Ethiopian and Eritrea Conflict: Neo-Realist Perspective

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Abstract: This article aims to explain the war between Ethiopia and Eritrea about 20 years ago with neo-realist theory, which has an important place in international theories. Eritrea was left to the control of the United Nations (UN) after the Italian invasion, and then attached to Ethiopia with a decision taken at the United Nations General Assembly. Following this decision, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front started the struggles for independence that would last for years. With the referendum held in 1993, Eritrea officially left Ethiopia and became an independent state. In the early years of Eritrea's independence, good relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea worsened due to mutual moves in both countries, and the war started in 1997 due to the border dispute in the town of Badme, located on the border of Ethiopia and Eritrea, this war continued on more than one border point, killing tens of thousands of people, caused hundreds of thousands of people to migrate and spend millions of dollars in both countries. In this article, the connections between the war between the two countries and the three different assumptions presented by the neo-realist theory will be examined. The main structure of the article is the anarchic structure of the international system put forward by the neo-realist theory and the gaps in the international system, especially the security concerns of the small countries and the security perception of the countries and the economic relations between the countries affecting the security understanding of the countries. In addition, these assumptions aim to show that the war between Ethiopia and Eritrea is not only the border dispute between the two countries, but also on the background of the war.

Keywords: Neo-realism, Ethiopia, Eritrea, conflict, international system, security, economy.

Etiyopya ve Eritre Savaşı: Neo-Realist Bakış Açısı

Öz: Dünya üzerinde her şey bir değişim halindedir. Değişimin gücünün önünde hiçbir engelin durabilmesi mümkün değildir. Değişimin engellenemez etkisinden kentlerde değişim ve dönüşüm geçirerek günümüzdeki konumları ile insanlığa ev sahipliği yapmaktadır. Bu çalışma, kentlerin ilk olarak ne zaman ortaya çıktığını, nasıl geliştiğini ve kentlerin günümüzdeki

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pozisyonlarını değerlendirmek üzere yapılan literatür çalışmalarından elde edilen bilgilerin analizi ile oluşmuştur. Varılan noktada kentlerin ilk çıktığı çağlardan günümüze kadar büyük bir değişim ve dönüşüm geçirdiği ve bu değişimin tetikleyici gücü olarak ekonomin lokomotif güç olduğu gözlemlenmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Neo-realizm, Etiyopya, Eritre, savaş, uluslararası sistem, güvenlik, ekonomi.

Introduction

Wars have done more harm to humanity than good. Not only did the fighting soldiers suffer, but the people living in that region or that country were directly or indirectly affected by wars. Some have lost their lives, some have lost their loved ones, and sometimes have to leave the land where they were born and raised. People who leave the land they live in want to save their lives and seek a more reliable life. In order to obtain this life, they migrated from their place of residence to a place they found more reliable. Throughout the history of the world, people have fought constantly. After the emergence of the nation-state concept, these wars continued. In general, it is stated that states fight for the balance of power. Some states fought for border security, economic and political power, while others participated in cross-border wars for international power balances. Scientists put forward many theories called international relations theories in order to explain the moves they make because of the balance of power between countries. Some thinkers argue that international relations emerge in the context of international anarchy. However, he argues that international relations are not completely irregular. They state that the order between states arises from some power. As an example, they show that the British Empire shaped the world in the 19th century and that most states accepted the attitude of the British. (Roskin and Berry 2014).

In this study, the border conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea between 1998-2000, which caused the death and displacement of thousands of people, and this conflict is examined from a neo-

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realist point of view. The study begins with an overview of Ethiopia, describing the demographic and sociological structure of Ethiopia. Then you will see the general information about Eritrea. The main reason why there are parts that contain general information about Ethiopia and Eritrea is to provide a better understanding of the logic of the conflict that people are experiencing. After the information about the countries, the background of the conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea and general information that will give us an idea about this conflict are given. After this information is given, the situation analysis from the neo-realist point of view of the conflict is mentioned. In this section, some information is given, such as the main factors in dragging the two countries into war. Unfortunately, the number of articles examining the Ethiopian-Eritrean conflict from a neo-realist point of view is almost nonexistent. Apart from this, the articles about the emergence of the Ethiopian-Eritrean conflict could not go beyond the rhetoric of war, in general, rather than relying on the theory of neo-realism, one of the major theories of international relations. It cannot be denied that even though theories of international relations do not fully explain wars between countries, all theories offer a different perspective to those who study events (Aslanlı and Memmedov 2016).

