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# Human Trafficking and Trauma in the Digital Era: The Ongoing Tragedy of the Trade in Refugees from Eritrea

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# Table of Contents

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Acknowledgements.....	xv
Justification.....	xvii
Acronyms.....	xix
<b>Chapter 1: Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
The ongoing human trafficking crisis.....	1
Severe trauma.....	6
A crisis of accountability.....	7
Main conclusions.....	11
<b>Part 1: The Ongoing Human Trafficking Crisis.....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Chapter 2: Human Trafficking in the Sinai:</b>	
<b>Mapping the Routes and Facilitators.....</b>	<b>19</b>
Introduction.....	19
Deliberate impoverishment and control:	
Establishing human trafficking structures.....	21
Eritrea’s illicit cross-border trade in arms and people.....	31
Abduction and trafficking to the Sinai.....	39
Involvement of Eritrean officials.....	56
In the Sinai and beyond: A coordinated network of traffickers.....	65
On release: Imprisoned and deported.....	72
Towards Israel.....	76
Following the ransom back to Eritrea.....	82
Conclusion.....	88
<b>Chapter 3: The Exodus from Eritrea and Who is Benefiting.....</b>	<b>95</b>
Introduction.....	95
Eritrea’s policy to push out youth:	
The students arrests of 2001.....	98
Mass detentions of 2001.....	109

The consolidation of power: 2003–2007.....	116
The post-2008 economy: Sources of funds for the regime.....	117
Crisscrossing borders: No safe haven in Ethiopia or Sudan.....	130
Surveillance and deportation.....	139
Conclusion.....	147

<b>Chapter 4: Human Trafficking Connecting to Terrorism and Organ Trafficking: Libya and Egypt.....</b>	<b>159</b>
Introduction.....	159
New routes from Sudan to Egypt and Libya.....	161
Deportation from Egypt.....	163
Held by ISIS in Libya.....	167
Beheadings by ISIS.....	177
Women abductees held by ISIS.....	180
Organ trafficking in Egypt.....	183
Conclusion.....	186

<b>Chapter 5: Eritrean Unaccompanied Minors in Human Trafficking.....</b>	<b>193</b>
Introduction.....	193
Reasons for fleeing Eritrea.....	196
The exploitation and extortion of unaccompanied minors in human trafficking.....	201
When minors become torturers.....	212
The trauma of unaccompanied minors.....	215
Conclusion.....	217

<b>Chapter 6: The Fragmentation of Families: Eritrean Women in Exile in Uganda.....</b>	<b>221</b>
Introduction.....	221
Conditions in Eritrea and reasons for flight.....	224
Migration journeys.....	229
Life in Uganda.....	237
Beyond Uganda.....	255
Lifestory: Abrehet’s journey to Uganda.....	258
Conclusion.....	264

<b>Part 2: Severe Trauma</b> .....	269
<b>Chapter 7: The Trauma of Survivors of Sinai Trafficking</b> .....	271
Introduction.....	271
Methodology.....	275
The camps where Sinai survivors live.....	278
Theoretical framework.....	281
Overview of torture practices.....	285
Impact of events scale and trauma in Sinai victims.....	290
Physical examination.....	293
Interviews.....	300
Conclusion.....	311
<b>Chapter 8: Collective Trauma from Sinai Trafficking: A Blow to the Fabric of Eritrean Society</b> .....	317
Introduction.....	317
Deliberate traumatising of friends and family networks.....	319
Secondary trauma.....	320
Pain of multiple losses.....	325
Pain of being ignored.....	327
Pain of injustice.....	328
Impacts of collective trauma.....	330
In search of healing.....	333
Healing collective trauma.....	336
Conclusion.....	340
<b>Part 3: A Crisis of Accountability</b> .....	347
<b>Chapter 9: Crimes against Humanity: The Commission of Inquiry on Eritrea</b> .....	349
Introduction.....	349
First report: Systematic and widespread, gross human rights violations.....	350
Second report: Crimes against humanity.....	352
Methodology of the COIE.....	354

Response by Eritreans in the diaspora.....	355
Response by people inside Eritrea: Silence.....	359
Ongoing ‘shoot-to-kill’ policy and national service.....	361
Response by the Government of Eritrea.....	362
Conclusion.....	363

**Chapter 10: The Long Arm of the Eritrean**

<b>Regime in the Netherlands.....</b>	<b>369</b>
Introduction.....	369
Eritrean community in the Netherlands.....	373
Impact of the long arm on integration.....	381
Forms of intimidation.....	387
The 2% tax.....	397
Conclusion.....	400

**Chapter 11: Atlantic Council: The Eritrean**

<b>Regime's US Spin Doctors? .....</b>	<b>405</b>
Introduction.....	405
What we know about the human rights situation in Eritrea....	406
The Atlantic Council’s stance.....	410
The Nevsun case.....	419
Blurring the line between policy research and lobbying.....	423
Conclusion.....	424

**Chapter 12: The Policy Agenda in Europe and Africa.....**

<b>429</b>	<b>429</b>
Introduction.....	429
The European Union.....	430
The African Union and IGAD.....	441
The African Union’s approach to trafficking.....	446
Addressing the causes of migration .....	453
Conclusion.....	454

