

*Philippe Pellet*¹

THE IROB PEOPLE: A CHRISTIAN ETHNIC MINORITY CAUGHT BETWEEN THE HAMMER AND THE ANVIL IN THE TIGRAY WAR IN ETHIOPIA

Introduction

In November 2020, the “Tigray War” broke out between the Ethiopian Federal Government and the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF). Tigray is one of the ten regional states of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, located in the north of the country along the border with Eritrea (see Figure 1). In this conflict, the Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF) have cooperated with the Eritrean military (Eritrean Defense Forces – EDF). This conflict has created a major humanitarian crisis, which is aggravated by the Ethiopian Federal Government’s blockade of Tigray. The Irob people, a minority ethnic group whose homeland is in Tigray along the Ethiopia–Eritrea border, are probably amongst the conflict’s most severely hit communities. One of the peculiarities of the Irob people is that a part of the community converted to Catholicism in the 19th century in a predominantly Orthodox Christian and Muslim environment. In January 2021, the Ethiopian Catholic Bishops’ Conference visited the Diocese of Addigrat in North Tigray to assess the humanitarian consequences of the war in this region. During the visit, the members of the mission collected testimonies about the fate of the civilian population of the Irob woreda.² Some of the local civilians were allegedly killed, whilst others had to flee to the mountains to save their lives. During this visit, the diocese specifically requested that the Catholic Church should be the voice of the Irobs, share facts about their fate with the world and lobby for those who are currently voiceless.

¹ University of Public Service

² Woreda is an administrative division within Ethiopian regional states.

The purpose of this article is to meet the Addigrat Catholic Diocese's request. In other words, to publicise the suffering of the Irob people, whose plight in current and past conflicts has largely been overlooked and ignored.



Figure 1
Location of the Irob woreda

Source: ecoinet website

Geographical, historical and human background

Ethiopia is a mosaic of diverse peoples and languages since the country is home to more than 80 ethnic groups. Tigray makes up about 6% of Ethiopia's estimated 115 million population. The majority ethnic group of Tigray is the Tigrayan, but two more ethnic groups are also present, mainly along the borders of Tigray. These two peoples are the Kunama and Irob. According to the 2007 census, there were about 35,000 Irobs in the northeastern corner of Tigray (see Figure 1). Today, there are about 60,000 Irobs in Tigray. However, due to the Tigrayan conflict about half of them have either become internally displaced people in Ethiopia or fled the country as refugees.

Geographically, Irobland is located in the eastern part of the Tigrayan highlands, a highly mountainous area with steep slopes towards the Danakil desert in the east, which is located in the Afar territory (see Figure 2).

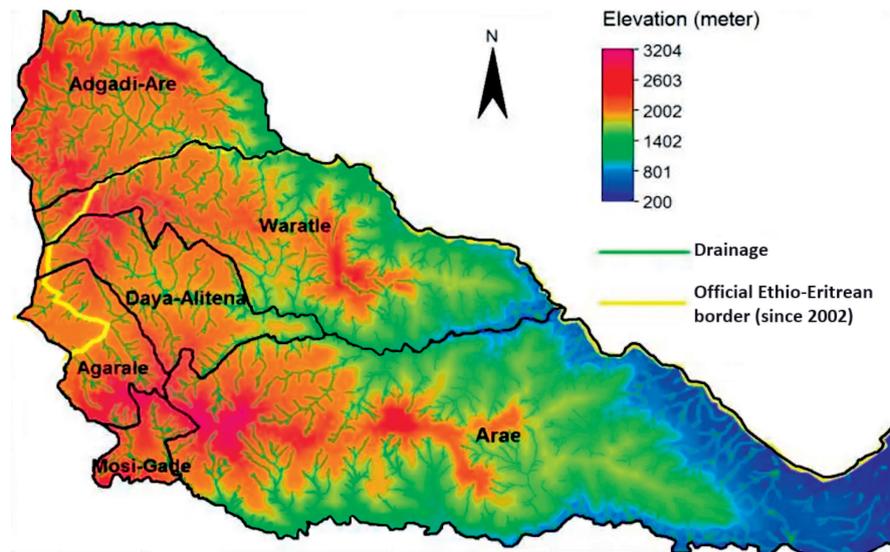


Figure 2

The relief and drainage network of Irobland

Source: https://i1.wp.com/irrobo.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Irob_map.jpg

Historically, the mountainous territories in the far north of Ethiopia were composed of provinces ruled by their local governors and enjoyed a high level of autonomy within the Ethiopian Empire. The Irobs were one of these groups who were committed to protecting their political and individual autonomy. However, they have always been proud Ethiopians which is illustrated by their steadfast loyalty to Ethiopia throughout the country's history.

