

Italian Colonial Power And Contemporary Strategic Competition In Eritrea, Ethiopia And Djibouti: Economic Control, Maritime Access And Accountability (1869–2026)

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A comparative study of colonial rule and contemporary strategic access in the Red Sea–Gulf of Aden corridor
Historical-documentary and comparative analysis

Abstract: This article asks how Italian colonial rule in Eritrea and the occupation of Ethiopia converted coastal access, land allocation, labor, legal hierarchy and military logistics into unequal political and economic power, and which historically documented mechanisms can inform—but not predetermine—a test of contemporary port dependence, conflict-related opacity and Italian strategic engagement over Ethiopia’s maritime access through Djibouti, Eritrea and Bab el-Mandeb. Based on a critical comparison of Tekeste Negash (1987), Ben-Ghiat and Fuller (2005), historical records and the accompanying research transcript, the analysis distinguishes continuity in strategic geography from discontinuity in sovereignty, methods and institutions. Documented colonial land expropriation, differentiated education, racial regulation and military mobilization are contrasted with contemporary port dependency, infrastructure finance, foreign bases and Italy’s Mattei Plan. The proposed link between conflict, concentrated decision-making and reduced scrutiny is treated as a testable hypothesis, not proof that governments engineer wars to conceal corruption. Findings identify port dependence and logistics as recurring sources of leverage while rejecting unsupported claims of an Italian transfer of Djibouti or direct Italian control over contemporary regional conflicts. The contribution is a source-graded comparative framework for historical coercion and present-day economic-security interdependence.

Keywords: Italian colonialism; Eritrea; Ethiopia; Djibouti; Bab el-Mandeb; Red Sea; land dispossession; cultural hierarchy; chemical warfare; strategic dependence.

I. Introduction: research question and analytical boundaries

The focus of the strategic comparison is Bab el-Mandeb, the natural strait between the African coast around Djibouti and Eritrea and Yemen. It links the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden and thence to the Arabian Sea. The Suez Canal is a different, artificial passage in Egypt, relevant as the northern end of connected maritime routes but not the passage situated by Djibouti (U.S. EIA, 2019). This distinction grounds the article’s title, its geographic scope, and its comparison of sovereignty with foreign access.

The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 strengthened the importance of the Red Sea for shipping between Europe and Asia. Assab and Massawa on the African coast, Obock and Djibouti farther south, and Bab el-Mandeb at the southern gate did not occupy identical political positions. The canal itself lies in Egypt, while Bab el-Mandeb is a natural strait connecting the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden. Disentangling these geographic and legal differences is indispensable for assessing competing imperial claims (Suez Canal Authority, n.d.; National Geographic, 2024).

The central research question is: How did Italian colonial rule transform control of Eritrean ports, land, labor and legal institutions into power over the Ethiopian hinterland, and which comparable—but institutionally distinct—mechanisms shape today’s contest over Ethiopian maritime access through Djibouti, Eritrea and Bab el-Mandeb? A related, explicitly unproven hypothesis asks whether conflict-induced secrecy and emergency procurement can aggravate governance risks. The analysis evaluates mechanisms rather than assuming continuity of regimes or intentional orchestration of war.

Methodologically, this is a critical synthesis rather than a newly digitized quantitative dataset. Three kinds of statements are separated: a documented event, a claim attributed to the historiography, and an inference requiring additional archival examination. Published work about Eritrean development must not be transformed into numerical proof of profits, resource depletion, or household welfare when the relevant series are missing. Nor does an imperial public works project establish the absence of coercion or the presence of broadly distributed benefits. This distinction is central to the study’s historical and ethical conclusions.

II. COLONIAL FORMATION: TERRITORY, PORTS, AND THE DISPUTE OVER SOVEREIGNTY

2.1 Assab, Massawa and the political economy of access

Italian expansion along the Red Sea coast followed strategic and commercial calculations closely bound to shipping routes. Assab became an early foothold; Massawa later offered a more extensive port and administrative base. The 1890 formation of the colony of Eritrea institutionalized the new political geography. These developments were not merely changes of flag. They created the administrative conditions under which commercial privileges, concessions, defense spending, taxation and racial distinctions could be organized by a foreign authority (Library of Congress, n.d.; Jerven, Weisdorf and Strangio, 2021).

