



# Observatoire Afrique de l'Est de l'Est

Enjeux politiques & sécuritaires

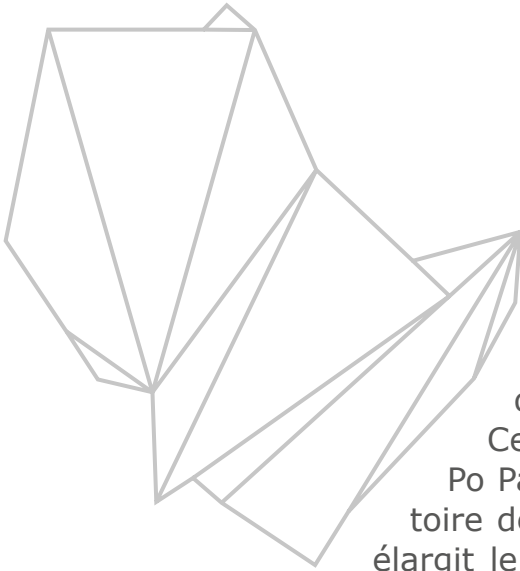
## THE ETHIOPIAN-ERITREAN RAPPROCHEMENT AFTER YEAR ONE: CYCLES OF HOPE AND DESPAIR IN ERITREA

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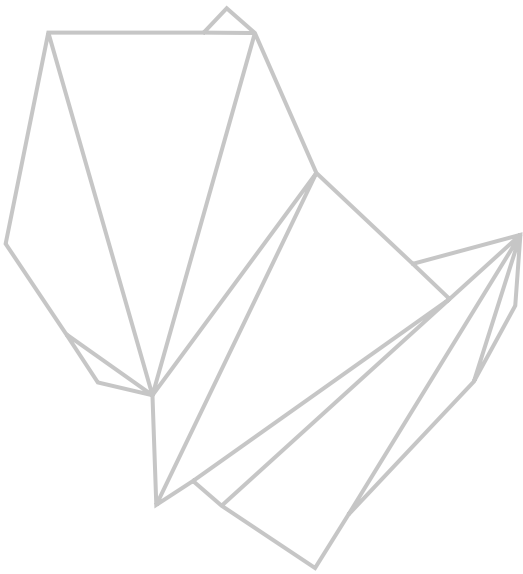
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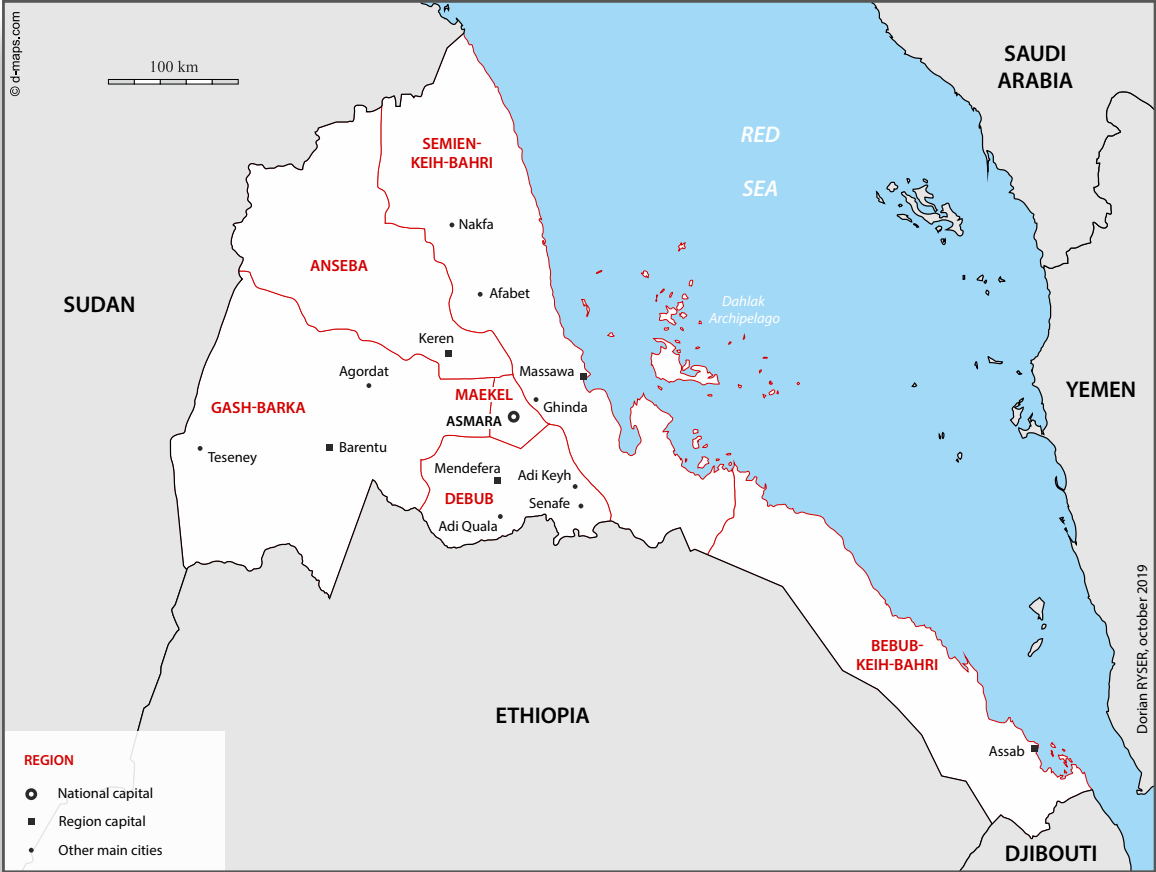




