

Book Review: The Horn of Africa by Kidane Mengisteab

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The Horn of Africa is a deeply troubled region engulfed in multiple, interlocking crises. In this book **Kidane Mengisteab** aims to explore the key drivers of instability in the region, suggesting structural and institutional changes that – if implemented – could help lift the region out of crisis. **Jonathan R. Beloff** writes that the author successfully introduces topics that are often forgotten when examining the region.

The Horn of Africa. Kidane Mengisteab. Polity Press. October 2013.

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Since the infamous images of two United States military Black Hawk helicopters being shot down during the failed [Battle of Mogadishu in October of 1993](#), Somalia has continued to fascinate Western scholars, as has the entire Horn of Africa's seemingly endless conflict and economic underdevelopment. [Kidane Mengisteab](#), an academic scholar on the Horn of Africa attempts to inform readers of the current situation across the entire Horn of Africa. He does this via categories dealing with the legacy of past empires, colonization, the Cold War and the War on Terrorism; failures of nation building and their implications for current conflicts; regional and international influences; environmental disaster; and the prospects for better governance. Regional scholars and students might be perplexed by the author's addition of Sudan, Southern Sudan, Kenya, and Uganda to the list of Horn of Africa states. Traditionally, the region is composed of Eritrea, Djibouti, Ethiopia, and the various entities within Somalia (Somaliland, Puntland, and the Federal Government of Somalia TFG). The underlying theme of the book is to see the context of regional failure through different levels of conflict: from inter-state wars, intra-state conflicts, civil wars, conflicts among rebel groups, inter-communal conflicts, cross-border community conflicts, and one-sided violence against civilians. There are, however, simplifications of the root causes of the last fifty years of regional conflict.

In order to expand the rather vague terms that are commonly used to describe the region's conflicts and crises, Mengisteab successfully introduces topics that are often forgotten when examining the Horn of Africa. One in particular, and reflective of his holistic approach, is how external actors have historically created and preserved a culture of inept and often violent political figures as well as of continuous violence in the name of 'peace' and 'state sovereignty'.

However, Mengisteab overstates the role of external forces, especially the United States, in causing most of the current chaos. In depicting a zero-sum game of differences between Western-style capitalism and African capitalism he oversimplifies and overlooks many important overlaps between the two forms of economic systems. He continues to utilize a theory of a zero-sum game when discussing Western and Chinese involvement in the region. While China has been able to provide some key infrastructure projects, its motives are rather questionable and leave humanitarian and international leaders nervous about the rise of a new form of colonization. Mengisteab brushes these worries aside and even goes so far as to hint that therein lies the reason why Western countries are losing some of their traditional African markets. In addition, Chinese foreign policy of supporting an African 'Big Man', like Sudanese dictator Omar al-Bashir, is incompatible with the democratic policies that Mengisteab suggests throughout the book.

Another simplification of the book's examination of external actors is explaining Israel's history with the region. The author tries to write the significance of the relationship that Israel has had with Ethiopia and the Eritrean independence movement,

but without providing the necessary literature support to such an extent that the reader might question the real motives for including this subject when in fact the topic is not properly explored. In addition, is the lack of examination of the physiological and historical reasons why the United States government sees some linkages between the former Union of Islamic Courts and



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currently Al-Shabaab with the Afghan Taliban and Al Qaeda.

An important topic that is often forgotten when discussing the Horn of Africa is environmental damage from improper agriculture policies and the effects of climate change. The region is facing a very difficult time in adapting to rising temperatures and stopping the degradation of soil for agricultural production. With the population expected to double in the new few decades, the Horn of Africa is heading into a food and water crisis that will have great humanitarian costs. Mengisteab rightly discusses this important subject, but he never provides new information or realistic in-depth policies that might be implemented to overcome these challenges.

Mengisteab finishes the book by describing a new method of democratic governance that is more in line with the region's culture. This heavily theoretical section provides some interesting methods about attempting to combine democracy with government planning of regional and state economies. One in particular is how to create accountability of political leaders in order to prevent dictatorships. However, as mentioned before, it is difficult to increase political accountability amidst a Chinese foreign policy that supports oppressive dictators like al-Bashir. What could have elevated Mengisteab's discussion in this section is using case studies of other states that fall in line with the author's governance design. For example, he discusses the failures of the regional bloc, Intergovernmental Authority of Development (IGAD) and his plans for a better regional organisation for the Horn of Africa. What would have propelled his comparative argument is using the examples of the East African Community (EAC) or the Southern African Development Community (SADC).

Overall, the book faces difficulties in connecting its economic and political theory to its regional examples. Instead of making the linkages clear, Mengisteab expects his readers to make the necessary inferences. A possible explanation is the seeming lack of field research that went into this book. It appears that many of the stated reasons and explanations for the region's crisis come from research performed by other scholarly and human rights authors. It would have been better if the author had used empirical information gathered from his own field research, as do other books that deal with this complex region. Consequently, this book unfortunately falls into the category of just another academic book that provides no new discourse in our understanding of the Horn of Africa.

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