**Chapter 13: Prosecuting Sinai Trafficking: An**

<b>Overview of Options.....</b>	<b>465</b>
Introduction.....	465
Prosecution: Essential in combating human trafficking.....	467
The international legal framework.....	468

Eritrea at the centre of Sinai trafficking..... 471  
Trafficking and the crime of enslavement..... 472  
Involvement of Eritrean officials.....474  
Trafficking as a lucrative business..... 476  
State responsibility.....479  
Individual criminal responsibility..... 481  
Prosecutorial forums..... 483  
Obligation of international community: R2P..... 488  
Conclusion..... 490

### Atlantic Council: The Eritrean Regime's US Spin Doctors?<sup>45</sup>

*François Christophe*

*When Eritreans leave, they do it for economic opportunities. In order to get a green card, they have to say that they're oppressed.*

(Deputy Director, Africa Center of the Atlantic Council, Bruton, 2015).

*Eritrean officials have engaged in a persistent, widespread and systematic attack against the country's civilian population since 1991. They have committed, and continue to commit, the crimes of enslavement, imprisonment, enforced disappearance, torture, other inhumane acts, persecution, rape and murder.*

(Commission of Inquiry on Eritrea, UNHRC, 2015, p. 18).

### Introduction

Contrary to classic dictatorships, the totalitarian state does not simply target political opponents, but society as a whole. It methodically destroys all forms of human solidarity that are not directly under its control, from religious congregations and civil society organisations down to the family unit, in order to exert absolute rule over a population of atomized and defenceless individuals. Whereas those who do not actively oppose the government are usually safe in an 'ordinary' dictatorship – they can choose to stay away from politics and seek refuge in the private sphere – a totalitarian state requires

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<sup>45</sup> This chapter is adapted from the article by François Christophe published on the blog of Martin Plaut published on 12 December 2016 at <https://martinplaut.wordpress.com/2016/12/09/forget-objectivity-for-the-atlantic-council-eritreas-prison-state-isnt-that-bad-2/>

that each and every one of its citizens to be entirely dedicated to its leader and official ideology. Eritrea is one of the world's few totalitarian states, although you would never know it from the reports of the Atlantic Council – a think tank on international affairs with its headquarters in Washington. This chapter examines the peculiar bias in the Atlantic Council's coverage of Eritrea.

### **What we know about the human rights situation in Eritrea**

Reputed non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, as well as the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC), among many others, paint a bleak picture of the human rights situation in Eritrea (Human Rights Watch, 2016; Amnesty International, 2016; UNHRC, 2016). In June 2014, UNHRC established a special UN Commission of Inquiry on Eritrea (COIE) to document the situation. The COIE concluded that the Eritrean government engages in “systematic, widespread and gross human rights violations” and that “it is not the law that rules Eritreans, but fear” (UNHRC, 2015, p. 1 & p. 8). Despite “the facade of calm and normality that is apparent to the occasional visitor”, human rights violations by the authorities include “enslavement, imprisonment, enforced disappearance, torture, reprisals and other inhumane acts, persecution, rape and murder” (UNHRC, 2016, p.5 and p.18). The scale of the abuse largely explains why Eritrea, which according to the World Bank only had 4.8 million people in 2011, sent more refugees to Europe than any other country in Africa in 2015: more than 5% of the total population fled between 2003 and 2013 (Jeangène Vilmer & Gouéry, 2015, p. 209). In one incident, on 3 April 2016, “as military/national service conscripts were being transported through the centre of Asmara, several conscripts jumped from the trucks on which they were traveling. Soldiers fired into the crowd, killing and injuring an unconfirmed number of conscripts and bystanders” (UNHRC, 2016, p. 9).

Yosief Ghebrehiwet, one of the most perceptive analysts of Eritrean politics, describes contemporary Eritrea as a large-scale,

multi-layered penitentiary system comprising several prisons, in the manner of a Russian doll (Ghebrehiwet, as cited in Jeangène Vilmer, &Gouéry, 2015, p. 142):

- The tens of thousands of prisoners populating Eritrea’s jails make up the narrowest circle, the “prison within a prison within a prison”.
- A broader, middle circle includes the hundreds of thousands of military conscripts whom the government uses as forced labourers.
- Finally, the outer circle encompasses the entire population, who lives in fear of arrest and is forbidden from leaving the country, hence the depiction of Eritrea as a “prison state.”

An essential layer of Eritrea’s repressive system is its mandatory military service, which is indefinite in duration. Although national service is officially justified by the threat posed by foreign enemies such as Ethiopia, it provides the government with a constant supply of virtually free labour and allows it to “maintain control over the Eritrean population” (UNHRC, 2016, p.12). Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International note that *agelglots* (‘conscripts’ in Tigrinya) “serve indefinitely, many for over a decade” (Human Rights Watch, 2016, p. 2) and “up to twenty years” (Amnesty International, 2016), despite the fact that national service is officially limited to 18 months. “Children as young as 15 are sometimes conscripted” (Human Rights Watch, 2016, p. 2), and all conscripts are forced to work “for government-owned construction firms, farms, or manufacturers” (*Ibid.*, p. 2), for little or no pay. According to the COIE, “the use of forced labor, including domestic servitude” primarily serves “private, PFDJ [People’s Front for Democracy and Justice]-controlled and [s]tate-owned interests” (UNHRC, 2016, p. 12). Individual army generals, for instance, use forced *agelglot* labour to build new homes for themselves (unpublished report, 2015).<sup>46</sup> During national service,