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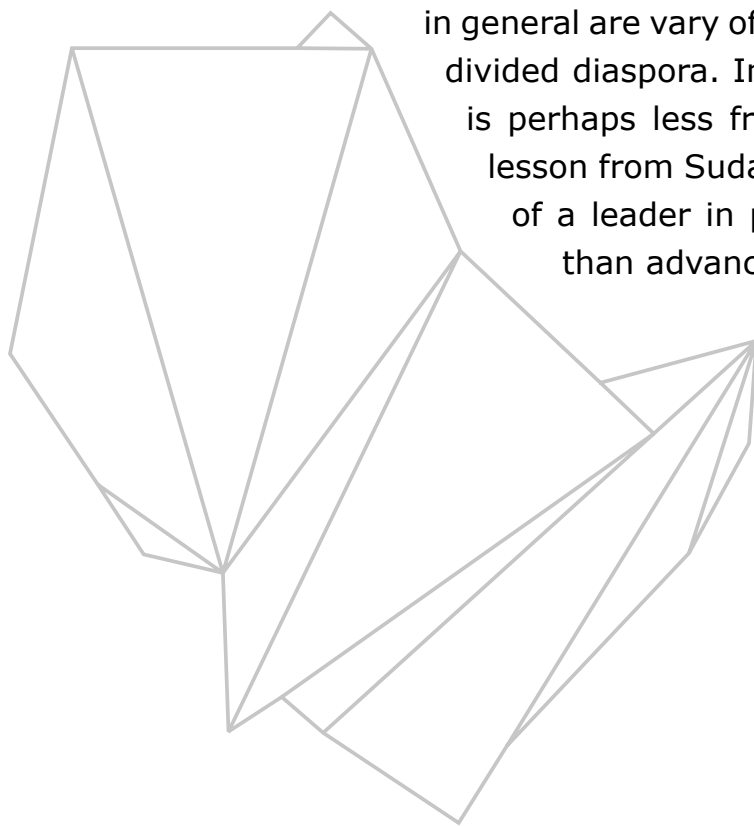
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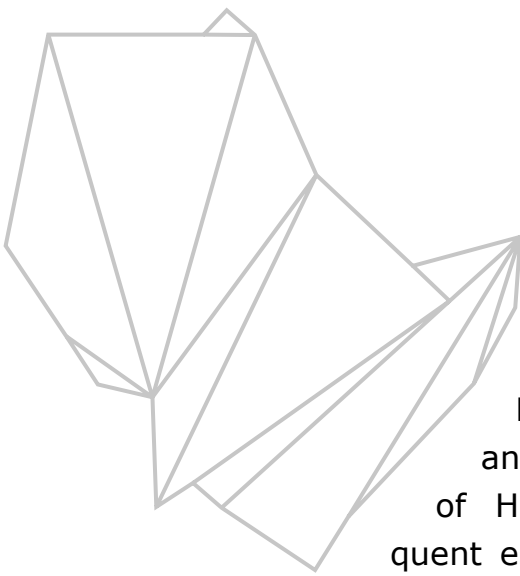
# Regions and main cities of Eritrea



## Abstract

The stalemate that followed the end of a two-year war between Eritrea and Ethiopia in 2000 was over when new Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed unconditionally offered the implementation of peace to Eritrea in July 2019. As a consequence of this rapprochement, many within Eritrea and observers from the outside expected political and economic changes to take hold in Eritrea. In this article I discuss how the first months after the peace agreement did result in a short-lived period of changing conditions of everyday life in Eritrea, largely triggered by the fact that the border between both countries was now open and could be crossed with relative ease. Since the border closed again from April 2019 onwards, a new period of static stalemate has taken hold within Eritrea. This is accompanied by increasingly vocal diaspora engagement most prominent via social media through attacks on the Eritrean President and the demand for his overthrow. While some have drawn parallels to the political change in Sudan expecting a similar scenario to occur, within Eritrea people see such comparisons with caution and in general are vary of the scenarios coming from the divided diaspora. In addition, the Eritrean regime is perhaps less fragile than it may look. And a lesson from Sudan might be that the vilification of a leader in power is more likely to hinder than advance sustainable political change.





## Introduction

When the inter-state 1998-2000 war between Eritrea and Ethiopia seemed to have come to an end with the Agreement on the Cessation of Hostilities signed in 2000 that led to the subsequent establishment of the Eritrea Ethiopia Boundary Commission (EEBC), few people expected more than a decade of a no-war-no-peace stalemate between both countries to follow.<sup>1</sup> But once the EEBC awarded the highly symbolic hamlet of Badme to Eritrea in 2002, leading to years of Ethiopian refusal to accept a ruling that was supposed to be final and binding, this was what happened.<sup>2</sup>

While Ethiopia proclaimed throughout it was ready to talk about readjustments, the Eritrean side steadfastly refused, making the case that only once Ethiopian troops had withdrawn from and handed back all territory awarded to Eritrea any talks could begin. And while this stance might be seen as counterproductive in international diplomacy, even seasoned critiques of Eritrea had to concede that in this case, it was Ethiopia that was in the wrong.<sup>3</sup>

This stance of the Eritrean government enjoyed broad support within the population, regardless of where they may have stood in relation to the outbreak of the war, its subsequent conduct and the internal crackdown that followed its end within Eritrea. The phrase “you cannot talk with traitors” was the usual answer whenever I queried this on the face of its inflexible stance, while it was left open if the “traitors” were all those in power in Ethiopia or merely or mainly those from the Northern province of Tigray bordering Eritrea who had, in the Eritrean reading, captured power in the Ethiopian state.<sup>4</sup>

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1. Tekeste Negash & Kjetil Tronvoll, *Brothers at War. Making Sense of the Eritrean-Ethiopian War*, Oxford, James Currey, 2000.
  2. Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission (EEBC), *Decision Regarding Delimitation of the Border Between The State of Eritrea and The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia*. The Hague, EEBC, 2002.
  3. Tanja R. Müller, “Assertive foreign policy in a ‘bad neighbourhood’: Eritrean foreign policy making”, *International Conference on Eritrean Studies, 20-22 July 2016, Proceedings*, edited by Tsighe, Z., Idris, S. M., Asfaha, Y. M., Andemariam, S. W., Tadesse, R. K. & Ogubazghi, G. (eds.). Asmara: Sabour Printing Press, Vol.1, p. 631-651, 2018.
  4. Various conversations with Eritrean informants in Asmara, June 2016.

