



Integrated Country Strategy

ERITREA

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1. Chief of Mission Priorities

The November 2022 Cessation of Hostilities Agreement brought an end to a two-year conflict in northern Ethiopia and precipitated the withdrawal of Eritrean troops from the Tigray region. The peace process and Eritrea's de-escalation of military presence provides an opportunity to reshape bilateral relations with Eritrea to a more productive end, including peace and development in the Horn of Africa. The U.S. Embassy in Asmara, Eritrea, strives to build on this positive change and increase the understanding between the people of the United States and the people of Eritrea. Eritrea's return to the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) also presents an opportunity to encourage positive and constructive relations between Eritrea, its neighbors, and regional organizations, and to promote resolution of Horn of Africa matters with a focus on sustainable regionally led solutions.

The Embassy's ability to capitalize on such initiatives to promote democracy and good government, however, is constrained by the absence of the usual foreign assistance and constructive policy tools. In 2005, the Government of the State of Eritrea (GSE) ordered USAID, other bilateral donors, and international NGOs to depart the country. In 2022, the GSE ordered the Embassy to close the American Center indefinitely, restricting the Embassy's ability to engage with the citizens of Eritrea. Further, the U.S. government implemented sanctions against Eritrean individuals and entities for their involvement in the conflict in northern Ethiopia, in addition to human rights abuses committed by Eritrean troops. An atrocities determination also was issued against all parties in the conflict, including Eritrea's military. Eritrea's tier 3 rating for Trafficking in Persons, and designation as a Country of Particular Concern with regard to religious freedom, further impede use of funds for targeted programs.

While sanctions remain in place, the embassy will endeavor to open communication lines to establish commonalities that serve the interests of the people of both countries. To accomplish these goals, the embassy will share information on American values and interests, seek opportunities to increase cultural and professional exchange programs between Americans and Eritreans, listen to Eritrean perspectives on regional and international issues, and promote the positive inclusion of Eritreans in regional initiatives.

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1. *Support regional peace and security:* Eritrea's pursuit for complete self-reliance is an admirable and ambitious policy, but it comes at a steep cost: isolation. However, Eritrea, in 2023 initiated outreach to regional leadership, and rejoined IGAD, which welcomed Eritrea's renewed interest. In late 2022, Eritrea signed a five-year Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework with the United Nations. The President of Kenya visited in December 2022, the first trip by a Kenyan President in four years, for discussions on regional peace and stability, economic integration, and establishing a diplomatic presence by opening embassies. The GSE called for peace in Sudan and hosted both factions separately in an effort to establish a dialogue and promote peace.

As a priority, the Embassy will continue to encourage Eritrea to become a proactive and constructive member of the international community, including continued pursuit of improved relations with neighboring countries, and within the region.

2. *Promote fundamental human rights, economic development, and democracy:* The Eritrean leadership, in place since the nation won a 30-year independence struggle from Ethiopia in 1991, implemented, in the name of national security, a range of policies that have curtailed basic human rights, stifled economic growth and, until recently, isolated Eritrea from its neighbors and beyond.

Yet, in his annual speech in March 2023, the President highlighted new policies to promote economic development, including the mining sector, renewable energy, water conservation, and agriculture. The GSE recently partnered with the Africa Development Bank to develop a solar energy plant to reduce the number of near constant electricity outages, which plague Eritrea daily. Interest in water conservation and expanded agriculture production is driving numerous agriculture and dam construction projects, some initiated with multilateral support. The GSE also has focused particular attention to improve the health conditions of Eritrean citizens, running vaccine campaigns for childhood diseases and HPV, as well as making a concerted effort to eliminate female genital mutilation.

These programs for fostering sustainable economic development and improving health conditions are in concert with common U.S. policy interests and offer an opportunity to open bilateral partnership and enhance our mutual understanding.