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<sup>46</sup> This was the case even before national service became indefinite following the 1998–2000 border war with Ethiopia. For instance, as early as 1997–1998, *agelglots*

"perceived infractions result in incarceration and physical abuse often amounting to torture. Military commanders and jailers have absolute discretion to determine the length of incarceration and severity of physical abuse" (Human Rights Watch, 2016, p. 2). Female conscripts are often raped by commanders, a crime that goes unpunished. In the words of a leading expert on Eritrea:

*... [national service] progressively sank into a nightmarish quagmire of exploitation resulting in quasi-slavery. Many of the young women are routinely raped, work conditions are miserable, with monthly 'salaries' of 450 nakfa [USD 9], no proper place to sleep, no health care, very poor food, no home leave allowed for months, and at times for years, 'deserters' hunted down by the army and sentenced to several months in jail followed by indefinite work periods, dangerous digging or construction jobs performed without proper security equipment and resulting in workers frequently being injured or killed on the job. (Anon., personal communication [unpublished report], 2015)*

Outside of national service, Eritreans live in fear of arbitrary arrest, in the complete absence of any rule of law. Prisoners are rarely told the reason for the arrest, and "most are detained without any form of judicial proceeding whatsoever" (UNHRC, 2016, p. 8). Detainees are held in "shipping containers, with no space to lie down, little or no light, oppressive heat or cold, and vermin" (Human Rights Watch, 2016, p. 3). According to the COIE, torture is "systematic" (UNHRC, 2016, p.8), a "clear indicator of a deliberate policy" to "instill fear among the population and silence opposition" (in Human Rights Watch, 2016, p. 3). The security services also resort to enforced disappearances, about which the "friends and family of disappeared persons [are] never able to obtain information officially" (UNHRC, 2016, p. 13). Plain-clothed informants abound, as part of the country's "complex and militarised system of surveillance" (in Human Rights Watch, 2016, p. 3). Religious minorities, such as evangelicals, are specifically targeted and their members imprisoned.

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built luxurious houses for high-ranking army officers near Kagnaw (unpublished report, 2015).

As anyone can be denounced to the authorities with little justification, mistrust corrodes friendships and family relations. In addition, relatives can be fined, deprived of government services or even jailed as a punishment for the actions of their family member – a form of guilt by association. Fear of reprisals against loved ones is used to coerce Eritrean refugees abroad into paying a special 2% government tax (see Chapter 10 for more on the 2% tax and other voluntary contributions), despite the fact that they no longer reside in Eritrea. This also explains why those in the diaspora who take part in demonstrations denouncing the rule of President Isaias Afwerki sometimes choose to wear masks to remain anonymous. As leaving the country is forbidden, escapees risk being shot at the border, although authorities have enabled a lucrative smuggling business, turning the Eritrean exodus into a significant source of revenue, particularly for the military (Jeangène Vilmer & Gouéry, 2015; see also Chapters 2 and 3 of this book).

Politically, Eritrea has not held elections since it became officially independent from Ethiopia in 1993. A constitution was adopted in 1996, but never implemented. "Power [...] is concentrated in the hands of the President and of a small and amorphous circle of military and political loyalists" (UNHRC, 2016, p.16). There is no independent media as the country's newspapers, TV and radio channels are all government-owned and operated, prompting Reporters Without Borders to rank Eritrea at the very bottom of its international index of press freedom since 2008 (Reporters Without Borders, 2016). "All of the independent print media were arrested" in September 2001, not long after opposition members "who had dared to publish an open letter [...] calling on the government to implement the (1996) constitution and hold elections" were also jailed (Reporters Without Borders, 2016; see also Chapter 3 of this book). The men were never tried, but put in solitary confinement in a remote detention centre, where most of them have likely died. In 2009, Isaias Afwerki responded to Sweden's requests to free Dawit Isaak – one of the imprisoned journalists and a Swedish national – by publicly declaring: "We will not have any trial and we will not free

him. We know how to handle his kind. [...] To me, Sweden is irrelevant” (Free Dawit Isaac, 2016).

### **The Atlantic Council’s stance**

Unfortunately, you would not know any of this from reading the Atlantic Council’s analysis of Eritrea. Indeed, it is as if the Atlantic Council has made it its mission to obscure what is known of the country, most notably by systematically questioning and minimising the extent of the regime’s human rights violations. In a series of articles and interviews, the Deputy Director of the Atlantic Council’s Africa Center, Bronwyn Bruton, has maintained this line with remarkable persistence.