Eritrea's refusal to engage has also to be understood in line with the importance of territorial integrity for Eritrea as an independent nation state, of which the clear lines of the Badme-Yirga triangle, one of the main areas of Ethiopian contestation, is such an important marker. In contrast to numerous journalistic and other commentaries, who argue that the 1998-2000 war was in fact not a border war at all but fought over economic issues; different conceptions of nationalism; and/or grounded in deep-seated animosity between Eritrea and the Ethiopian province of Tigray, I contend that the war was to an important degree literally a border war, as a deep-seated sense of territorial integrity is a key foundation of Eritrean nationalism and the Eritrean nation state.<sup>5</sup>

For all the above reasons, it became inconceivable that the stalemate between both countries would be broken as long as Meles Zenawi was Prime Minister of Ethiopia and Issayas Afewerki President of Eritrea – even though the death of Meles Zenawi and thus the departure of an Ethiopian Prime Minister from the region of Tigray initially held some hope. In the end, Meles Zenawi's successor (Hailemariam Desalegn, 2012-2018) did not fundamentally alter the line Ethiopia took on Eritrea, and it was left to new Ethiopian Prime Minister Dr Abiy Ahmed, who came with a new political agenda in multiple fields, to instigate the rapprochement in promising to unconditionally accept the EECB ruling.<sup>6</sup> While this has resulted in the signing of a joint declaration of peace and friendship in July 2018 that formally ended the state of no-war-no-peace between both countries, no land has changed hands on the ground. The border has been demilitarised and was open at three official border crossings at various points in time, but one could still be taken by surprise that the Eritrean President did accept the offer of peace while Eritrean land is de-facto still Ethiopian – even if Ethiopia committed to implement the EECB ruling.<sup>7</sup>

In the remainder of this paper I will look at what the rapprochement, now in its second year, has meant for ordinary Eritreans, in particular in light of the fact that apart from vague declarations, no clearer idea about the future relationship between both countries has emerged. The paper is partly based on interview and observation data collected in Mekelle/Ethiopia in October

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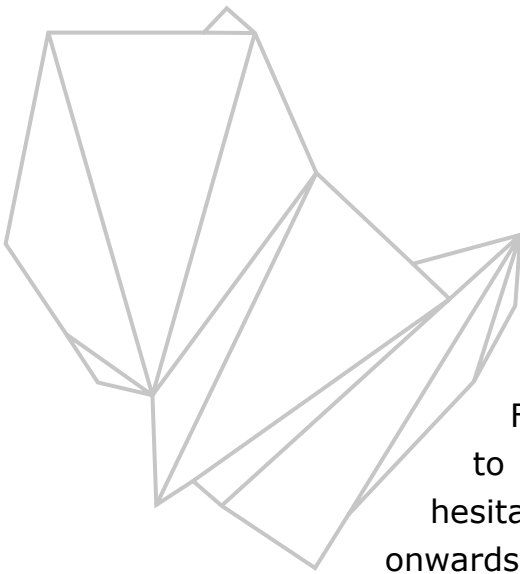
5. Tanja R. Müller, "Borders and boundaries in the state-making of Eritrea: revisiting the importance of territorial integrity in the rapprochement between Eritrea and Ethiopia." *Review of African Political Economy*, 2019, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03056244.2019.1605590>.

6. *Africa Confidential*, "From the edge of war to the bridge of love", 59, p. 14, 2018.

7. Demessie Fantaye, "Imagining Peace: Ethiopia-Eritrea Rapprochement". *Horn of Africa Bulletin* 30(3), p. 3-6, 2018.

2018 and in Eritrea in May 2019, combined with skype interviews among diaspora activists in the United States. I will firstly engage with the initial joy and hopes that accompanied the first few months of the rapprochement, in particular after the first border crossings were opened in September 2018. Subsequently I will briefly discuss how dynamics in the diaspora have been affected, before turning to a discussion of the largely illusive peace dividend. At the end, the paper offers some concluding thoughts about the future.





## Peace – ups and downs, hope and despair

First reactions to the peace process that seemed to have started so suddenly were cautious and hesitant, and while reciprocal visits from July 2018 onwards by the Ethiopian Prime Minister and the Eritrean President, and joint touring of neighbouring states became a prominent feature in the months following the rapprochement, there was at the same time a sense of unease not least about the involvement of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in the peace process.<sup>8</sup>

Equally, initially peace seemed to consist mainly of symbolic gestures, such as the reopening of the Eritrean embassy in Addis Ababa but without any operating staff and thus not functioning as an embassy. But that changed when the first commercial flights between Addis Ababa and Asmara commenced in July 2018 and in September 2018, at the time of the Ethiopian new Year celebrations, the first two land border crossings between both countries opened. Numerous heart-warming stories were posted on social media and other online sources of families re-united who had not seen each other for more than a decade.<sup>9</sup> Emotional scenes of welcome and tears dominated the news, and as students of international relations should be aware, emotions are an often overlooked but important factor in world politics.<sup>10</sup>

I was in Mekelle in the Ethiopian region of Tigray in October 2018, shortly after the border opening, and there the often ambivalent experience of the suddenly open border at Serha-Zalambesa for Eritreans could be observed

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8. Tanja R, Müller, "Back to square one between Eritrea and Ethiopia?", *Horn of Africa Bulletin* 30(3), p. 22-27, 2018.

9. BBC News, "Ethiopia-Eritrea border reopens after 20 years", <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-45475876>; Hadra Ahmed, "Ethiopia-Eritrea Border Opens for First Time in 20 years", *The New York Times*, 11 September 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/11/world/africa/ethiopia-eritrea-border-opens.html>; Ruth Maclean, "Champagne and roses on first Ethiopia-Eritrea flight in two decades", *The Guardian*, 18 July 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jul/18/champagne-and-roses-on-first-ethiopia-eritrea-flights-in-two-decades>

10. Roland Bleiker, "Fear no more: emotions and world politics", *Review of International Studies*, 34, p. 115-135, 2008.

particularly well.<sup>11</sup> Mekelle is the biggest town near the border in the region, it is a commercial hub and has a large university.