The Irob language belongs to the Saho linguistic group, which is mostly found in Eritrea. The Irob ethnical group can be divided into three subgroups: Bukanyte, Adgadi and Hasaballa. Unlike the other seven Saho subgroups in Eritrea, the Irobs did not adopt Islam and remained Orthodox Tewahedo Christians. However, in the middle of the 19th century, the Bukanyte Irob were converted to Catholicism by the French Lazarist Congregation that established a mission house in Alitena,³ a newly constructed town nearby. The two other Irob subgroups, the Adgadi and the Hasaballa, have remained predominantly Tewahedo Christians. Irob's northern and northeastern neighbours in Eritrea or the regional state of Afar are Muslims while the Tigrayans who live south of Irobland belong to the Orthodox Tewahedo Church.

Today, approximately half of the Irob people are Catholics, the other half is predominantly Tewahedo Orthodox Christian and a very small minority is Muslim. Although the Irob are very religious, yet the existence of different confessions amongst them does not harm intra-Irob relations. This is the case because the Irobs have a very strong community that is held together by a common culture and history. Most Irob people are sedentary agriculturalists and cattle breeders, unlike every other nomadic Saho. Irobland is located in one of the many mountainous areas of Ethiopia.

However, this area is very arid, it has the smallest mean annual rainfall (300 mm) in the country which impedes their agricultural activities. Nevertheless, the Irobs have developed their unique solutions to the lack of precipitation. They call these the "*Daldal/sey-tan madewa* or the devil's tie" (ZIGTA-WATERS-BAYER 2000) which trap the water and the silt flowing down the steep slopes of the highlands. They also constantly improve their land usage, for example, they have established "garden farms" at incredibly steep and rocky locations. More significantly, Irob people produce top-quality honey. Furthermore, persistent droughts, which are a constant threat to the survival of the region's human inhabitants and livestock population, have also greatly affected the agricultural activity at Irobland.

³ Alitena is the traditional capital of the Irob woreda. However, since 1997 the new capital of the Irob woreda is Dawhan.

The origin of Christianity and Catholicism in Ethiopia and Irobland

According to the latest census of 2007, 63% of Ethiopians are Christians. The vast majority, about 70%, belong to the Orthodox Tewahedo Church. Evangelicals make up approximately 28.5% of Ethiopia's Christian population while the share of Catholics is about 1.5%.

The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church is not only a religious community but an ancient institution. Its origins date back to the 4th century when the Kingdom of Aksum converted to Christianity. The Tewahedo Church is very closely intertwined with Ethiopian historical identity. This connection is especially strong in the highlands region that is the historical centre of Ethiopia. At the time of the Council of Chalcedon in 451, the Church of Aksum supported the Monophysites who rejected the Council's position that Christ has two natures, a divine and a human. The Tewahedo Orthodox Church is the heir of the Aksum Christian Church. The Tewahedo Orthodox Church is extremely dominant in Tigray, where 95% of the population belongs to this community.

Since the 13th century, the Catholic Church has made several attempts to reconcile with the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church. However, this process has been complicated by Rome's claims of universality. Relations between the two parties became especially fraught in the middle of the 16th century when the Ethiopian Emperor was protecting his country from a jihad led by Imam Ahmad ibn Ibrahim. This Imam whose nickname was "the Gragn",⁴ was from the neighbouring Muslim sultanate of Adal. Aid from the Ottoman Empire has gradually turned this conflict into an invasion threatening the mere existence of the Ethiopian Empire. Tens of thousands of people were killed or captured, many churches were burnt down, and towns and villages were completely razed.

