuwait and United Arab Emirates (UAE) for the liberation movement. His Highness Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Alnahyan, President of the UAE, pledged support for Eritrea. Even though the ELF was by now no longer a significant military force, it maintained ties with some Arab states and organizations. And in 1979, it found a new friend, Ayatullah Ruhollah Khomeini in Tehran. After the overthrow of Haile Selassie, the ELF had refused

to accept aid proffered by the Shah of Iran; they therefore built up credit with the new ruler, who also thought he was aiding a Muslim Struggle.

On the basis of the observations of aforesaid facts and figures one can conclude that close historical relations existed between the people of Eritrea and West Asia in the various ages since the ancient period until present day. Actually this region is a natural extension West Asian region geographically and strategically. In addition to this, during Eritrean revolution West Asia has played a very significant role to continue the freedom struggle against Ethiopia. Thus we can say that Eritrea has always been associated with region of West Asia from ancient to modern times either culturally, linguistically, religiously, politically or strategically.