Further, the People's Republic of China (PRC) owns major commercial investments including interest in all of Eritrea's mines. Eritrea and the PRC conduct multiple cultural and technical exchanges from medical expertise to agriculture projects. However, as highlighted by President Isaias, Eritrea has many areas of economic investment, environmental concerns, and technical exchanges in which the United States, committed to upholding the highest international standards for business practices and rule of law, brings a better competitive position compared to PRC investments and activities.

3. Sharing American values and fostering relations with Eritreans: Our diplomatic engagement and public diplomacy programming are focused on laying the groundwork for building ties with the Eritrean people. Our public diplomacy programs, including the American Center, which drew 100-250 daily visitors, are designed to promote cultural exchange and engender close relations with students, educators, artists, intellectuals, businesspeople, religious leaders, technocrats in the government, people with disabilities, and other civil society contacts. These programs provide an avenue for sharing cultural values, language, educational curricula, and invitational travel, while fostering closer connections to the people of Eritrea. The GSE closed the American Center for an unspecified period of time in November 2022. A top priority is engagement with the GSE to reopen the center in part or whole to continue a key aspect of diplomacy: people-to-people relations building. This is an aspect well-understood and utilized by the GSE through its many cultural festivals, community centers, and public affairs activities within the United States and throughout other regions of the world.

4. Protect and assist U.S. citizens. Most of our American Citizens Services (ACS) "customers" are Eritrean-Americans. We provide routine consular services and emergency assistance during arrests, deaths, child abductions, destitution, and criminal victimization, when a consular officer is assigned to and present at the Embassy. The Embassy curtailed most services since September 2022, due to a lack of an assigned consular officer. The Embassy also faces

persistent barriers by the GSE in accessing arrested and detained American-Eritrean citizens. The Consular Section supports several retired dual nationals living in Asmara. The Embassy is revitalizing its American Liaison network, refreshing its list of American citizens, and bringing a new emergency contact system online.

Management Priorities

Upgrade our facilities: Embassy Asmara's physical plant is an eight-building, 3.2-acre compound built nearly 100 years ago on which no significant renovations or updates were done during the 2003-2016 period. In 2019 OBO approved a \$19 million critical upgrades and renovation project. The first phase was completed in December 2021. The second – and largest – phase began in January 2022. It will last at least three years and involve dozens of contractors, but once completed will enhance the mission's operational efficiency.

2. Mission Strategic Framework

Mission Goal 1: Support regional peace and security.

- **Mission Objective 1.1:** Encourage Eritrea to be a proactive and constructive member of the international community, including support of global initiatives with commonalities between Eritrea and U.S. policy.
- **Mission Objective 1.2:** Promote the Eritrean government's positive support of regionally led peace and security initiatives.

Mission Goal 2: Promote economic development, fundamental human rights, and democracy.

- **Mission Objective 2.1:** Promote inclusive economic growth and regional economic integration through improved diplomatic engagement and prioritization of sustainable development, energy, agriculture, health and other economic fields of mutual concern.
- **Mission Objective 2.2:** National Service program returns to 18-months (from the current interpretation as indefinite service).
- **Mission Objective 2.3:** Embassy works with the GSE to expand Eritrea's civic space to allow the establishment of local independent civil society and elevate the voices of Eritreans.

Mission Goal 3: Foster strong relations with the Eritrean people and share American culture and values.

- **Mission Objective 3.1:** Embassy reaches an agreement with the Government of Eritrea to reopen the American Center to expand cultural and educational exchanges and engender closer relations with Eritreans across the entire society.
- **Mission Objective 3.2:** Embassy and the GSE collaborate on increasing awareness, among U.S. and Eritrean people, of shared interests in public health, climate adaptation, environmental conservation, and women and youth empowerment.

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Mission Goal 4: U.S. citizens in Eritrea are safe.

- **Mission Objective 4.1:** Expand the access of U.S. citizens in Eritrea to Embassy services by upgrading Embassy's suite of communications/outreach tools and increasing frequency of outreach.
- **Mission Objective 4.2:** Enhanced cooperation between the Embassy and the Government of Eritrea to improve access to and release of detained American Citizens and LE Staff.

Management Objective 1: Embassy's physical plant is able to support mission activities and personnel.