1. Ethiopia

The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, officially known as the Horn of Africa, is a country in the eastern part of Africa. The neighboring countries of Ethiopia, whose capital is Addis Ababa, are Sudan, South Sudan, Eritrea, Djibouti, Somalia and Kenya. Ethiopia, which is the second most populous country in Africa, is one of the two African countries that defeated the European colonial powers and maintained its sovereignty as an independent country. Italy has attempted to invade Ethiopia twice but failed to do so (Macalester, Retrieved 10 December 2019). The Ethiopian state has a state tradition of 2,000 years. In the historical records, the country, which was referred to as Abyssinia, was the first country that Muslims emigrated in the 7th century.

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Ethiopia is one of the strongholds of Orthodox Christianity in Africa. In the 4th century, Middle East became the official religion of the state and gained power in Ethiopia. Until 1974, the state was the patron of the Middle East. Even though the Ethiopian state has a secular appearance today, the relations between the Ethiopian state and the Orthodox church are very strong. Ethiopia is both multilingual and multi-religious. In addition to the small number of Falashas of Jewish origin, there are a large number of Christian and Muslim communities. When the religious distribution of the population is examined, it is seen that Orthodox Christians make up the majority with 43.5% and Muslims make up the second largest group with 40%. Some sources claim that the Muslim population reaches 50% in the country. The regime of the Ethiopian Empire, which was the kingdom until 1974, changed after a coup that took place on that date. The country, which was ruled by a Marxist regime until the 90s, has entered a democratic order after the collapse of the Soviet Union (Macalester, Retrieved 10 December 2019). As Africa is the only country that cannot be exploited, Ethiopia has also become a symbol of Africa's independence. The center of the African Union is therefore located in Addis Ababa, the country's capital. At the same time, the headquarters of many African institutions are located in Addis Ababa. Because of this feature, Addis Ababa is a metropolis that hosts the foreign missions of many countries. Although Ethiopia is a rich country in terms of natural resources, it is poor in terms of underground resources. There are no underground resources such as oil, gold and diamond in the country. Therefore, agriculture and animal husbandry activities in favorable places constitute the backbone of the national economy. 70% of the Ethiopian population works in the agricultural sector.

In a referendum in 1993, when Eritrea declared its independence, Ethiopia, which lost its connection to the Red Sea, became a land country. According to the 2007 census, the total population of Eritrea has reached 73 million. If this rate continues, the population of Ethiopia will reach 117 million people in 2025. There are over 80

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ethnic groups in Ethiopia (Mesf'in 2012). Oromos, Amharas, Tigres, Sidamos, Shankellas, Somalis, Afars and Gurags are the major ethnic communities in Ethiopia. Among these ethnic groups, the Oromos constitute the most populous ethnic group in Ethiopia by approximately 35% (Indexmundi, Retrieved 6 December 2019).

When we look at the map of Africa, we can see that Ethiopia is geographically located in the center of the Horn of Africa or in other words its heart. Nevertheless, Ethiopia's broad geographical dimension offers strategic military protection. The large mountains surrounding Ethiopia serve as natural barriers. However, Ethiopia has important water resources. This causes Ethiopia to have a significant impact on the Horn of Africa (Mesf'in 2012).