Astonishingly, the Atlantic Council has authored several articles (detailed in the following), the sole purpose of which is to undermine the credibility of the COIE’s detailed investigation into human rights abuses in Eritrea. Knowing full well that the Commission was denied entry by the Eritrean government, Bruton nevertheless accuses the COIE of being “uninterested” in visiting Eritrea as “its conclusions were already drawn” (in Sen, 2016a). She bizarrely accuses the Commission members of having failed to read “the relevant academic literature”, in another unsubtle effort to cast doubt on the Commission’s seriousness (Bruton, 2016a). In a June 23 article in the *New York Times*, comically titled “It’s Bad in Eritrea, but Not That Bad”, Bruton blames the COIE for relying mostly on the testimonies of hundreds of Eritrean exiles, while simultaneously lamenting the alleged exclusion of PFDJ supporters in the diaspora (Bruton, 2016a) – the very people who, throughout the COIE’s investigation, relentlessly intimidated exiles to keep them from testifying, sometimes going as far as physically preventing them from reaching the Commission’s offices (Le Monde, 2016). In her view, the victims were clearly over-represented by the Commission, whereas their tormentors should have been given more of a say.

On the other hand, it is hardly surprising that the Atlantic Council would attack the COIE’s investigation, as it has long denied the scale

and seriousness of the abuses perpetrated by Isaias Afwerki's regime. Astonishingly, the think tank suggests that the massive exodus of Eritrean youth has little to do with human rights or the mandatory military service; instead, Bruton declared (in an interview on Voice of America): "When Eritreans leave, they do it for economic opportunities. In order to get a green card, they have to say that they're oppressed" (Bruton, 2015). This statement suggests that she has never asked recently exiled Eritrean why they fled.

In another instance, Bruton compares Eritrea with Puerto Rico, on the grounds that Puerto Rico experiences strong emigration to the United States (in Sen, 2016a). Perhaps Bruton is not aware that Puerto Rico is actually part of the United States. In any case, she would have been better advised to compare Eritrea with Ethiopia, which, despite suffering from poverty and having over 80 million people (compared to Eritrea's 4.8 million), produces far fewer refugees than Eritrea. In fact, Ethiopia itself is home to tens of thousands of Eritrean refugees (Prandi, 2016). The Atlantic Council even questions the scale of Eritrea's emigration problem, alleging that refugees from neighbouring countries claim to be Eritreans to "take advantage of Europe's asylum policies" (Bruton, 2015).

The Atlantic Council minimises the ordeal of those who attempt to flee Eritrea, by casting doubt on the COIE's findings with regard to the 'shoot-to-kill' policy at the border: Bruton claims that she has "never heard of any meaningful example that would support that claim" (in Sen, 2016a), discarding the testimonies not only of Eritrean refugees who reported being shot at, but also that of former soldiers who were tortured after refusing to shoot their countrymen attempting to cross the border.

Some of the claims made by the Atlantic Council go against well-established facts, which suggests that their author either knows little about her subject, or engages in willful disinformation. For instance, Bruton does not hesitate to state that "charges of forced labor would be very hard to substantiate" (in Sen, 2016a), despite the widespread availability of evidence that the national service has long been turned into a forced labour programme (UNHRC, 2016; Jeangene Vilmer &

Gouéry, 2015). She even speaks of "national service volunteers" (in House of Foreign Affairs Committee, 2016<sup>47</sup>) to describe the many thousands who have been forcibly and indefinitely enrolled in the military. In the same vein, at a Subcommittee Hearing at the United States House of Representatives on 14 September 2016, which she was invited to address, Bruton denied any food crisis in Eritrea (in House of Foreign Affairs Committee, 2016). Having lived in Asmara, I have personally witnessed hunger in the capital, where some families send their children to beg for food from their neighbours, and humanitarian workers agree that the situation is far worse in the countryside. In January 2009, I watched Isaias Afwerki deliver a seven-hour long New Years' speech to the nation on the official channel ERI-TV: Isaias Afwerki recommended that no adult eats more than 1,200–1,500 daily calories, an amount usually recommended for children of two to four years of age.

One of the most bizarre and troubling aspects of the Atlantic Council's analysis of Eritrea is the idea that human rights violations may not in fact reflect a deliberate government policy, but rather the bad behaviour of third parties over whom authorities have little control. In a particularly egregious example of disinformation, Bruton suggested to the House Foreign Affairs Committee that Eritrea's totalitarian government was in fact so weak that it had little control over anything (in House of Foreign Affairs Committee, 2016):

*Representative Karen Bass: So, what's the human rights situation from your vantage point, from your viewpoint? What are the human rights abuses?*

*Bronwyn Bruton: I think all the human rights abuses that have been described are absolutely real. I think that the question is, and the reason that I asked the question earlier from the intelligence officer who asked, "is there a government in Eritrea?" Are these abuses systemic? Are they the result of deliberate government policy or how much are they the result of poverty, the "no-peace-no-war", bad behavior by people outside of Asmara that the government has poor grip on, what is*

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<sup>47</sup> See also Bruton's written testimony (Bruton, 2016b).

*the relationship between the political side of the government and the military? We have virtually no knowledge of that. I have no doubt that the military are bad actors, but to which extent is their behavior condoned by the government? I don't really know. I've talked to people, senior people, in the government, in Asmara and I may be super naïve, but sometimes I think they believe human rights abuses don't really exist, and if they do, they are very few and far between [...].*

The statement is deceptive: while stating that “all the human rights abuses” are “absolutely real”, it also echoes the suggestion by Eritrean officials that they are “few and far between”, if they exist at all. Here, Bruton parodies herself: in her imaginary Eritrea, human rights abuses could only be the work of “people outside of Asmara”, while the government remains clueless as to what is happening. This fantasy would certainly be even more amusing if it did not have the potential to cause doubt and confusion among people unfamiliar with Eritrea’s current predicament, especially given the Atlantic Council’s profile. Father Habtu Ghebre-Ab, who was also invited to testify at the hearing, along with Dr Khaled Beshir, rightly saw in Bruton's statements “an effort to make the human rights situation look so much better than it really is” (in House of Foreign Affairs Committee, 2016). In an earlier interview with Voice of America, Bruton reported what Isaias Afwerki had told her on human rights, apparently failing to detect the cynical nature of his statement: “He [the President] reaffirmed his attachment to equality and human rights. He says those are the fundamental qualities upon which he governs” (Bruton, 2015).