In October 2018, I met numerous Eritreans in different states of excitement often combined with disbelief. It was hard to find any empty hotel rooms in Mekelle then, as many Eritreans with family in the diaspora who could afford it had paid up-front for a month or more, trying during that time to get a visa preferably to the United States or Europe to join their relatives. The mostly young Eritreans, the majority of whom had never been outside Eritrea, marvelled at the many new buildings in Mekelle and its general air of a vibrant city, as Mekelle was in their imagination a backwater. Others drove over in cars old and new to stock up on goods hard to get in Eritrea, cement being on top of the list as in Eritrea the government has a hold on all construction materials. In parallel, Eritrean markets for fancy Italian shoes (mostly used ones) and electronic gadgets that had entered Eritrea from the Arab peninsula sprung up around Mekelle. Unregulated at the time, these exchanges were on the whole good natured, even if they could remind one of the time before 1998 and the border war, when economic imbalances lead increasingly to grievances on both sides of the border.

Economic issues may in fact have played a bigger role than acknowledged in the decision by the Eritrean leadership to agree to the border opening. I for example know of a baker from a border area in Eritrea near the Sudanese and Ethiopian border combined, who had traditionally bought his flour in Sudan and was about to go bankrupt after the Sudanese border was closed in January 2018 for a prolonged period of time.<sup>12</sup> This meant he could no longer get vital ingredients at an affordable price, but with the border opening his business began striving again, even more so when in early January 2019 the border crossing at Omhajer-Humera was opened as a third crossing. In all likelihood, many people with small businesses faced similar challenges and the border opening provided a vital respite.

But as no public accounts exist in Eritrea, and, according to interviews with key informants in Eritrea in May 2019, ministries do not have planned budgets any longer but submit requests on an ad-hoc basis, the real state of the

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11. Tanja Müller, "Eritrea is not sweet' – Personal notes from Mekelle a few months after the Ethiopian-Eritrean peace", blog available at: <https://tanjarmueller.wordpress.com/2018/10/07/eritrea-is-not-sweet-personal-notes-from-mekelle-a-few-months-after-the-ethiopian-eritrean-peace/>

12. *Reuters*, "Sudan closes border with Eritrea", 6 January 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-sudan-security-idUSKBN1EVOE0>

economy is hard to evaluate – even if recently completed Article IV talks with the IMF may shed a bit more light on the latter.<sup>13</sup>

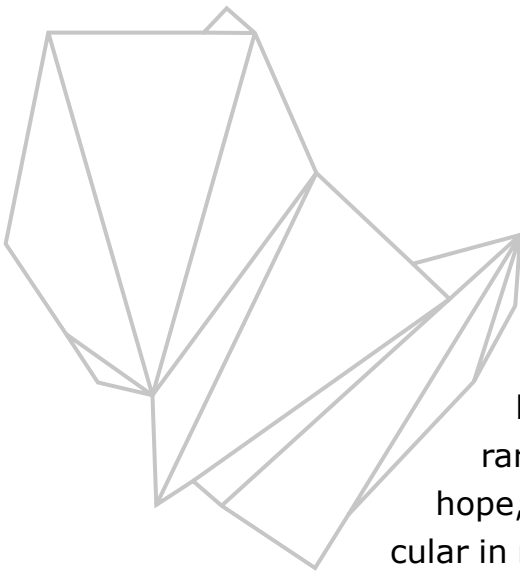
The few months of more or less unregulated border crossings and *ad hoc* rules – sometimes papers needed to be shown, sometimes the border closed again for a few days but then reopened, and nobody ever knew what was happening when – also resulted in a spike in Eritrean refugee numbers who registered with UNHCR in Ethiopia.<sup>14</sup> While migration has been discussed as a valve for the Eritrean government to get rid of potentially disruptive youth, this unregulated movement together with non-existent rules for economic activities and unregulated exchange rates of Ethiopian Birr and Eritrean Nakfa, has led to the closure of all border crossings again since April 2019.<sup>15</sup> This closure was to be temporary until a clear framework for cross border trade and movement was in place, but thus far no end is in sight nor any indication from the Eritrean side when the border might re-open again.

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13. International Monetary Fund, "IMF Staff Completes 2019 Article IV Mission to Eritrea", 22 May 2019, <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2019/05/22/pr19179-eritrea-imf-staff-completes-2019-article-iv-mission>

14. UNHCR, "EthiopiaCountryRefugeeResponsePlan", <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/67744.pdf>; James Jeffrey, "Eritrea-Ethiopia peace leads to refugee surge", *The New Humanitarian*, 15 November 2018, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2018/11/15/eritrea-ethiopia-peace-leads-refugee-surge>

15. *Africa Confidential*, "Chill on the border", 60, p. 9, 2019.



## The divided diaspora

While inside Eritrea, at least until the celebrations of independence day in 2019, the overarching reaction to the peace deal was one of hope, even if not all immediate expectations, in particular in relation to release from often indefinite National Service were fulfilled. In contrast, the reaction in much of the diaspora critical of the regime, was characterised by condemnation, with an increasing focus solely on the figure of the Eritrean President (or dictator) Issayas Afewerki. This criticism focused partly on questioning the legitimacy of Afewerki to agree to peace, as an unelected leader, and called for some kind of people's involvement.<sup>16</sup> In a more hardened line of thought, Afewerki became accused of trying to eliminate Eritrean independence and in fact of selling Eritrea to Ethiopia. This line of argument was also advanced by respected Eritreans who once had a role in Eritrean post-liberation politics like legal scholar Bereket Habte Selassie.<sup>17</sup> The social media campaign of the #Enough or, in Tigrinya, #Yiakl movement "that is now in every city where Eritreans live" according to one of my informants,<sup>18</sup> is largely focused on a personalised critique of Afewerki – even though of late its activities seem to have become more broad and localised meetings attended by a comparatively large number of diaspora Eritreans are now a quite regular occurrence.<sup>19</sup> But in essence, #Yiakl remains predominately a Facebook, Twitter and other social media-based advocacy initiative aiming to expose Eritrea as a brutal dictatorship.<sup>20</sup>

In addition, according to some informants within the movement who remain sceptical but, like many Eritreans in the diaspora are shunned when they voice their concerns loudly and in danger of being ostracised in the polarised

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16. Many of these exchanges can be found on the website [www.asmarino.com](http://www.asmarino.com).