For an economic interpretation, it is necessary to compare the customs income, commercial traffic and state investment at different stages rather than assuming that every coastal acquisition paid for itself. Port control may confer strategic returns that are not captured by the metropolitan treasury. Conversely, colonial investment may benefit selected merchants even where the state incurs losses. These are separate outcome variables, and studies that collapse them into a single notion of colonial wealth risk conflating political power with profitability (Bertazzini, 2020; Strangio, 2011).

2.1.1 A colonial chronology grounded in Negash

A chronology matters because the expansion of a port concession into a colony required several different kinds of action. Negash dates the initial foothold at Assab to 1869, when a shipping company purchased the bay in the same year the Suez Canal opened. The private transaction did not confer uncontested authority over the surrounding societies. Italian possession was formalized in July 1882; in 1885 Italy moved from Assab to Massawa with British diplomatic and technical support. Ethiopian objections and the inland importance of Massawa show that coastal possession carried claims over trade routes and territorial hinterlands well beyond the port itself (Negash, 1987, pp. 1–2). Thus commercial access, diplomatic recognition and effective rule should be treated as different variables. A private company's contract is evidence of an attempted foothold; troop deployment is evidence of coercive capacity; a colonial decree records an imperial administrative claim; and later resistance reveals that none of these amounted to agreement by every affected population. In 1887 the defeat at Dogali interrupted further encroachment, while the drought, epidemic and dynastic realignment of 1888–1889 facilitated subsequent Italian advances. The colony named Eritrea was proclaimed on 1 January 1890 (Negash, 1987, pp. 2–3). The sequence is incompatible with a narrative of benign territorial donation.

2.2 Wuchale: treaty language as an imperial instrument

Article XVII of the 1889 Treaty of Wuchale (Ucciali) became a central point of contention. The discrepancy between the Amharic and Italian understandings concerned whether Ethiopia could use Italian diplomatic services or was required to do so. Italy advanced a protectorate interpretation that Ethiopian authorities rejected. The dispute demonstrates that translation and diplomatic recognition could be instruments of foreign domination, with sovereignty argued through the precise formulation of a treaty provision (Giglio, n.d.).

This case is more precise than claiming that Italian was imposed uniformly as an everyday language throughout the region. Diplomatic language could produce geopolitical consequences even while indigenous languages continued in homes, religious institutions, markets and local public life. The evidence supports an argument about unequal legal leverage; it does not justify attributing a single, perfectly coordinated linguistic conspiracy to all institutions and periods.

2.3 Adwa and the interruption of conquest

The Italian defeat at Adwa on 1 March 1896 was a decisive limitation on Italy's attempted subordination of Ethiopia. Ethiopian forces under Menelik II defended the independence of their state, even as Italy retained its colony in Eritrea. The difference between colonial Eritrea and independent Ethiopia must be maintained throughout the chronology. Adwa demonstrates both the agency of African political and military organization and the limits of European technological and diplomatic advantage.

Subsequent colonial expansion did not erase Adwa from the political record. Rather, the later Fascist conquest must be understood partly against the long memory of an earlier imperial defeat. Treating the 1935–1941 invasion and occupation as a simple continuation of the 1890 Eritrean colony obscures the differences in legal status, duration and military resistance. Historical comparisons need periodization before statistical conclusions can be drawn.

2.3.1 Crisis, political strategy and competing sovereignties

The 1896 defeat at Adwa must be related to the internal politics of the Italian settlement project. Negash describes Francesco Crispi's appeal to southern Italian land hunger and the proposal to open African lands to Italian peasants as a means of avoiding agrarian change at home. Leopoldo Franchetti's settlement policy was therefore more than migration management: it attempted to substitute territorial acquisition abroad for distributive conflict within Italy. Confiscations antagonized Eritrean farmers, while the rebellion associated with Bahta Hagos in 1894 exposed the security costs of alienating rural communities. Negash links the subsequent confrontation with Ethiopia to the colonial military escalation, culminating in Adwa and the political demise of Crispi's colonial policy (Negash, 1987, pp. 3–4). This does not prove that peasant revolt was the sole cause of the battle; Ethiopian political and military decision-making was independent and consequential. It does demonstrate why colonized actors belong within the causal account, rather than appearing solely as passive victims or background to a story of European cabinets. The distinction between the failure to conquer Ethiopia in 1896 and the continued possession of Eritrea also prevents the erroneous assumption that the same political outcome applied across both territories.