Through Bruton, the Atlantic Council has denounced the allegedly ‘disproportionate’ focus on Eritrea’s human rights situation (in House of Foreign Affairs Committee, 2016), declaring: “In terms of repression, Eritrea is on a par with Ethiopia and Djibouti” (*Ibid.*). To be sure, Eritrea is not the only country in the Horn of Africa with a less-than-stellar record on human rights abuses and political repression. In Ethiopia, where a state of emergency has recently been declared, security forces have cracked down on protesters in the Oromo and Amhara regions, killing hundreds of peaceful protesters

(Horne, 2016). In a country where the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) and its allies control all of the 547 seats in parliament, Obama's statement during his July 2015 visit to Addis Ababa that the Ethiopian government had been "democratically elected" (New York Times, 2015) is ludicrous.

However, contrary to the Atlantic Council's stance, Eritrea's human rights record is objectively much worse than that of both Ethiopia and Djibouti. While governments in those countries repress their political opponents mercilessly, Isaias Afwerki's paranoid, highly-militarized regime represses its entire population, forcing many into exile not unlike a parasite slowly killing its host. In that sense, the Eritrean state has more in common with totalitarian regimes like Turkmenistan or North Korea than with its authoritarian neighbours. In contemporary Eritrea, one does not need to be a political opponent to end up in jail or at a labour camp. In rural areas, families are forced to depend on their children to work in the fields when older relatives are forced into the national service. To ensure their family's subsistence, teenagers have no other choice than to drop out of school and take on farming, but doing so leaves them at risk of arrest for dropping out of school. In this situation, mothers face a bleak choice between the family's starvation and the arrest of their children.

Bruton would have United States policymakers believe that Eritrea's unique ordeal is commonplace in the region, yet no other country in East Africa has forced generations of people into indefinite, unpaid labour; banned travel and sealed the borders; banned public gatherings of even a handful of people; locked up entire religious congregations; or taken entire families into custody if one member manages to leave the country. No other regime in East Africa has done so much to split families apart and prevent individuals from being loyal to anything other than the party-state.

In some instances the Atlantic Council's analysis sounds plain naive rather than manipulative, as it seems to take Isaias Afwerki's empty promises at face value. In April 2015, Bruton enthusiastically announced:

*There is a process of change going on in Eritrea. Officials said that they have stopped the indefinite conscription policy. [...] They say that only 5% of the conscripts have been there for more than 18 months at this point. I suspect that the release of those people may be one of the things that's driving the outflow of refugees from that country.* (Bruton, 2015)

Although high-ranking Eritrean officials regularly promise to end indefinite conscription and limit it to its legal duration of 18 months – a promise made to convince the Europeans to contribute EUR 200 million to Eritrea's development between 2016 and 2020 – such commitments have all come to naught. The government has yet to send the slightest signal that this will actually happen and, in June 2016, Eritrea's Foreign Minister admitted that conscription would continue to last over 18 months, as it was necessary “to defend the country” against perceived threats from Ethiopia (Radio France International, 2016). Bruton has also proven quite eager to appropriate the government's narrative of social and economic progress, as if it could somehow compensate for the repression and lack of freedom, declaring: “The education system, the health care... It's amazing how much Eritrea has managed to accomplish in spite of its isolation. I have to say, I was astonished” (Bruton, 2015).

In spite of these accomplishments, Bruton is concerned that the UN-imposed sanctions against Eritrea's government are “hurting” Eritrea, although they consist of little more than an arms embargo, as well as a travel ban and asset freeze targeting high-ranking officials (Bruton, 2015). Finally, when it comes to policy recommendations, the Atlantic Council is contradictory in its statements. It rightly blames the United States for putting strategic considerations above human rights in its dealings with Ethiopia, yet forcefully argues in favour of doing just that in Eritrea: urging United States policymakers not to be misled by “the narrative of crushing government repression” and to mend its ties with the authorities in Asmara, as it would be “in the interest of both nations” (Bruton in House of Foreign Affairs Committee, 2016).