3. Mission Goals and Objectives

Mission Goal 1: Support regional peace and security.

Description: Eritrea's withdrawal of military forces from northern Ethiopia in response to the November 2022 Cessation of Hostilities Agreement, Eritrean efforts to facilitate peaceful resolution of the conflict in Sudan, and Eritrea's more transparent, proactive and positive foreign policy outreach to regional countries and organizations, provide an opening for the Embassy to encourage and support Eritrea to become a more constructive member of the international community.

Objective 1.1: Encourage Eritrea to be a proactive and constructive member of the international community, including support of global initiatives with commonalities between Eritrea and U.S. policy.

- **Justification:** Eritrea's military involvement in Ethiopia threatened to destabilize the region and triggered financial sanctions designed to limit Eritrea's ability to prosecute the conflict. Eritrea has withdrawn the majority of its military from Ethiopia, and it is poised to re-engage regionally to achieve economic integration and settlement of regional conflicts.
- **Linkages:** JRS 1.1: Strengthening the capacity of multilateral and regional organizations, government institutions, and civil society to prevent worsening state fragility and the emergence of armed conflict. JRS 1.3: Address the immediate causes of conflict through long-term investments and institution-building in the security sector.
- **Risks:** If Eritrea fails to act constructively in the region, prioritizing its policy of self-reliance above peaceful resolution of local conflicts and regional integration, destabilization of the Horn of Africa could increase.

Objective 1.2: Promote the Eritrean government's positive support of regionally-led peace and security initiatives.

- **Justification:** Eritrea historically has followed a policy of self-reliance, leading to its isolation. Eritrea recently has taken steps to play a more proactive and transparent role in regionally-led initiatives, including towards resolving the conflict in Sudan.
- **Linkages:** JRS 1.1: Strengthen the capability of multilateral and regional organizations, government institutions, and civil society to prevent worsening state fragility and the emergence of armed conflict.
- **Risks:** Eritrea actively campaigns against U.S. and international efforts to quell rising tensions and instability in the region.

Mission Goal 2: Promote economic development, fundamental human rights, and democracy.

Description: Eritrea, under the justification of defending its national sovereignty and territorial integrity, has eliminated all civic space and the free exercise of most fundamental human rights. Our goal is to demonstrate advancing civic space and human rights will not undermine Eritrea's national sovereignty and territorial integrity. The U.S. National Security Strategy (NSS) pledges a shared vision "that the foundational principles of self-determination, territorial integrity, and political independence must be respected" while also reinforcing "universal human rights must be upheld." Eritrea's lack of civic space and fundamental freedom continues to be a major impediment to improving bilateral relations and has curtailed pursuit of the United States' National Security Strategy goal to "Build 21st Century U.S.-Africa Partnerships."

Objective 2.1: Promote inclusive economic growth and regional economic integration through improved diplomatic engagement and prioritization of sustainable development, energy, agriculture, health and other economic fields of mutual concern.

- **Justification:** Eritrea's economy is largely stagnant, and basic services are limited, due to factors such as minimal exports and highly controlled imports, lack of economic diversification, currency control, environmental considerations including unreliable rain and water sourcing, long-term national service across the population, sanctions, and continuing migration of the educated class. Eritrea is taking steps to incorporate renewable energy and sustainable agricultural practices into its economic strategy, along with tackling other shared challenges such as communicable diseases and climate change. To date, the majority of Eritrea's economic engagement has focused on bilateral engagement with the PRC, Russia, and India.
- **Linkages:** JRS 2: Increase mutually beneficial economic growth, trade and investment. JRS 2.3: Improve economic governance and regional integration for trade and investment. JRS 42: Accelerate equitable, inclusive, and accessible actions to address climate crisis, build the capacity to adapt, and foster resilience to climate-related environment changes.
- **Risks:** Eritrea maintains its current protectionist trade policies and does not institute governance reforms to support economic transparency, growth, and integration. Eritrea does not constructively address these shared challenges within the rules-based international system.