In this situation, Emperor Lebna Denguel sought help from the King of Portugal, who despatched an expeditionary force led by Christopher da Gama, the son of Vasco da Gama. This force reached Ethiopia in 1541. Although Christopher da Gama himself was captured and killed, in 1543 the Portuguese–Ethiopian armies routed the Gragn's armies. Finally, Portugal had the alliance they wanted so much, one with the Ethiopian Kingdom. This alliance was especially valuable due to Ethiopia's unique geostrategic position which may enable the conquest of the Muslim world through a back door. The existence of the Christian Ethiopia state probably has contributed to limiting the spread of Islam in East Africa.

⁴ Gragn in Amharic, Gura in Saho, Afar & Adal, all meaning "left-handed".

For Lisbon and Rome, the conversion of Ethiopia to Catholicism was key to the preservation of their alliance with the Kingdom of Ethiopia. The task of making Ethiopia Catholic was given to the Society of Jesus. The first members of the Jesuit order reached Ethiopia in 1557 but relations with the court were extremely difficult for decades. The arrival of Father Paez in 1603 turned things significantly around. Besides his skills, Father Paez also benefitted from a series of succession crises at the Ethiopian court. Father Paez was accepted by the entourage of Emperor Susneyos (1607–1632). Father Paez convinced the king to become Roman Catholic. This rapprochement was beneficial for both parties: Paez could promote Catholic and Portuguese expansionism while Susneyos tried to increase his power by an alliance with the Iberian Catholic powers. But the deep religious reforms the Jesuits wanted to carry out in Ethiopia created a severe backlash among the general population and the court. To preserve the unity of the kingdom on 14 June 1632 Susneyos had to reverse his conversion to Catholicism and abdicate in favour of his son. His son Fasiladas started his reign by ordering the expulsion of every Catholic from Ethiopia in 1633. The Jesuit adventure in the country had left so deep marks that for two centuries, no Catholic missionary was able to operate in Ethiopia.

The Catholic presence in Ethiopia was revived in the middle of the 19th century with the arrival of the Lazarist Priest Justin de Jacobis⁵ in 1842. He laid the foundations of Ethiopian Rite Catholicism in northern Ethiopia and in several territories that now belong to Eritrea. Unlike the failed Jesuit attempt two centuries earlier, Justin de Jacobis converted the people while preserving the traditions and culture of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. The Eparchy of Addigrat with its cathedral and seminary, and the existence of the Irob Catholic community, are the main legacies of the French Lazarist Congregation presence in northern Tigray.

The main reason why the Irob in Tigray and the Tsen'adegle and the Bilen in Eritrea, three traditionally autonomous communities of northern Ethiopia, became Catholic was mainly political. These three were seeking alliances with European powers, particularly with France, to protect themselves from Egyptian expansionism and to counter the growing unifying pressure of the Ethiopian state. As for France, these alliances were also advantageous since this enabled Paris to slow down both English colonial expansion and the progress of Islam in East Africa. On the religious level, the Holy See's main interest was to bring Ethiopia back into the Roman Catholic Church. The Catholic missions played a key role in the development of education in Ethiopia and the emergence of a modern educated elite. Missionaries were often pioneers in the study of Ethiopian languages, culture and history. They were also instrumental in the introduction of printing and printed books in Ethiopia.

⁵ Canonised by Pope Paul VI in 1975.

Missions also became increasingly involved in the provision of medical care and the construction and operation of hospitals.

In 1844, the Catholic mission led by Justin De Jacobis built a seminar and school named Lideta in Alitena in Irobland. This was the first school that was opened in Ethiopia. Despite many interruptions, due to events of religious persecution, the Lideta School flourished and eventually became one of the most prestigious academic institutions in the Ethiopian Empire. Lideta provided modern education for students from all over the Ethiopian Empire. In 1935 when the Italians invaded Ethiopia the French teachers were expelled from Alitena and the school was shuttered. However, in 1959 Lideta was reopened and it could flourish again due to the activities of the Catholic Diocese of Addigrat. By the time of the Eritrean invasion in 1998, Lideta has become a secondary school that also has about eleven Catholic Church-run elementary schools. In 1954 a Lideta Catholic school was founded in Addis Ababa too.