The Atlantic Council's motives for consistently painting a totalitarian regime in a favourable light are a matter of speculation. Bruton herself is primarily a Somalia expert, who only started to focus on Eritrea in 2014–2015. It is likely that, in contrast to Somalia's chaos, she found Eritrea's totalitarian orderliness somewhat refreshing. As puzzling as it sounds for a think tank whose mission includes providing policymakers with objective analysis, it is entirely possible that the Atlantic Council's openly unapologetic bias toward Isaias Afwerki's government is grounded in genuine conviction. It is clear that Bruton was impressed by her meeting with the Eritrean president in the spring of 2015. In the interview she gave to Voice of America upon her return, her admiration is unmistakable; in fact, her tone is not that different from that of a teenage girl describing her latest crush:

*[Isaias Afwerki] was very impressive. We sat with the President for almost three hours. He was very, very sharp. I was very impressed. He was so astute, he was so articulate in English. Frankly, he looks 50, and he's a lot older than that.*  
(Bruton, 2015)

Let us pause for a moment to remember just who Bruton is talking about here: a guerrilla leader who eliminated his guerrilla companions and, once he became president, locked up journalists in shipping containers, sent his country's youth to be killed in the trenches, and replaced universities with military training camps, and who lets his army generals sexually assault young female conscripts – the list goes on.

Beyond personal admiration, Bruton's articles and statements suggest another reason for her consistent support for the PFDJ's regime: she revels in deconstructing what she scornfully calls the usual 'narrative' on Eritrea, which according to her revolves around a disproportionate concern for the country's human rights situation. Bruton badly wants to be the smartest person in the room, which predisposes her to embrace a contrarian stance. As she warns her audience against a supposed anti-Eritrean bias, she exudes a sense of

superiority, not unlike that of conspiracy theorists, who derive great pride from being the only ones who understand what is happening, the only ones who ‘get it’.

Alas, far from any intellectual heights, Bruton’s points are not exactly ground breaking or new, as most of them come straight out of the PFDJ’s instruction guide to its supporters worldwide. In the introduction to its 2016 report, UNHRC lists the objections it has received from regime supporters in the diaspora (UNHRC, 2016, p. 5). Strikingly, almost all the key critiques identified by the COIE have been expressed in one form or another by Bruton herself. In other words, a lot of the Atlantic Council’s work on Eritrea really amounts to a simple rewriting of PFDJ talking points in an unsuccessful effort to give them a more legitimate, more academic, and less partisan appearance. The UNHRC notes the “common themes” it found in the correspondence of its critics:

*The commission was able to identify a number of common themes in the correspondence, including the commission’s failure to visit Eritrea; [1] the detrimental impact of United Nations sanctions on the humanitarian situation in Eritrea; [2] that there was no rape in Eritrea; [3] the failure of the commission to ensure implementation of the decision of the Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission on Badme; [4] that indefinite military conscription in Eritrea was justified by the threat from Ethiopia; [5] that there was no discrimination against women; the history of inter-ethnic and interreligious harmony in Eritrea; [6] that there was no shoot-to-kill policy at Eritrean borders; that education and health care were free in Eritrea, unlike in other States; [7] and that Eritrea had made progress on the Millennium Development Goals. (UNHRC, 2016, p. 5)*

And here are the corresponding points, as expressed by Bruton:

- (1) *[...] continually adding stress to the current regime in Asmara, for example through sanctions and indictments, is likely to simply make Eritreans more miserable without producing any real change. (in Sen, 2016a)*
- (2) *[The UN’s Commission of Inquiry on Eritrea report] extrapolates from*

*anecdotal examples — like instances of rape by military forces — to allege systemic abuses and blame them on state policy. [Here Bruton does not deny that army generals have committed sexual violence against female conscripts, but brushes off such cases ‘anecdotal’]. (Bruton, 2016a)*

- (3) *[...] for the past 15 years, Ethiopian troops have been permitted by a silent international consensus to flout the treaty and illegally occupy Eritrean territory. [Bruton is factually right here]. (in House of Foreign Affairs Committee, 2016)*
- (4) *The presence of Ethiopian troops on Eritrean soil has done crippling harm to the Eritrean people. [...] The presence of this ‘army at the gates’ has of course undermined Eritrea’s political development. The over-militarization of the country as a justified means of defending the country has had severe consequences for political and civil space. [In reality, the border dispute with Ethiopia does not explain why Eritrea’s entire population is still kept on a war footing today, deprived of its civil and political rights]. (in House of Foreign Affairs Committee, 2016)*
- (5) *Despite the virulent tribal and ethnic conflicts plaguing the rest of the region, the Eritrean government appears to have been exceptionally successful in its own nation-building project. Eritreans seem largely unified across tribal and religious categories. (in House of Foreign Affairs Committee, 2016)*
- (6) *The UNCOIE’s claim that Eritrea maintains a ‘shoot to kill’ policy on the border is an especially egregious example – I’ve never heard of any meaningful evidence that would support that claim, except perhaps in a few, highly militarized spaces along the border, where Eritrea is actively in conflict with its neighbours. (in Sen, 2016a)*
- (7) *The United Nations Development Program gives Eritrea high marks for its progress on several Millennium Development Goals. (Bruton, 2016a)*

Naturally, given its tendency to stick to the PFDJ party line, regime supporters in the diaspora have fallen in love with the Atlantic

Council's analysis of Eritrea. Bruton herself has become a favourite of the regime's army of online supporters, who all happen to be based in the West and frequently team up to launch coordinated, targeted attacks against anyone who dares to criticise the Eritrean government on social media. The United States-based Tesfanews, which repackages official propaganda for consumption by Eritrean expatriates, praises Bruton and shares her articles in full (Fraser, 2015; Sen, 2016b). Bruton herself does not seem to mind the attention from the PFDJ crowd. On the contrary, in August 2015, she addressed the annual conference of the YPFDJ, the Eritrean party-state's youth organisation, in Las Vegas. No researcher with even a modicum of concern for apparent bias would do the same.