17. Martin Plaut, "President Isaias 'Handing Eritrea to Ethiopia on a Silver Platter' - Prof Bereket Habte Selassie." *Eritrea Hub*, December 15, 2018. <https://eritreahub.org/president-isaias-handingeritrea-to-ethiopia-on-a-silver-platter-prof-bereket-habte-selassie>

18. Skype-conversation, 9 June 2019.

19. Teklemariam Bekit, "Eritrea's 'ice bucket' bid to oust Isaias Afwerki", 13 June 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-48034365>

20. See <https://www.facebook.com/yiakil/> and <https://twitter.com/yiakl1?prefetchTimestamp=1569696572592>

Eritrean discourse, the #Yiakl movement "is mainly based on emotions and 'wrong' narratives [...] like the President is not a real Eritrean, what he really wants is to unite Eritrea with Ethiopia again, so Eritrean sovereignty is under threat [...] it is not a continuum from movements for justice and democracy it is a side-tracked emotional narrative."<sup>21</sup> Whether this impression is true or not only time will tell, but already forms of disunity within the #Yiakl movement have emerged on various opposition websites, most prominently perhaps on Awate.com.

The #Yiakl movement also increasingly claims a following within Eritrea, visible for example in social media posts of its stickers on lampposts or graffiti on walls that might be genuine but often could be anywhere. During my stay in Eritrea in May 2019, the only graffiti with a derogatory message about PFDJ I saw was inside a building. I do not mean to suggest that there is not indeed a much wider following of #Yiakl - even if I have my doubts, which are shared by some within the movement who objects to its "irrational focus and often almost laughable propaganda about Issayas"<sup>22</sup>, but I personally only encountered people who desperately wanted change but did not see engagement with diaspora activists as a way to achieve that. And when it comes to Eritrea, as I have argued elsewhere, all sides are skilful performers of narratives of their own liking, making it hard to discover the realities below.<sup>23</sup>

When it comes to the diaspora, not only those critical of the government seem often quite far removed from the hopes and aspirations of those who remain in Eritrea for often complex and contradictory reasons. The same is true for pro-government diaspora actors, many of whom one could meet on the streets of Asmara as my visit in May 2019 overlapped with the Independence Day celebrations, which always bring a large crowd of pro-government diaspora to Eritrea.<sup>24</sup>

On this occasion, quite a few had come to inspect new flats being built for those in the diaspora who had contributed to the war and development in

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21. Skype conversation with a member of a #Yiakl committee in a North American city, 9 June 2019.

22. Exchange with #Yiakl-member in a local chapter in the diaspora, 18 August 2019.

23. Tanja R. Müller, "Unhappy performatives of statehood: staging incompatible narratives of Eritrea through academic conferences", *TDR-The Drama Review, a Journal of Performance Studies*, forthcoming.

24. Tanja R. Müller, "The Two-Percent and the Hundred-Percent - Eritrean global networks and their discontents", blog available at: <https://tanjarmueller.wordpress.com/2019/06/18/the-two-percent-and-the-hundred-percent-eritrean-global-networks-and-their-discontents/>

the past on different sites across Asmara.<sup>25</sup> They remained oblivious to the fact that while partly National Service recruits built flats for them as diaspora Eritreans, among local professionals there is a huge housing shortage with people entitled to government housing on long waiting lists.

Others were literally giddy with potential new business prospects. An acquaintance who lives overseas and has an import-export business in the region with relatives in Eritrea told me: "I am so happy he opened the border" - referring to the Eritrean President and thus confirming the critique that political decision making is vested in the persona of the President, only that he seemingly had no problem with this state of affairs. He continued to outline the various companies he aimed to open in Eritrea to help foster foreign investment. "I have already spoken to many investors from Germany and Italy" he said, and was confident licences for all planned business activities would come forward "with time".<sup>26</sup> In this vision, there is little space for the engagement of local Eritreans beyond his family as demanded by many who used to run successful businesses but were forced to close them down or downsize due to National Service obligations, import restrictions, unavailability of hard currency or a combination of those and other factors.

One of the more bizarre twists in this fight for and among the diaspora has involved American actress Tiffani Haddish, who, even though her Eritrean father left the family when she was three years of age, has suddenly discovered her Eritrean heritage as something to be proud of. She visited Eritrea during the 2019 independence day celebrations and participated in the traditional carnival in Asmara. President Afewerki showed her the dams around his usual place of abode in Adi Halo, she was given citizenship papers (no National Service obligations for her) and on a whole page in the Eritrean Profile newspaper sang the praises of Eritrea.<sup>27</sup> During her participation at the carnival, when I pointed out to acquaintances usually very critical of the current situation in Eritrea, how Haddish was being used for propaganda purposes and a cynical show of nationalism, they were still delighted that she was there and feted her as an important celebrity.

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25. Milena Belloni, "Diaspora houses and citizenship: mapping Eritrea's diaspora-state relationships through housing policies", Paper presented at the European Conference on African Studies, University of Edinburgh, p. 11-14 June 2019.

26. Conversation in Asmara, 16 May 2019.

27. *Eritrean Profile*, "The world needs to know how amazing Eritrea is – Tiffany Haddish", 26(25), p. 12, 2019.