Figure 3

A statue of Bishop De Jacobis stands near the Lideta Mariam Catholic monastery church in Alitena

Source: Daughters of Charity, Tigray.

Border disputes and the 1998–2000 war between Eritrea and Ethiopia

Irobland is located along the disputed border between Eritrea and Ethiopia. The border dispute has its roots in the Italian colonial era.

Before the Italian colonisation of Eritrea in 1885, the Eritrean highlands belonged to Ethiopia, whilst the coastal areas were controlled by the Ottoman Empire and local principalities. In 1895 Italy tried to invade Ethiopia from their newly acquired colony of Eritrea, but the Ethiopian forces defeated them by 1896.

The peace treaty between the two countries was signed in October 1896. The Treaty of Addis Ababa recognised the sovereignty of Ethiopia and the Italian colonial presence in Eritrea. Nevertheless, it took several years of diplomatic negotiations, and a financial compensation worth 5 million lire, to convince the Ethiopian Government to accept the border between Ethiopia and Eritrea in May 1900.

According to the treaties in Irobland, a river called “Muna” became the boundary that separated the two countries. This border was delineated on a map attached to the treaty. This line practically cut Irobland in two. However, Ethiopia has always denied that this river was mentioned in the treaty. Allegedly, the Italian governor of Eritrea said in January 1904 that the Muna River had been mistaken for the Endeli River, which is located further north. In addition, the treaty’s inconsistencies and imprecisions made the delineation of the border extremely challenging. Nevertheless, this situation had no direct impact on Irobland and the daily lives of the Irob people until the 1998–2000 border conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia.

Eritrea remained an Italian colony until the Second World War. Then in 1952, an alliance was established between Eritrea and Ethiopia under the auspices of the United Nations, which placed Eritrea under the control of the Ethiopian crown. However, the centralising policies of the Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie have gradually increased the Ethiopian interference in Eritrean affairs. Ultimately in 1962, Eritrea was annexed by Ethiopia. The decades of annexation radicalised separatist movements like the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF).

In May 1991, EPLF and its leader Isaias Afwerki⁶ took control of Eritrea and in April 1993 Eritrea became an independent country. This development created a severe border dispute between the two countries. According to Eritrea, the current border must follow the colonial boundaries as defined by the 1900 treaty, whilst the Ethiopian authorities highlighted the “long-standing Ethiopian nature” of the contested areas.

⁶ Isaias Afwerki has been until today the president of Eritrea. He has created one of the most repressive dictatorships in the world, where basic human rights are not respected. According to Amnesty International, there are 10,000 political prisoners in Eritrea. On the Global Index of Open Doors on Christian Persecution, Eritrea occupies place number six.

In May 1998, skirmishes in the disputed areas degenerated into violent artillery bombardment and the occupation of Ethiopian territories by Eritrean forces. These areas were first retaken by the Ethiopian military in 1999 and then Ethiopia captured some Eritrean territory in May–June 2000. Finally, the two countries signed a cessation of hostilities agreement in June 2000. The two-year-long war claimed between 70,000 and 100,000 lives. On 12 December 2000, Ethiopia and Eritrea signed a peace agreement in Algiers and they also set up the Eritrea–Ethiopia Border Commission (EEBC) to delineate the border between the two countries. The boundary separating the two countries, as drawn by the EEBC, mostly follow the colonial-era borders from the treaties signed after the First Italo–Ethiopian War (1895–1896). Concerning Irobland, EEBC ceded the northern part of Irobland to Eritrea in 2002 (see Figure 4).