2. Eritrea

Asmara is the capital of the country in the north of East Africa. Eritrea, which has borders with Sudan, Ethiopia and Djibouti, lies entirely on the eastern and northeastern borders of the Red Sea. Eritrea, which had been subjected to Italian occupation in the past, was connected to Ethiopia in 1950 by a resolution of the United Nations. Eritrea, which remained as an autonomous region of Ethiopia until 1962, was abolished to become a city of Ethiopia (Britannica, Retrieved 6 December 2019). With this decision, civilian resistance started in Eritrea which would last for 30 years. In 1993, with a referendum held by the United Nations, Eritrea left Ethiopia and became an independent state. (The World Factbook, Retrieved 6 December 2019). The country has been governed by a single-party regime since its independence. Although it was decided to switch to a multi-party system in 1997, it was not implemented. The constitution adopted in the same year is not in force. President Isaias Afwerki has been in power since the date the state gained its independence. There is not a national assembly at present, but a symbolic assembly of members of the PFDJ (People's Front for Democracy and Justice), the only party in the country (Britannica, Retrieved 6 December 2019).

Today, more than half of the Eritrean population is estimated

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to be Muslim, but no definite data are available. The number of Muslims and Christians in the country is close to each other and there is also a small minority with different beliefs. Eritrea is a country where half of its people are below the poverty line, despite its precious mineral deposits. There are a number of valuable underground resources in the country, mainly gold, silver, copper, sulfur, nickel, basal and zinc, but these are operated by up to twenty foreign mining companies from China, Canada and Australia, most of them being exported raw. This situation leads to the fact that the riches of the country cannot be used for the welfare of the people. Political problems that have been going on in the country for many years show their effect in the economic field. Unemployment is very high in the country. These negative conditions caused the poverty rate to reach 50% even though the exact rate is not known. Agriculture is the most important source of livelihood in the country. 80% of the population is engaged in agriculture and animal husbandry. On the other hand, the share of agriculture in the total income is between 10-15%, agricultural production cannot meet the needs of the people and food products are needed in imports. In the field of animal husbandry, besides livestock production, poultry and egg trade and fishing are among the important livelihoods. There are many different ethnic groups in Eritrea. The main ethnic groups come from the Tigrais, the Tigres, the Sahos, the Kunamas, the Rashaidas and the Bilenler. Among them, the Tigray ethnic group is the most populous ethnic group in Eritrea with a rate of 55% (The World Factbook, Retrieved 6 December 2019).

3. Ethiopia and Eritrea Conflict

Until 1991, the two liberation movements, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), which had good relations with each other, broke down due to Eritrea's request for independence from Ethiopia. The close proximity of these two freedom movements in previous years stems from their struggles against Ethiopian governments in the past (Mesf'in 2012). Although the two movements collaborated,

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there were serious differences in ideological and military strategy. Moreover, after coming to power in their own countries in these two movements, they experienced significant differences in terms of management understanding as before. The EPFL leader, Isaias Afewerki, announced that they would follow the Singapore model of Eritrea's establishment as an independent country and implement an aggressive free market policy by squeezing Eritrean's political system. Ethiopia, on the other hand, was facing different pressures. The Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), the dominant party in the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) coalition, which included many ethnic groups, was also less than 10 percent of the 60 million Ethiopian population represented by this party. Oromos, which constitutes 35 percent of Ethiopia, started to create a fuss of independence by referring to Eritrea (Lorton 2000). Despite serious differences and perceptions, there was a friendly relationship between Ethiopia and Eritrea between 1991 and 1997, including the 1993 referendum on independence. This friendly relationship is primarily Ethiopia's support for Eritrea's independence at heart and then the establishment of Joint High Ministerial Commisson. This committee convened after Eritrea gained independence and signed 25 protocol agreements between Ethiopia and Eritrea. The two countries reached "cooperate closely on all matters relating to international relations and [to] work towards adopting common strategies and common policies on important regional and international political and security issues to achieve common objectives" as an agreement. In addition, the two parties that came to power declared that they would avoid behaviors that would harm peace and security. In addition, Ethiopia was granted permission to use the port of Assab at no cost (Mesf'in 2012).