Of late, the #Yiakl movement has tried to capture the prominence of Tiffany Haddish for its own purpose, urging her publicly to distance herself from the PFDJ and its events in the diaspora, but to no avail. Haddish rejected such approaches and sometimes responded in ways on social media that betrayed her ignorance not only of Eritrea but broader political dynamics - in that joining the many celebrities more broadly who have become actors in development and humanitarianism and thus not unusual.<sup>28</sup> But an informant in Asmara probably described Haddish's situation spot on when remarking: 'She [Tiffany] has to see things the way she does, in a positive light, because like many in the diaspora she is lost, she needs an identity'.<sup>29</sup>

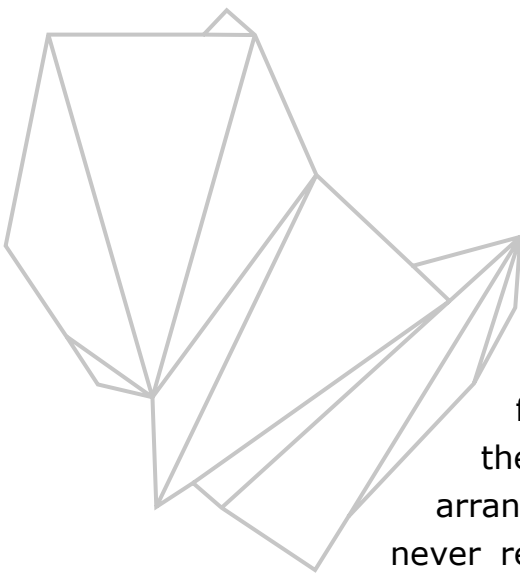
Taken together, there seems little common understanding of the situation in Eritrea between those inside the country and those in the diaspora, no matter what side the latter are on. In addition, while it is hard to meet an Eritrean on the streets of Asmara or beyond these days who does not wish for political change, of prime importance has been the immediate effect that the border opening with Ethiopia had on material conditions of everyday life in Eritrea. When the border, or rather, the official border crossings, closed again in April, the expectation was this would be a short-term and temporary closure only, and around Independence Day the border would re-open with some rules and regulations on cross-border traffic in place. The President's independence day speech was thus eagerly awaited. When it came, a deep sense of disappointment set in.<sup>30</sup> Not only was the peace process with Ethiopia not even mentioned by name during the speech, but nothing was said about what would happen with the border in the future and a general sense set in that no real change would come any time soon with the present leadership in charge.

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28. Dan Brockington, *Celebrity Advocacy and International Development*, London, Routledge, 2014.

29. Conversation in Asmara, 23 May 2019.

30. Tanja R. Müller, "Despite Historic Rapprochement with Ethiopia, 'Nothing has changed' in Eritrea", *World Politics Review*, 14 June 2019, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/27944/despite-historic-rapprochement-with-ethiopia-nothing-has-changed-in-eritrea>; Tanja R. Müller, "Eritrean independence celebrations after the rapprochement with Ethiopia: plus ça change?", *Global Development Institute*, 10 June 2019, <http://blog.gdi.manchester.ac.uk/5082-2/#more-5082>



## The illusive peace dividend

With the border being closed again, and rising frustrations from the Ethiopian side who claim they sent detailed documents on future border arrangements to Eritrea quite some time ago and never received a response, a state of peace-but-no-change seems to have replaced the no-war-no-peace stalemate that characterised the situation in Eritrea until July 2018.

In this scenario, a journey from Asmara to Senafe and the actual border at Zalambesa undertaken in May 2019 feels like a reminder of what could have been, or what has been called the brief period of “the golden days of the open border” by Eritrean informants.<sup>31</sup> “At least for some weeks we had something” is how an employee of a Ministry phrases it, referring to an influx of often unavailable goods and a sharp drop in prices once the border opened.<sup>32</sup>

Local people still cross the border and informally also some goods make their way, but in much smaller quantities. Where before the renewed border closure trucks crossed the Serha-Zalambesa border, people now carry those goods on their backs or their heads, or use donkey carts. They navigate the un-demarcated border informally, then take a shared taxi or bus to Senafe, the closest town on the Eritrean side, where donkey carts wait to receive these goods. Some local police and army checkpoints are stationed at various points on the short stretch of road between the border and Senafe. Sometimes buses and people are being searched, sometimes they are waved through. Goods that travel this way and often onwards to Asmara are not necessarily those most needed, but those who promise most profit. For example, plastic water bottles from Ethiopia can be sold at a 100% profit and thus are one of the goods one can see put on pick-up trucks to Asmara – even though there is no shortage of bottled water in Eritrea.

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31. Various conversations, Asmara, May 2019.

32. Conversation, Asmara, 25 May 2019.



Cement, on the other hand, a much needed good in Eritrea, has become harder to come by again, visible in many construction or extension projects that were started when the border opened and have been paused for lack of materials. On the outskirts of Asmara on the way to Dekemhare, the left-overs of what was until recently called the 'Mekelle market' can still be seen: a few pick-up trucks and abandoned market stalls. I am told that until the border closure it was a vibrant market fed by Ethiopian trucks who had come from the border with many commodities usually scarce in Eritrea (a similar market existed on the road to Keren in the West) – with cement and other building materials being one of the commodities highly sought. An informant in Asmara puts it this way: "Until peace, you could not even built a new water pump when the old one collapsed, as you could not get the materials".<sup>33</sup>

A business-person who regularly covers the Asmara-Massawa route, spoke about roads clogged with Ethiopian trucks as goods also started to arrive at Massawa port again for a short time.<sup>34</sup> In May 2019, the port of Massawa was as sleepy as it had been since the 1998-2000 war, the main activity the uploading of minerals from Bisha mine onto ships bound for China, now that the mine has been sold by Canadian firm Nevsun to Chinese company Zijin.<sup>35</sup> And the town of Massawa itself, always crumbling as little investment had taken place in the old city since the end of the liberation war, is now falling apart. Houses where a few years ago I sat with locals living there for an evening coffee ceremony are now so derelict that they are uninhabitable and left until reduced to rouble. It thus is rather ironic that from the Ministry of Tourism in Asmara one can get a small brochure that describes Massawa as the pear of the Red Sea, praising its "extravagant villas" dating back to the 17th century and its coral buildings.

More generally, even during the months when the border was open, multiple restrictions on private business activities were officially still in place. Buildings started or altered without the necessary permission could still be put down by government enforcement as this was illegal – thus most construction activities, at least in Asmara where such regulations have always been enforced more strictly, were renovations rather than new constructions. The further one moved away from Asmara the more new construction took place. Even

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33. Conversation, Asmara, 16 May 2019.