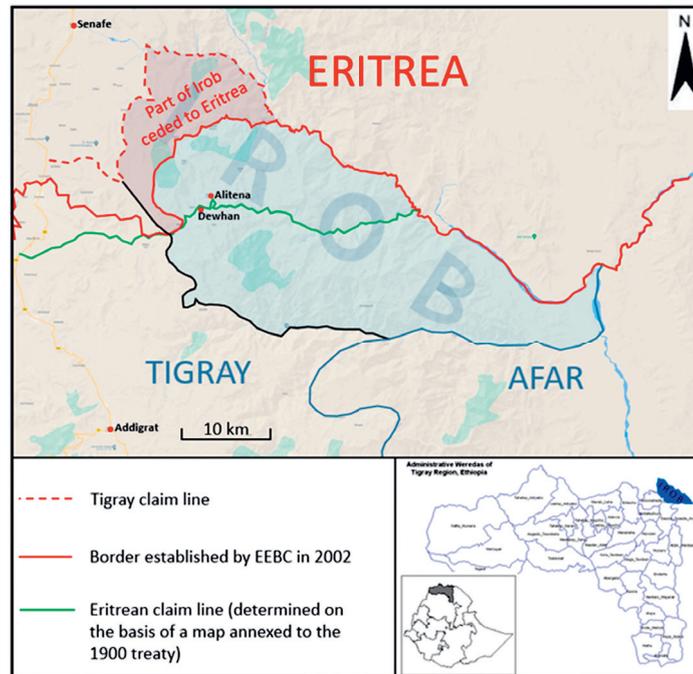


Figure 4
Disputed border area in Irobland

Source: Established from maps attached in April 2002 by the EEBC Decision.

Ethiopia has not accepted these borders until 2018. Shortly after taking office, the new Abiy Ahmed administration announced that they are willing to accept the 2002 border proposals without any preconditions. However, the administration of the contested territories was not taken over by Eritrea until the outbreak of the “Tigrayan War” in November 2020.

Consequences of the Eritrean–Ethiopian 1998–2000 war on the Irob

Eritrea’s invasion of Northern Tigray in 1998 included the partial occupation of Irobland and the invasion was accompanied by cases of extreme violence:

- ✦ imprisonment, harassment, beatings
- ✦ the murder of civilians (including priests)
- ✦ sexual violence against women and girls
- ✦ widespread looting
- ✦ the confiscation and destruction of private property and facilities like churches, schools, health centres and other government buildings, for example, the Lideta Mariam Church, priest residence and church properties in Alitena were all damaged and looted
- ✦ the theft of relics from churches
- ✦ residents were evicted from their houses and their livestock and beehives were either slaughtered or destroyed
- ✦ 97 civilians were kidnapped, their fate is still unknown
- ✦ significant environmental damage like deforestation, burning of fields and forests, destruction of the indigenous irrigation systems

This war and the post-war period had very severe consequences for the Irob:

- ✦ The previously porous border was secured. This impeded the traditional movement patterns of people and goods across the border. Even after Eritrea’s independence in 1993, the border had remained so lightly controlled that communities separated by the international boundary could continue their daily activities as they have always done. This was particularly important for the Irob people, who used to sell their products at the Senafe market in Eritrea (see the location of this city on Figure

- 4). The reason for this is that for many rural Irobs the Eritrean Senafe was a much more accessible location than the Ethiopian Addigrat. But all of this came to an end due to the 1998–2000 war.
- ✦ After the war, Irobland became a militarised zone where thousands of Ethiopian federal soldiers protected the disputed border. This has had a significant social and environmental impact: soldiers have destroyed land and caused deforestation; the constant presence of soldiers within the community and the rise of prostitution due to the presence of soldiers have hurt the social fabric of the local community. Finally, the constant presence of soldiers and the unsettled nature of the border created uncertainty and anxiety.
 - ✦ Irobland was neglected by both the Ethiopian Federal Government and the regional government of the Tigray Region. Neither government did anything to redevelop the area after the war which made matters worse.
 - ✦ The Tigrayan Government has adopted a policy of assimilation that undermined the centuries-old tradition of Irob's autonomy. Because of this, Irob youth are experiencing an identity crisis. They are afraid to say: "I am Irob" instead, as a survival strategy, they say that they are Tigrayans.
 - ✦ The Alitena Catholic School, which used to be a centre of excellence and attracted students from all over Ethiopia, never recovered from the ravages of war. The school was unable to recruit qualified teachers because of the lack of attractiveness of Irobland due to economic depression and insecurity.

All these factors made many, especially young, Irobs leave their ancestral homeland and move to other African countries, the Middle East, Europe, or the United States as either refugees or migrants. Even elderly people have left Irobland for Addigrat or Mekelle despite their strong attachment to their ancient lands.

