

Eritrea to Yemen, 11-11-1995

Both Eritrea and Yemen claimed the Hanish al-Kabir island, part of a group of about '40 hot, dry mostly uninhabited islands, islets and rocks' in the Red Sea.¹ In 1995 the Yemeni government granted a German company the concession to develop a scuba diving resort at Hanish al-Kabir, deploying a contingent of two hundred soldiers to protect the construction site. The Yemeni government also allowed a French travel agency to take tourists scuba diving in the waters around the island.² The Eritrean government, fearing that these actions would result in *de facto* Yemeni sovereignty over Hanish-al-Kabir, delivered an ultimatum to the Yemeni government. The ultimatum was presented by Eritrea's Foreign Minister Petros Solomon on 11 November 1995. He demanded that the Yemeni government withdraw all military forces and civilians from the island within one month.³ Eritrea also attempted but failed to land a naval unit on the island. Yemen, in response, increased its military footprint to about 500 forces.⁴ The following weeks negotiations ensued, with high level meetings between the two countries foreign ministers in Yemen on 16 and 22 November, and in Eritrea on 7 December.⁵ The negotiations did not produce a satisfactory solution to both parties.⁶ Eritrea put the blame for the failed negotiations on Yemen's refusal to discuss the whole archipel and its insistence on focusing only on the Hanish al-Kabir island.⁷ On 15 December, four days after the expiration of the deadline, Eritrea attacked the island with over 2,000 forces and 45 vessels.⁸ The hostilities lasted three days. Six Yemeni soldiers and twelve Eritrean soldiers lost their lives before the countries' leaders agreed to a cease fire from 17 December midnight onwards.⁹ On 18 December Eritrea was in control of the island having captured 196 Yemeni soldiers and 17 civilians in the process.¹⁰ Yemen accused Eritrea of continuing hostilities after the cease fire – a claim denied by Eritrea. During the crisis the Arab League expressed its support for Yemen which elicited condemnation from the secretary-general of the Organization of African Unity (OAU), Salim Ahmad Salim, who called for moderation and neutrality.¹¹ Mediation offers were extended by Algeria, Egypt, Ethiopia, Qatar and the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) and the UN. Within a week Eritrea had released the prisoners but negotiations stalled thereafter.¹² Negotiations resumed under the offices of the government of France, almost breaking down oncemore when Eritrea invaded the island Hanish al-Saghir in August 1996. With the threat of conflict looming large, both parties agreed in October 1996 to submit their dispute to

¹ Jeffrey A. Lefebvre, 'Red Sea Security and the Geopolitical-Economy of the Hanish Islands Dispute', *Middle East Journal* 52, no. 3 (1 July 1998): 368.

² Lefebvre, 375.

³ Lefebvre, 373.

⁴ Gareth R. V. Stansfield, *The 1995-96 Yemen-Eritrea Conflict over the Islands of Hanish and Jabal Zuqar: A Geopolitical Analysis* (University of Durham, Centre for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, 2001), 34.

⁵ Stansfield, 33.

⁶ Lefebvre claims that both sides agreed to try and settle the maritime dispute at the negotiation table or otherwise defer the dispute to the International Court of Justice, but cannot explain why Eritrea would attack following this agreement. Dzurek's and Stansfield's accounts seem to me more plausible (see next footnote).

⁷ Eritrea claims that its forces were harassed by Yemeni forces, Yemen that it was first attacked by Eritrea. see Stansfield, *The 1995-96 Yemen-Eritrea Conflict over the Islands of Hanish and Jabal Zuqar*, 34. ; see also Daniel J. Dzurek, 'Eritrea-Yemen Dispute Over the Hanish Islands', *IBRU Boundary and Security Bulletin Quarterly*, no. Spring 1996 (1996): 72, <https://www.dur.ac.uk/ibru/publications/bulletin/>.

⁸ Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Emma C. Murphy, *The International Politics of the Red Sea* (Routledge, 2013), 73. Stansfield, *The 1995-96 Yemen-Eritrea Conflict over the Islands of Hanish and Jabal Zuqar*, 35.

⁹ Some observers put the number of Yemeni death at a hundred. Lefebvre, 'Red Sea Security and the Geopolitical-Economy of the Hanish Islands Dispute', 369, fn.11.

¹⁰ Ap, 'Yemen and Eritrea Step Up Dispute Over Island', *The New York Times*, 19 December 1995, sec. World, <http://www.nytimes.com/1995/12/19/world/yemen-and-eritrea-step-up-dispute-over-island.html>.

¹¹ Dzurek, 'Eritrea-Yemen Dispute Over the Hanish Islands', 72. Lefebvre, 'Red Sea Security and the Geopolitical-Economy of the Hanish Islands Dispute', 368-69.

¹² Lefebvre, 'Red Sea Security and the Geopolitical-Economy of the Hanish Islands Dispute', 380.

an international tribunal.¹³ The international tribunal reached a verdict in in 1998 in 1999 splitting the sovereignty over the archipel between the two countries. The sovereignty over Hanish al-Kabir fell to Yemen.¹⁴

¹³ Lefebvre, 381.

¹⁴ Tanja R. Müller, 'Understanding the Dynamics of Foreign Policy-Making in a New State: The Case of Eritrea', 2007, 36–37. Müller, 36–37; B. Kwiatkowski, 'The Eritrea/Yemen Arbitration: Landmark Progress in the Acquisition of Territorial Sovereignty and Equitable Maritime Boundary Delimitation', *Boundary and Security Bulletin Quarterly* 2000, accessed 31 July 2015, https://www.dur.ac.uk/resources/ibru/publications/full/bsb8-1_kwiatkowska.pdf.