34. Conversation, Asmara, 19 May 2019.

35. James Poole & Laura Millan Lombrana, "Nevsun finds a white knight in Zijin with \$1.41 Billion deal", *Bloomberg*, 5 September 2018, [https://www.bloomberg.com/amp/news/articles/2018-09-05/zijin-mining-to-buy-nevsun-resources-for-1-41-billion-in-cash?\\_twitter\\_impression=true](https://www.bloomberg.com/amp/news/articles/2018-09-05/zijin-mining-to-buy-nevsun-resources-for-1-41-billion-in-cash?_twitter_impression=true).

those with legitimate businesses had to follow practices that are strictly speaking illegal in order not to go bankrupt, such as getting imported and other needed supplies through black market channels. What was different, at least in relation to the latter activities, was that people spoke about them openly, and some of the results of black market behind the scenes trading could be seen in shops and premises, but nobody cared. Thus, either a blind eye was now turned to these activities by government or ministry officials, or, and that seems more likely to me, there is no capacity to follow up. While one can, as so often in Eritrea, not be certain, this was the first time in my more than 20 years engagement with the country that in a number of ministries whole corridors were locked and little personnel was present. This raises questions about capacity within Eritrea to re-envisage the future, and counters some of the scenarios devised by either profit-driven entrepreneurs or the political diaspora with its own not necessarily democratic agenda. Many of those who decided to stay in Eritrea and “fight for change within, if we do not do it who will?”<sup>36</sup>, or returned from for example studies abroad,<sup>37</sup> and who are deeply sceptical about both of these diaspora groups and their agendas, might need all their wit about them to have a say in Eritrea’s political future.

Taken together, thus far the political stasis that has characterised Eritrea for more than a decade, visible for example by no meetings of the National Assembly (the Eritrean equivalent to a parliament) since 2002, lack of real power of ministries, but political decision making centred on the office of the President who mostly resides in Adi Halo outside Asmara, where only a small group of select people have regular access to him, has remained as entrenched as ever. The same is true for the economy that is largely controlled by the state or rather enterprises of the ruling party PFDJ or the military. While this has allowed the supply of basic provisions on ration cards over the last decades, it has hindered real economic progress or investment. Similarly, revenues from mining went to a special fund controlled by the President, from which for example salary increases for public employees have reportedly been paid, but about which not much else is known in concrete detail.<sup>38</sup> Since Bisha mine is owned by a Chinese company, there is even less transparency about revenues from it than when it was under Canadian ownership. Lastly, the jury is out to what extent the potential strategic importance of Eritrea to

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36. Conversation in Asmara, 29 May 2019.

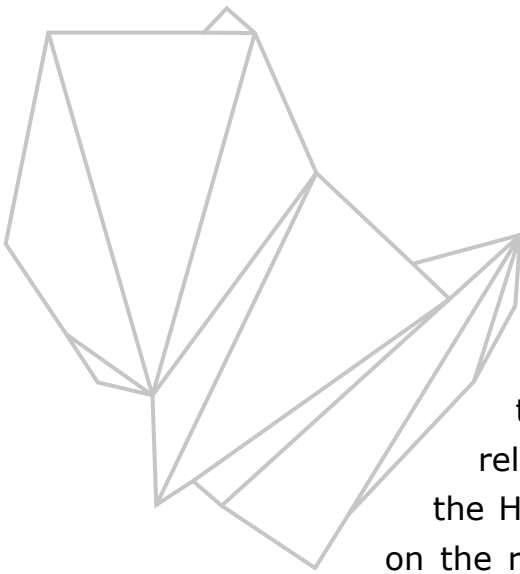
37. Tanja R. Müller, “Post-liberation politics and political space in Eritrea: Interrogating aspirations among educated youth”, *Journal of Development Studies*, 54(6), p. 968-982, 2018.

38. Various conversations with Eritrean professionals in Asmara, 28 May 2019.

Arab countries will translate into tangible economic benefits for Eritrea. One of Eritrea's main assets here might be its ports that may attract major investment to be followed by increased trade and the opening of a long-planned export processing zone near Massawa, for which the physical infrastructure is largely completed.<sup>39</sup> And next to the massive new Chinese embassy building near the airport in Asmara, a site has been earmarked for a similarly big embassy to be built by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, perhaps the clearest indicator for a closer future economic partnership.

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39. David Styan. "The politics of ports in the Horn: War, peace and Red Sea rivalries", *African Arguments*, 18 July 2018, <https://africanarguments.org/2018/07/18/politics-ports-horn-war-peace-red-sea-rivalries/>



## Conclusion

Various scenarios are possible when looking at the future of Eritrea and the Ethiopian-Eritrean relationship as well as wider regional dynamics in the Horn and beyond. While much has been written on the renewed importance of the Arab states for the countries in the Horn and the potential pitfalls in this, what this may mean for Eritrea is less clear, not least since of late the war in Yemen that is deeply intertwined with this involvement seems to have taken a different turn.<sup>40</sup>

Regardless of these external relations, when speaking to people in Asmara about the discourse in the diaspora that frets about the hidden agenda of the Eritrean President to re-unite Eritrea with Ethiopia, they usually shrug their shoulders as this does not make sense to them. Discourses that Eritrea is in fact not at peace as peace cannot exist within a dictatorship have little meaning here, even if people at the same time are adamant that a new political leadership and new political processes are needed. Reportedly, neighbourhood meetings have started to take place where potential transitional solutions are being discussed<sup>41</sup> – and while I have not come across any such meetings I have also not met anybody who believes the political situation can stay as it is, including professionals who work for ministries or other state institutions.