3.1. Background of Conflict

At a time when relations were so good, things suddenly reversed, and the footsteps of war began to be heard. In 1997, Ethiopia began importing oil from other countries and ceased to use Eritrea's Assab oil refinery. In addition to this, Eritrea announced

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that it would start using a new currency called Nakfa and that it would leave Birr, which they used in common with Ethiopia. After the announcement of the new currency Ethiopia, Eritrea announced that a new trade agreement. While Eritrea suggested that the two currencies be equal in value, Ethiopia did not accept this offer (Mesf'in 2012). In addition to these economic disputes, there were allegations of historically uncertain regions between Ethiopia and Eritrea. This uncertainty undermined the relations between the two countries. In addition, there were some psychological factors. During Eritrea's life under Italian and British colonialism, the image of Eritrean middle class people was pushed to the background. This distinction was reinforced and used by Eritrea in the struggle for independence. Eritrea needed political support in the region called the Horn of Africa. Despite previous conflicts with Yemen, Djibouti and Sudan, the Eritrean government said it would never tolerate hostile actions against it (Abbink 1998).

Economic conflicts and the above-mentioned reasons were replaced by serious disputes on the border line. The TPLF and the EPFL, the rulers of the two countries, started blaming each other. In 1997, Eritrea first announced that Ethiopian troops had occupied Eritrea. In November 1997, the two countries wanted to settle this dispute peacefully, established a joint border commission. While no clear agreement was reached yet, in May 1998 the Eritrean army moved to the town of Badme with a previously planned operation (Mesf'in 2012). The Tigrayan soldiers stationed in the same town warned the Eritreans and asked them to leave Badme and then the first bullet was fired (Trivelli 1998). After the clashes in the town of Badme, clashes began on three different fronts, including the town of Badme on the border between Ethiopia and Eritrea. The other two façades are the Bure district on the way to the port of Zalembessa / Alitena and Assab. In addition to fighting on the front, the two countries were struggling to weaken each other with strategic moves. Eritrea was trying to weaken Ethiopia by using Ethiopia's fragile policy with different ethnic groups. Eritrea did not find it right for the Tigrayan ethnic group to rule the country, a low pro-

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portion of the Ethiopian population, and provided material assistance to other groups against the Ethiopian Government. He also supported Al Itihad al Islami, a radical Islamist group operating in Somalia-based Ethiopia, not only providing material to different ethnic groups. Ethiopia, on the other hand, sought to undermine Eritrea's power by targeting Eritrea's vulnerable economy against these attacks. For this purpose, Assab, one of Eritrea's main sources of income and one of the most important ports, was targeted. Ethiopia planned to destroy Eritrean's economy and then the Eritrean government would fall (Lorton 2000).

4. Neo-realism

While neo-realism takes an attitude that the international system is formed by the sovereign states and that these states are similar in terms of mobility in general, the concept that separates these sovereign states is the balance of power. Neo-realism reveals the theory of international politics by adding the analysis of systems to the unitary explanations of classical realism (Şahin and Şen 2014).

4.1. Assumptions of Neo-realism

There are three basic assumptions that determine neo-realism. The first is anarchy that keeps the system in order. The second is the behavior that takes precedence over security, which causes states to be alike. The third is the approach that explains the positions of the sovereign states in the international system against each other and their positions within the system with the power distribution. As neo-realism, as in classical realism, states that the international system has an anarchic structure. States explain that they made their decisions by looking at their own and other states' position within the system. However, states not only look at their own positions and gains, but also attach importance to the positions and gains of their rivals. Neo-realism foresees to take over important positions and dominate the system by increasing the military power of the powerful states (Balcı and Kardas 2014).

According to Waltz, power is a tool. Likewise, he argues that the main concern of states is not to increase power, but to maintain

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their place in the system. States want to increase their security, not their power (Gözen 2019). There are some factors that affect the limits of the powers of states. While the factors such as geography, demography, natural resources, economic capacity, political stability and geopolitical position are mentioned as these factors, the basic concept explaining power is called as military power. In the anarchic international system, where there is no authority to maintain order, the situation that limits the behavior of states to each other with a certain framework is the capacity of the powers of the states in the system. Therefore, it is understood that the basic concept that will ensure the security of states is a power factor (Küçüksolak 2012).

It is possible to provide security by maximizing the military power of states within a system which is presumed to depend on the factors that make up the survival of states. In an absence of international order, the state's ability to maximize military forces to ensure their own security demonstrates the competitive and confrontational structure of the system.