At a time when Eritrea appears to have embarked on a public relations effort to improve its image in the West, the Atlantic Council's activism is a godsend. Although evidence is hard to come by, several consulting firms may already be enlisted in this effort in the United States, where a leaked memo dated January 2015 revealed that former United States Ambassador Herman Cohen had been engaged by the Eritrean Embassy to lobby on behalf of Asmara and "disseminate truthful information" (Awate, 2015). Eritrean embassies in the West have also attempted to enlist reporters, with mixed success. On 28 June, journalist Pierre Monegier revealed that he was offered EUR 15,000 and a free trip to either New York or Tokyo in exchange for painting a rosy picture of Eritrea in his news report for the French public television. After he refused, Eritrea's Embassy to France set up a conference with the help of mysterious consultants armed with fake Twitter accounts to discredit Monegier's work (Bannani, 2016).

### **The Nevsun case**

In 2015, the Atlantic Council's favourable view of the Eritrean government earned it the generous financial backing of a Canadian mining firm, Nevsun, which operates exclusively in Eritrea, providing the government with much of its foreign exchange income. The

company has a high stake in improving the country's image. Based on figures disclosed by the Atlantic Council itself, the company's donation to the Eritrean government was between USD 100,000 and 249,000 (Atlantic Council, 2015). Contacted by French journalist, Leonard Vincent, a Nevsun representative made the following statement in an email: "Nevsun made a contribution to the Atlantic Council last year because we were impressed by their ongoing constructive work on Eritrea" (Anon., personal communication [email], 24 June 2016).

Nevsun's statement makes no mystery of the fact that its donation is directly related to the Atlantic Council's singularly positive outlook on Eritrea. And, although Bruton stated before the House Foreign Affairs Committee that she had "no direct relationship with Nevsun" (in House of Foreign Affairs Committee, 2016), she spoke alongside Nevsun, Vice President, Todd Romaine at the Las Vegas YPFDJ conference, as evidenced by a photograph of her with Mr Romain (see: <http://www.photonatu.com/home/pictures-11th-annual-north-america-ypfdj-conference-las-vegas-nv>).

To anyone familiar with Nevsun, a company which, according to a mounting body of evidence, relied on slave labour to build and operate its Bisha Gold Mine (McVeigh, 2016), it is quite puzzling that the Atlantic Council was even willing to potentially damage its own reputation by being associated with such a problematic donor. On 6 October 2016, the Supreme Court of British Columbia ruled that a case against Nevsun brought forth by former mine workers would proceed in a Canadian court as there was sufficient evidence to establish a case to answer (McVeigh, 2016). However, a lot has already been established about the company's practices, contrary to Bruton's claim that past allegations against Nevsun were dismissed (Bruton in House of Foreign Affairs Committee, 2016).

One of the world's leading experts on Africa is the author of a 2015 report on Nevsun and the working conditions at the Bisha Mine. Although the report has not been made public, its author, who is familiar with the Atlantic Council's writings on Eritrea, gave me

permission to quote from it. The information on working conditions at the Bisha Mine comes both from former national conscripts who were assigned to work at the mine, and subsequently managed to flee the country, and from foreign contractors – such as Mike Goosen of the South African construction management firm Senet – who have testified, confirming former conscripts’ accounts. The conscripts were not directly employed by Nevsun, but by a state-controlled intermediary, Segen. However, for at least several years Nevsun used those conscripts to build its mine. In the words of the aforementioned expert:

*Nevsun has said that it does not employ national service conscripts, which is true if by 'employ' we mean 'hire as a salaried member of work force'. However, Nevsun [relied on] the Segen Construction Company [...], a government-owned company which does 'employ' conscripts under terrible conditions. Nevsun knew it [...].* (unpublished report, 2015)

The conditions described by former Segen workers include sleeping on the ground in a malaria-infested area, while surviving only on lentil soup and bread during the day. The workers who built the mine were “continuously hungry” (unpublished report, 2015). At one point, Mike Goosen arranged for cooks at Nevsun’s main camp to set food aside for the conscripts, but Segen managers promptly put an end to this. Several workers reportedly died of heat stroke in the scorching heat of the western Gash-Barka Region of Eritrea, where temperatures often exceed 35 degrees Celsius.

By 2012, Nevsun, realising that the use of forced labour by Segen constituted a threat to its own reputation, started to require that the workers it directly employed were “free of national service obligations” (unpublished report, 2015). All of them were, which is unsurprising as those workers employed directly by Nevsun were not forcibly enlisted; in fact, Nevsun jobs were probably quite coveted due to the comparatively high pay and the protection from the abuse routinely inflicted on army conscripts at Segen (*Ibid.*). One chilling case makes it clear that female conscripts at the mine were routinely

exposed to sexual violence, like their national service peers elsewhere. The report says: “[A female Nevsun employee] was raped by soldiers who believed her to be a conscript. When the soldiers searched her belongings and found a card identifying her as a Nevsun employee, they stopped molesting her, released her and even apologized” (*Ibid.*).