Thus while almost everybody one speaks to in Eritrea is clear that a brighter future under the current political system cannot be envisaged, few people have an idea how a transition-process could take place. In contrast to some commentaries and social media campaigns from the diaspora who see events in Sudan as a model for Eritrea and beyond, when I was in Asmara few people would have suggested to follow Sudan. “We observe what is going on there

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40. Alex de Waal. “Beyond the Red Sea: A new driving force in the politics of the Horn”, *African Arguments*, 11 July 2018, <https://africanarguments.org/2018/07/11/beyond-red-sea-new-driving-force-politics-horn-africa/>; International Crisis Group, “Intra-Gulf Competition in Africa’s Horn: Lessening the Impact”, *Middle East Report No. 206*, Brussels, ICG.

41. *The Economist*, “Where is the peace dividend? Eritrea’s gulag state is crumbling”, 11 July 2019.

and we do not want this trouble here”, was the general verdict, even if of late events in Sudan seem to have taken a turn towards a sustained transitional government.<sup>42</sup> But mass protests are also not something many Eritreans I met would contemplate, not necessarily out of fear, but because few share the obsession with the figure of the President and total contempt for Afewerki voiced by many in the diaspora like the #Yiakl-movement, nor do they see his leadership in the same way as many groups in Sudan saw the leadership of Omar al-Bashir. And as has been observed more generally, Eritreans are used to dealing with suffering in their own ways.<sup>43</sup>

In the short term, abolishing indefinite national service is a key priority for most. And while the government claims it has actually done that, in that now National Service recruits are being paid, this misses the point: It is not payment that is the issue, but that one cannot leave one’s place of assigned work easily and without possible repercussions. Of late, the issue of grade 12 in Sawa, the National Service training centre that was in fact introduced more than a decade ago, has received much attention, not least through a recent report by Human Rights Watch that in effect says nothing new. As I have argued elsewhere, as with everything concerning Eritrea, such narratives propagated from the outside should be taken with caution and more often than not fail to reflect Eritrea’s complex and contradictory realities.<sup>44</sup>

For a sustainable future, recent events in Sudan might hold one lesson after all: They were to an important degree driven by people inside, often improbable ‘heroes’ who perhaps would not have thought until recently that they would be drawn into such major political developments. One can only hope that those who remained in Eritrea out of a sense of national duty will play an equally important role in any transition. More generally, as peace processes in other parts of the world have shown, dialogue and compromise are often a cornerstone for lasting peace, which makes the antagonist and hate-based stance of much of the political diaspora a worrying sign. Recent research has

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42. BBC, “Sudan Conflict: Army and civilians seal power sharing deal”, 17 August 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-49379489>

43. Richard Reid. “Caught in the headlights of history: Eritrea, the EPLF and the post-war nation state”, *Journal of Modern African Studies* 43(3), p. 467-488, 2005.

44. Human Rights Watch. “They are making us into slaves, not educating us’. How indefinite conscription restricts young people’s rights, access to education in Eritrea”, 8 August 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/08/08/they-are-making-us-slaves-not-educating-us/how-indefinite-conscription-restricts>; Tanja R. Müller, “Eritrea is moving backwards in many ways, but I will stay’: An alternative reading of personal experiences in Eritrea’s system of higher education”, blog available at <https://tanjarmueller.wordpress.com/2019/08/13/eritrea-is-moving-backwards-in-many-ways-but-i-will-stay-an-alternative-reading-of-personal-experiences-in-eritreas-system-of-higher-education/>.

also observed that while inside Eritrea ethnic and religious affiliations play less of a role in favour of a sense of Eritreanness, in the diaspora these have re-emerged as important drivers of divisions.<sup>45</sup>

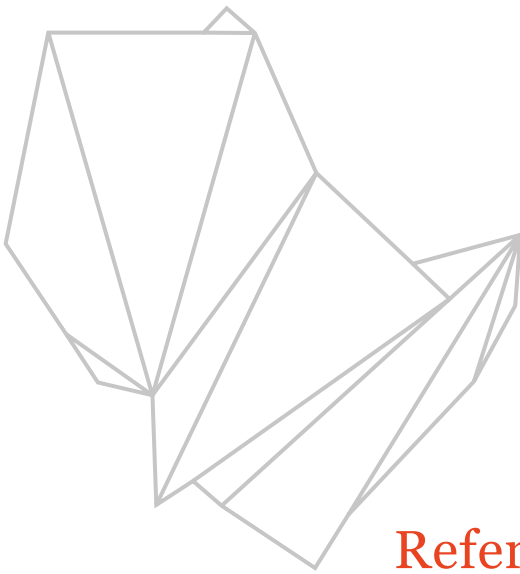
Lastly, the present Eritrean regime is less fragile than it looks. Its acceptance of the Ethiopian offer for peace resulted not only in an end of Eritrea's partly international diplomatic isolation and UN security council imposed sanctions (even if the latter had no direct connections to the Eritrean-Ethiopian dispute), but also in new engagements on the business front (for example in Potash mining) and the political international scene. In joining the Human Rights Council and taking up the Chairmanship of the "Khartoum process" Eritrea became an active actor in international affairs again (in a way Sudan under Al-Bashir would have struggled to, not least after his ICC indictment, which may hold another lesson in relation to peace and reconciliation).<sup>46</sup>

Taken together, while within Eritrea and in the diaspora, various actors hope for and demand change out of different motivations and through different means, change might take much longer than many anticipate. And the vilification of a leader in power is more likely to hinder than advance such change, as the example of Sudan might have taught us.

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45. Nicole Hirt and Adbulkader Saleh Mohammad. "Do Diasporas Contribute to the Persistence of Authoritarian Rule?", Paper presented at the European Conference on African Studies, University of Edinburgh, p. 11-14, June 2019.

46. On Bashir and the ICC indictment see Allard Duursma and Tanja R. Müller. "The ICC indictment against Al-Bashir and its repercussions for peacekeeping and humanitarian operations in Darfur", *Third World Quarterly*, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2019.1579640>; Tanja R. Müller. "Revisiting the ICC indictment against Al Bashir in the wake of the current protest movements in Sudan", *Global Development Institute*, 2 April 2019, <http://blog.gdi.manchester.ac.uk/revisiting-the-icc-indictment-against-al-bashir-in-the-wake-of-the-current-protest-movements-in-sudan/>



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