Objective 2.2: National Service program returns to 18-months (from the current interpretation as indefinite service).

- **Justification:** Eritrea's current National Service system involves indefinite conscription for both military and civilian jobs, including some that are purely economic in character. As National Service workers have no ability to leave or refuse a job, it is a form of forced labor according to international standards. As this is a governmental policy, Eritrea is annually ranked as TIP Tier 3 country, and thus subject to TIP-related sanctions. This prevents us from using our development agencies and financing tools to provide assistance to promote stability, as envisioned in the NSS, and from increasing mutually beneficial economic growth, trade, and investment as outlined in the JRS. In addition, the policy also causes many young Eritreans to flee the country, exposing them to arbitrary detention, deportation, or exploitation and abuse, and further undermining Eritrea's development potential.
- **Linkages:** JRS 3: Strengthen democracy, uphold universal values, and promote human dignity to build strong, accountable, and democratic institutions, sustained by a deep commitment to human rights and to generate greater peace and prosperity. NSS: To realize and defend the democratic values at the heart of the American way of life.
- **Risks:** Without National Service reform, Eritreans will continue fleeing the country, impeding Eritrea's economic development, exacerbating the refugee situations in nearby countries and Europe, exposing Eritreans to human trafficking networks, and severely restricting the provision of U.S. assistance.

Objective 2.3: Embassy works with the GSE to expand Eritrea's civic space to allow the establishment of local independent civil society and elevate the voices of Eritreans.

- **Justification:** This objective supports the United States' intention to "revitalize democracy the world over." Independent "civil society" groups are not allowed in Eritrea. All such organizations are controlled directly by the government or the ruling party, leaving ordinary Eritreans with few independent outlets for organizing and helping each other.
- **Linkages:** JRS 3: Strengthen democracy, uphold universal values, and promote human dignity to build strong, accountable, and democratic institutions, sustained by a deep commitment to human rights and to generate greater peace and prosperity. NSS: To realize and defend the democratic values at the heart of the American way of life.
- **Risks:** A lack of a civil society impedes Eritrea's development and leaves its people vulnerable to any shocks that render the government unable or unwilling to assist its people.

Mission Goal 3: Foster strong relations with the Eritrean people and share American culture and values.

Description: With a large Eritrean diaspora, the United States is already the partner of choice for many Eritreans, in country and abroad. Through demonstrated leadership in the areas of mutual interests, such as economic opportunity, we will strengthen the United States' standing among Eritreans. This is intended to lay the foundation for improved relations with the Eritrean population, both current and future.

Objective 3.1: Embassy reaches an agreement with the Government of Eritrea to reopen the American Center to expand cultural and educational exchanges and engender closer relations with Eritreans across the entire society.

- **Justification:** The American Center represents the Embassy's most effective public diplomacy tool for expanding people-to-people relations with Eritreans. The American Center historically hosted a range of classes, such as English language courses, robotics for youth, art classes, as well as an internet café offering Eritreans the ability to take virtual courses helping to bolster their higher education in areas of interest, such as technology or sciences. The Center's movie nights and book club provided an opportunity for Americans and Eritreans to exchange cultural perspectives.
- **Linkages:** JRS 2.2: Expand African capacity and technological innovation to foster effective participation in global markets. JRS: 4.4: Build the skills of Africa's current and next generation to adapt to longer-term economic, social, and environmental change.
- **Risks:** The Government of Eritrea continues to misinterpret the role of the American Center, not as a venue for building partnership and expanding Eritrean knowledge about the United States, but a tool to undermine the Eritrean government's policies, thereby reducing the ability of Americans and Eritreans to build cultural bonds.

Objective 3.2: Embassy and the GSE collaborate on increasing awareness, among U.S. and Eritrean people, of shared interests in public health, climate adaptation, environmental conservation, and women and youth empowerment.