Neo-realist theory argues that no state can provide absolute security because of the nature of the system. On the basis of this, he claims that the international system is insecure and therefore foreign policy is separate from domestic policy. However, the lack of trust in international policy is normally stated. While Waltz defines security as the highest objective, it is foreseen that in this anarchic environment, the only way states can ensure their own security is by maximizing their capacities, since there is no sovereign authority to prevent the use of force (Balcı and Kardas 2014).

According to John Mearsheimer, one of the prominent representatives of neo-realist theory, power is a goal for states, and this discourse has an approach called "aggressive realism."

1. The international system has an anarchic structure. Sovereign powers are the cornerstones of the system.

2. Great powers have inherent military power which is prone to attack.

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3. States are never sure what each other's intentions are.

4. Survival is the main purpose of states.

5. States are rational.

These five items mediated the emergence of the security dilemma described by John Herz. Security measures taken by a state in an environment where states cannot trust each other's intentions are perceived by other states as threats of attack and these states take action to protect themselves. These actions are interpreted as being justified by the state taking measures for security and other states may be dangerous (Gözler 2019).

5. Ethiopia-Eritrea Conflict: Neo-realist Perspective

5.1. Systematic Perspective

If we look at the conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea from a neo-realist framework, it can be said that the hostilities of the two countries that will lead to the conflict stem from the anarchic structure of the system and the gaps in the international system. Ethiopia-Eritrea relations after Eritrea gained its independence from Ethiopia, it went through a different phase. Although the Ethiopian State initially supported the independence of the Eritrean State, the situation changed later due to the nature of the international system. In the pre-conflict situation, the Fronts in Ethiopia and Eritrea acted differently in socialist theory. The two groups applied different approaches in the regions they controlled after their armed struggle in their countries. In addition, these approaches showed themselves in the military field. For example, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) guerrilla movement of Eritrea has adopted a wider policy of warfare, preferring to fight traditionally after liberation. On the other hand, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPFL) guerrilla group in Ethiopia did not change and chose to fight in the form of classic guerrilla-style surprise attacks, mobile troops and tactical attacks. In addition, Eritrea had clashes with Yemen, Djibouti and Sudan, despite the need for political support in the region. He has consistently stated that he will not tolerate any hostile attitude towards him (Abbink 1998). This situa-

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tion may have caused the situation of the two countries not only to look at their position in the system but also to the position of the other country. The two countries, which came into conflict, increased their military investments. They received numerous military equipment and technical support from China, Bulgaria, Romania, Italy and Russia in the two countries. In particular, Russia has sold different models of aircraft and helicopters to both countries (Lorton 2000). This situation can be interpreted as an indication that the military-strong state can obtain important positions within the system. In addition, Eritrean attacked the town of Badme within the borders of Ethiopia, which is considered the starting point of the conflict. Eritrea, a newly established state, followed an aggressive attitude towards Ethiopia, claiming that its borders were wider. We can assume that it does this because of the anarchic structure of the international system. The other behaviors of the countries, which we can say that stem from the anarchic structure of the system, are the attitude changes between neighboring countries. Ethiopia and Eritrea, for example, in Sudan, where they previously supported opposing groups, changed their attitude after the war and began to approach the Sudanese government. The first country to move to improve relations was Ethiopia, which aimed to attack Eritrea using Sudanese territory. Ethiopia, which was disconnected from the sea after the war started, it started to use the ports of Djibouti. After these developments, Djibouti broke off with Eritrea and got closer to Ethiopia (Lorton 2000). In these cases, we can interpret the attitude of the countries due to the anarchic structure of the system.

5.2. Security Perspective

Another focus of neo-realist theory is security discourse. Small or newly independent states give priority to the perception of security. The main concern of such states is security. If we look at Eritrea, we can say that this discourse of security concerns exactly matches their policy. Conflicts with neighboring countries may be indicative of this. However, the discourse that Ethiopia is a state with security concerns will not be wrong. Eritreans claim that they