As former conscripts succeeded in fleeing Eritrea and seeking asylum in the West, further testimonies of forced labour at the Bisha mine have emerged. An upcoming lawsuit against Nevsun in Canada will give former national service conscripts the opportunity to tell the story of how they were forcibly enrolled to work on the mine. In the Netherlands, an Eritrean refugee interviewed by Dutch academic Mirjam van Reisen testified that his work at the Bisha mine abruptly ended when he was arrested for unknown reasons, and detained for a year and a half in overcrowded, underground prisons, first in Barentu, then in Keren, where prisoners had both legs and hands chained, and torture was commonplace (Interview, Van Reisen, 17 October 2016).

To this day, it remains unclear whether Nevsun has ended its collaboration with Segen. From the start, it was the Eritrean government that demanded that Nevsun use Segen as its primary contractor for the construction of the mine. In a video posted on its website, Nevsun claims that: “[...] in Eritrea, it is illegal to use national service workers in the mining sector, so all perspective employees are screened before they are hired" and "contractors are also prohibited from using national service workers” (Nevsun Resources, 2016).

*This clearly does not apply to the company's primary contractor, Segen. Moreover, Nevsun's defence should be considered with all the more scepticism as its company representatives have a record of making inaccurate statements, as highlighted in the report: "When asked about the median age of the Nevsun workforce, the answer was '60', a most unlikely figure for a mining workforce, and one which can be disproved by a simple glance at Nevsun's own website, which displays only young and fit workers". (unpublished report, 2015)*

Despite that fact that Eritrea has no independent justice system, Nevsun's lawyers have long argued without irony that only an Eritrean court was qualified to examine the former workers' accusations. Fortunately, a court in British Columbia ruled against Nevsun on 6 October 2016, declaring that the Canadian justice system was, in fact, competent in this matter, paving the way for a lawsuit against Nevsun in Canada. The company has already had its share of lawsuits in Canada: In 2012, it was forced to pay "\$12.8 million, in compensation for having overvalued the mine's reserves in order to boost the share price before off-loading massive amounts of stock at an exaggerated price" (*Ibid.*)

### **Blurring the line between policy research and lobbying**

The Atlantic Council's whitewashing of Isaias Afwerki's horrendous human rights record comes at a time when a number of Washington, DC-based think tanks have come under increased scrutiny for agreements with donors. In recent years, foreign governments have donated tens of millions of dollars to a handful of private institutions officially dedicated to policy research. Foreign donors have come to rely on think tanks in addition to lobbying firms to push for specific changes in United States policy. This is somehow more insidious than traditional lobbying, as think tanks benefit from an overall reputation for objectivity and independence, and are not expected to serve as vehicles for foreign influence in the way that a lobbying firm might.

As think tanks are not registered as representatives of donor countries, United States policymakers are not necessarily aware of their foreign ties. Indeed, undisclosed agreements between research groups and foreign governments could potentially amount to a violation of federal law, which forces advocates of foreign interests to register. Yet when the Atlantic Council hired Miguel Silva in 2015, it chose not to disclose his role as a direct advisor to Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos. Silva then used his Atlantic Council fellowship to actively promote his government's policy and make

contacts with top United States policymakers. In the words of Lia Fowler, the Atlantic Council's role in this "seems more in keeping with the work of a lobbying firm than a think tank" (Fowler, 2016).

More generally, it is hard not to see how generous donations from foreign sponsors might endanger the independence and integrity of policy research. Already, researchers less eager than Bruton to push asides human rights issues have been faced with unenviable dilemmas: alter their position to satisfy donors, or risk losing their job. Michele Dunne, former director of the Atlantic Council's Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East, left the Council after a member of the Hariri family called to complain about her criticism of the 2013 military coup in Egypt (Lipton, Williams, & Confessore, 2014). Although the Atlantic Council's leadership says that her departure had little to do with her opinions, she was replaced by someone likely to be more sympathetic to the new Egyptian authorities, a former United States ambassador to Egypt known for his alleged deference to Egypt's former ruler. Such conflicts are obviously not exclusive to the Atlantic Council: Saleem Ali, a former visiting fellow at Brookings' Doha Center, said that he was explicitly told during his job interview that he should refrain from criticising the Qatari government in his research (Lipton, Williams, & Confessore, 2014).

## **Conclusion**

In light of the available information and the pending Canadian trial, why would the Atlantic Council risk being financially and politically associated with a company like Nevsun? Perhaps this is not surprising for a think tank whose leading Eritrea expert believes that things are 'not that bad' in the country. Perhaps, having already lost any pretense at objectivity on this topic, the Atlantic Council literally has nothing left to lose by accepting Nevsun's money. And, to be sure, in the months following the donation, Bruton only carried on her "constructive work on Eritrea", in the words of the company itself (Nevsun representative, personal communication, with

Léonard Vincent, email, 2016). This could be part of a troubling trend for the Atlantic Council. Foreign Policy recently reported that the think tank had intended to offer its Global Citizens Award to Gabon's President, Ali Bongo (Halvorssen & Gladstein, 2016), even as the latter was suspected of resorting to fraud to ensure his 27 August re-election (the country's post-election crisis eventually forced Bongo to miss the award reception in New York). Yet, as unsavoury as Bongo's regime may be, Eritrea's is far worse, and the Atlantic Council's artful spin amounts to nothing less than revisionism.

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