- **Justification:** The Government of Eritrea promotes several programs related to health, climate and environment, and women and youth empowerment. For example, the government touts a whole-of-country vaccine program for children, and recently launched HPV vaccines for girls. Other nationwide programs include a dedicated effort to eliminate female genital mutilation and gender-based violence, as well as support for the National Union of Eritrean Women. Renewable energy topped the President's economic agenda. These programs, mutually championed by the United States, provide an avenue for collaborative efforts as partners.
- **Linkages:** JRS 2.2: Expand African capacity and technological innovation to foster effective participation in global markets. JRS: 4.4: Build the skills of Africa's current and next generation to adapt to longer-term economic, social, and environmental change. NSS: To engage African countries as equal partners to achieve our shared priorities from health and pandemic preparedness to climate change.
- **Risks:** The Government of Eritrea often shuns international support of its internal programs. It may refuse to engage in bilateral partnerships or to support international organizations addressing global challenges.

Mission Goal 4: U.S. citizens in Eritrea are safe.

Description: Consistent with the NSS goal “to protect the security of the American people,” Embassy Asmara’s #4 priority is to protect and assist U.S. citizens. This is complicated by several factors, including no consular commissioned officer assigned to the Embassy, limited communications options in country, lack of internet for ordinary travelers and residents, and the fact that the Eritrean government does not recognize dual-nationals’ U.S. citizenship.

Objective 4.1: Expand the access of U.S. citizens in Eritrea to Embassy services by upgrading Embassy’s suite of communications/outreach tools and increasing frequency of outreach.

- **Justification:** Normal methods of consular communication, e.g., MASCOT, email, and the Embassy Facebook page, do not work well in Eritrea due to lack of internet access. The Embassy needs to identify other ways to communicate with local U.S. citizens.
- **Linkages:** JRS Goal 1.2: Improve the capacity and will of security forces, including defense and civilian sector actors, to identify and respond to ongoing transnational threats posed by terrorism and violent extremism, organized crime, maritime security, and border insecurity. NSS: To protect the security of the American people.
- **Risks:** Our ability to understand the number and locations of U.S. citizens and to assist U.S. citizens in crises will be diminished without an effective means of routine and emergency communication.

Objective 4.2: Enhanced cooperation between the Embassy and the Government of Eritrea to improve access to and release of detained American Citizens and LE Staff.

- **Justification:** The continued detentions of our LE staff and U.S. citizens, including those who have been designated as wrongful detentions, are an anathema to the promotion and protection of fundamental human rights, undermine our national security priority to protect the security of the American people, and pose an impediment to full rapprochement between our governments.
- **Linkages:** JRS 3.2: Promote and protect fundamental human rights for all people, including marginalized populations by improving equality and inclusion to advance human rights, bolster civil society capacity, and support independent and professional media. NSS: To realize and defend the democratic values at the heart of the American way of life.
- **Risks:** Failure to determine the status of or secure the release of these individuals will continue to cause friction in the bilateral relationship.

4. Management Objective

Management Objective 1: Embassy's physical plant is able to support mission activities and personnel.

- **Justification:** Embassy Asmara is housed in an eight-building, 3.2-acre compound with buildings that are over 100 years old. No significant renovations or updates were done during the 2003-2016 period due to the Eritrean Government's refusal to issue visas for required construction maintenance staff. Visas were typically limited to the Embassy's core diplomatic personnel. For two decades, our Management Officers and LE staff have worked heroically to maintain the buildings and meet relevant U.S. health and safety standards with limited resources locally available. This is an immense challenge since certain projects simply cannot be done with local resources. In 2019, OBO approved a \$19 million critical renovation and upgrades project. The first phase was completed in December 2021. The second – and largest – phase began in March 2023 and is expected to run for multiple years. In summer 2021, significant repairs were made to roofing infrastructure; however, some roofs will require complete replacement to provide long-term building stability.
- **Linkages:** AF-AFR JRS Bureau Cross-Cutting Management Objective: Revitalize the diplomatic and development workforce and infrastructure in a diverse, inclusive, equitable, and accessible manner.
- **Risks:** Without significant renovation and repair, Embassy Asmara will not be able to support mission personnel and activities, and safety standards will not be met.