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were forced to lose their identities and split during the period of Eritrea's Italian colony. Ethiopia, on the other hand, did not choose to support this policy and added different races to its constitutions. This increased the Muslim-Christian distinction and led Eritrean leaders to become unreliable in domestic politics. There are also regional conflicts between the Fronts with historical background. The Tigray region on the border of Ethiopia and Eritrea is a sensitive but still unsolved for the Fronts (Abbink 1998). The first situation mentioned would harm the security of Eritrea. Because the instability in the country can cause weakness in the international arena. The latter is capable of endangering both countries for security. Eritrea may become weak if Ethiopia does not receive the regions it has defended for years. Likewise, if Ethiopia allows Eritrea to take over the areas it has defended for years, it could be damaged in terms of security. In these two cases, it can be said that neo-realist theory is compatible with the security understanding. On the days when the footsteps of the conflict were heard, Ethiopia banned commercial flights from Ethiopia to Eritrea for security reasons. Eritrea sent troops to the village of Badme, an area in which Ethiopia had border problems. In return, he sent troops to the same region in Ethiopia and the war between the two countries began (Iyob 2000). It can be interpreted that this movement, which is accepted as the beginning of the war, is an example of security dilemma found in neo-realist theory. The military mobility of one state was countered by increasing the military movement with the idea that it could be hostile by the other state.

5.3. Economic Perspective

Neo-realist thinkers generally do not deny the importance of economic relations as well as the perception of security. They think that economic relations are an important tool for the security of states (Muslu El Berni 2017). One of the areas that led Ethiopia and Eritrea into conflict is economic relations. While Ethiopia was using Eritrea's Assab refinery in 1997, Eritrea wanted to increase its 30% share to 40%, and demanded 56 million Birr in cash. This led to a dispute between Ethiopia and Eritrea. Thereupon, Ethiopia

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changed its strategy and started to use Djibouti refineries. This attitude of Ethiopia was costly for Eritrea and it had to close the Eritrean oil refinery (Trivelli 1998). This dispute between the two countries has caused further damage to the Eritrean economy. We can say that this economic harm has also affected the security understanding. Eritrea announced that it would use Nakfa as a new currency by abandoning the Birr currency, which is a common currency with Ethiopia (Mesf'in 2012). We can say that this currency change will affect Ethiopia economically. Eritrea was economically dependent on Ethiopia because it was a newly established state. He was trading with Ethiopia especially on food imports, raw materials and credit. In 1997, Ethiopia issued a new trade agreement that changed the advantageous position of Eritrea. Some observers say that Eritrea plans the conflict after this, but thought that the border conflict would force Ethiopian leaders to make Eritrea's advantageous position commercially. In addition, since Ethiopia did not have any borders to the sea, it was the bargaining trump card for the Eritrean State that most of Eritrea's ports used. The events that we talk about summarize the effects of economic relations between countries on the security of countries.

Conclusion

In general, we can say that the best theory that helps explain the Ethiopian-Eritrean conflict is neo-realist theory. Because, as mentioned above, the main reason for the conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea is the security concern he felt in his two countries. It is possible to say that Eritrea, as one of the most important actors of the region, which is expressed as the Horn of Africa, has gained a new independence from Ethiopia and has remained in a serious security concern. Likewise, in Ethiopia, he was concerned about security in order to maintain its importance in the region. The historical, human and economic ties of the two countries have determined their attitudes towards each other. It is possible to see the issues of neo-realism theory such as anarchic structure of the international system, security concerns and economic relations in the relationship between the two countries.

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Ethiopia and Eritrea, aware of the internal dynamics of the country, acted during the war to intervene in each other's internal affairs. For example, the Ethiopian ruling Tigrayan ethnic group represented only 10 percent of the population in the country. The ethnic group Oromo, on the other hand, represented about 35 percent of the country's population. Following the independence of Eritrea, the Oromo ethnic group also claimed independence and was supported by Eritrea. In response, Ethiopia has targeted the fragile economy of Eritrea and carried out economic attacks that would harm it (Lorton 2000). In addition to military conflict, countries have made strategic moves to harm each other.

In terms of economic relations, it would not be wrong to say that Eritrea is mostly dependent on Ethiopia. Before the military fight in the two countries, they had disagreements in terms of economic relations. In these disputes, both countries undermined the sense of security and forced them to engage in an environment in which they felt safe.

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