Young people are often victimised by human trafficking organisations that have risen in Irob due to the lack of opportunities. These organised criminal gangs offer young people the chance to move to developed countries by selling them the promise of El Dorado. Many young people have been trapped by these unscrupulous enterprises. For example, halfway through their journey to their destination, the human traffickers contact the victims' family members and threaten them that they will kill their relative(s) and sell their organs if they do not pay the ransom they want.

2020–2021 “Tigrayan war” and its impacts on Irob

On 4 November 2020, in reaction to a coordinated attack by Tigray regional forces on the Northern Command of the Ethiopian Federal Defense Forces (ENDF) at several military bases in the Tigray Region, the federal government in Addis Ababa launched a military counter-offensive against Tigray Region. The outbreak of the “Tigray war” was the culmination of escalating political tensions between Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, who has been in power since 2018, and the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF). TPLF lead the government of the Tigray regional state and they have also dominated federal politics for almost 30 years, from the overthrow of Mengistu’s Marxist dictatorship in 1991 until 2018.

In this offensive, ENDF was supported by military forces from the Amhara regional state as well as the Eritrean Defense Forces (EDF). In November 2020, the allied forces quickly occupied the main cities of Tigray, including its capital Mekelle, so that on 28 November 2020, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed announced the end of the military confrontation. In reality, Tigrayan forces still controlled large territories, especially in the hard-to-reach mountainous regions where the fighting never stopped. In June 2021, Tigray Defense Forces (TDF) retook the main towns in Tigray, including its capital Mekelle. Today, the war is far from over: the central federal government has established a blockade around Tigray. This exacerbates the already catastrophic humanitarian situation. At the same time fighting expanded from Tigray to the neighbouring Amhara and Afar regional states.

In this conflict, 20 years after the Ethiopia–Eritrea war, the Irob people have been subjugated again by Eritrean forces. In November 2020, when the war began, Eritrean forces invaded northern Tigray, including the entire territory of Irobland. To prevent their destruction TPLF-linked militias fled and sought refuge in the mountainous areas of this region. On New Year’s Day, these militias attacked an Eritrean military base while the soldiers were celebrating New Year’s Day.

In retaliation, on and after Ethiopian Christmas Day, 6 January, Eritrean soldiers murdered 71 innocent civilians in villages east of Alitena, and other civilians in several villages across Irobland. Apart from those killings, the Eritrean army has slaughtered livestock, destroyed public and private properties, burned villages and looted administrative buildings in the capital Dawhan and Alitena.

When the TDF retook Tigray in June 2021, the EDF decided to withdraw. However, in Irobland, they still occupy all of those territories which the EEBC has defined as Eritrean and some lands south and southeast to the original Eritrean claim line. As a result, about half of Irobland is still under Eritrean control (see Figure 5).

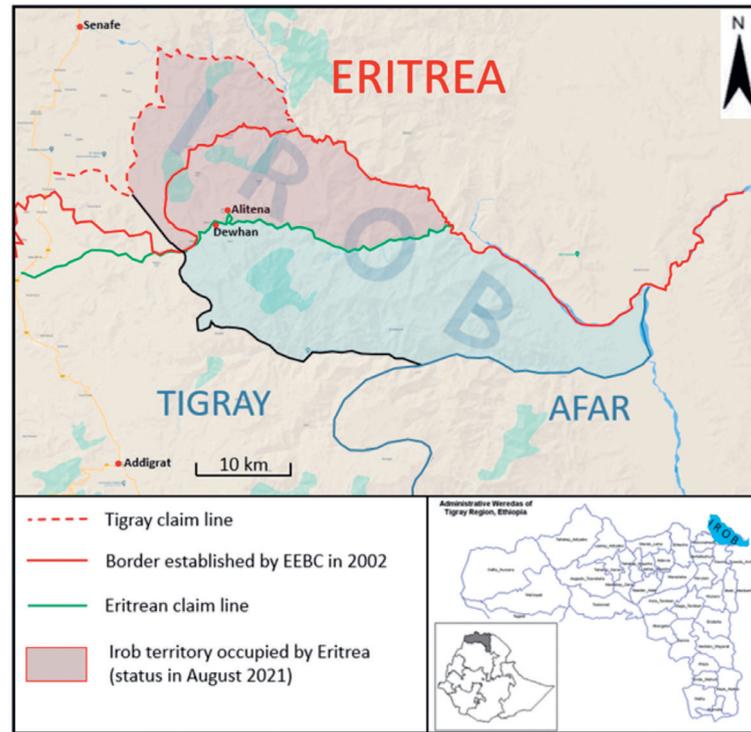


Figure 5

Occupation of Irobland by Eritrean forces (status in August 2021)

Source: April 2002 EEBC Decision and interview with the Irob Advocacy Association

Although internet and telephone communication lines are down, sporadic reports are emerging about the current situation, which, according to emigrant Irobs with relatives living there, is as follows:

- ✦ About 2,500 people sought refuge in Addigrat, Wukro and Mekelle.
- ✦ The January 2021 massacre of innocent civilians and the continued occupation of half of Irobland by the Eritrean army which separates families and relatives causes continuous trauma and anxiety.
- ✦ The presence of TPLF-affiliated militia and TDF among civilians and the fact that the Eritrean forces are also nearby is a major source of stress and anxiety, because the population is worried that clashes could break out at any time and that civilians might be used as human shields.

- ✦ Fear of starvation. The food situation in many villages is very precarious, the population largely relies on cactus pear fruits to alleviate the food shortage. If the crisis lingers on, the risk of starvation in Irobland is quite high due to the region's remoteness.
- ✦ TDF has imprisoned those Irob civilians who distributed aid during the territory's 8-month-long occupation by Eritrean and Ethiopian federal forces (November 2020 to June 2021). The pretext for these actions is that the detained cooperated with ENDF and the interim government. According to the representatives of the Irob Advocacy Association, 75 civilians are currently in prison, where they are beaten and have to perform forced labour. Furthermore, none of these people were members of the Prosperity Party, the political party which currently controls the federal government, instead, they helped to keep the population calm, maintained order while looting was being perpetrated, and distributed aid..

Concluding remarks

The Irob people have been caught between the hammer and the anvil in multiple recent territorial conflicts and regional power struggles. Their torment is probably linked, at least partially, to the assimilation pressures they have to deal with. This is a major issue because Irobs have a community that values independence. Indeed, over many centuries, they have developed a unique socio-cultural identity and created an extremely close-knit ethnic group with their myths and legends. The Irobs are also an interesting community since one of their subgroups, the Bukanyte, have converted to Catholicism. The Catholic Church has played an essential role in the development of not only remote Irobland but of Ethiopia too, largely due to the Catholic school, founded by the Lazarists in 1844, in Alitena.

The Irob society possesses advanced social values, whose values and characteristics must not only be recognised and respected but we must also support them to ensure that they may prosper. The most important prerequisite for any redevelopment action is of course the return of peace. Restoring the integrity of Irobland, which would require the revision of the current Ethiopia–Eritrea border, would improve the prosperity and security of the Irob community.

In the short term, besides food aid, this severely traumatised community desperately needs social rehabilitation and psychological support programs, similarly to what has happened in the Balkan states. In the longer term, we ought to carry out economic assistance programs to develop Irobland's natural resources.

According to the Irob Advocacy Association (IAA), many Irob youth are educated and would be willing to remain in/return to Irobland if the circumstances were right.

IAA has drafted a development plan for Irobland, which is essentially based on three pillars:

1. the development of infrastructure and public services in Alitena and Dawhan
2. the restoration of the natural environment on the mountainous regions of Irobland
3. the development of ecotourism

A comment about the last point. Due to its picturesque natural vistas, some visitors call Irobland “Little Tibet”. Combining the ecological treasures of Irobland with the unique cultural heritage of the Irobs, like the historic Gunda Gunde Monastery, could turn remote Irobland into a tourist hotspot of the region.

The Catholic school in Alitena should also be rebuilt so it can once again become the centre of Irobland’s educational sector.

Of course, such development programs require political support by the Tigrayan and federal governments. Nevertheless, humanitarian and development organisations could still carry out these programs by cooperating with local actors.

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