2.4 Negash's periodization and the politics of settler land

Tekeste Negash reconstructs the establishment of Eritrea not as a single administrative act but as a succession of commercial, military and treaty-based appropriations. The Assab foothold of 1869, its formal declaration as an Italian colony in 1882, the British-supported occupation of Massawa in 1885, and the consolidation of the colony under its name in January 1890 did not follow an uncontested path. Dogali in 1887, famine and epidemic disruption in 1888–1889, the death of Emperor Yohannes, and the complex diplomacy of Wichale altered the bargaining conditions under which Italian forces expanded (Negash, 1987, pp. 1–4). These contingencies are analytically important: sovereignty was not passively transferred to a modernizing state, and political disruption was not consent. Negash documents the Italian state's attempt to turn the political demands for land reform in southern Italy outward. Under Crispi, the attraction of settler land in Eritrea offered a colonial alternative to redistribution within Italy. Leopoldo Franchetti was charged with building the settlement program, whose land confiscations contributed to substantial peasant opposition, including the 1894 Bahta Hagos uprising (Negash, 1987, pp. 3–4, 33–37). Such evidence establishes a direct mechanism connecting domestic Italian class politics with external territorial dispossession; it does not establish that all Italian migration originated in identical motives.

III. THE COLONIAL ECONOMY: LAND, LABOR, CAPITAL AND INFRASTRUCTURE

3.1 Agriculture and irrigation

Land and water were key instruments of Eritrean economic transformation under Italian rule. Colonial administrators promoted export-oriented and settler-oriented agriculture, including cotton and other crops. The IMF's historical background on Eritrea describes the Gash irrigation project and associated commercial agriculture; its account provides a concrete basis for examining the relationship between land development, water allocation and market incentives (IMF, 1995).

The distributional question cannot be answered by aggregate production totals alone. Even if irrigation enlarged crop output, an evaluation of colonial welfare would need records of who controlled the irrigated parcels, who supplied the labor, how wages were fixed, who paid for canal maintenance, and which traders captured the margins. The colonial economy thus requires an incidence analysis rather than a celebratory inventory of productive assets (Jerven, Weisdorf and Strangio, 2021).

3.1.1 The land question is not reducible to yields

Negash's analysis of the settlement period differentiates a projected colony for European farmers from the later raw-material strategy. In the 1890s confiscation was an instrument of policy even before the economic viability of large-scale settler agriculture had been established. The change under Ferdinando Martini, who governed from 1897 to 1907, was significant: his government set aside the large settler vision and framed Eritrea more as a supplier of commodities and as a politically stable base for relations with Ethiopia (Negash, 1987, pp. 3–4, 32–48). The evidentiary distinction is essential. Land reserved by official decree is not a measure of crops harvested; planned exports do not equal realized exports; and aggregate exports do not measure the well-being of households whose communal or village rights were displaced. Negash's description of precolonial Tigrinya tenure also cautions against treating village lands as empty territory simply because ultimate tribute was owed to an emperor or officials. Local kinship groups and villages exercised land rights, while gulti arrangements concerned rights to tribute more than unqualified private ownership (Negash, 1987, pp. 5–7). To

assess agrarian transformation, an empirical reconstruction must match expropriation orders to original occupancy, irrigation access, land use, market prices and subsequent claims by Eritrean families. A colonial budget or export table cannot alone settle those questions.

2.2 Enterprises and fiscal incentives

Private enterprises and the colonial state were interconnected but analytically separate. The state could invest in transport, regulation and defense while firms obtained the more direct opportunities associated with procurement, production or trade. The economic historiography emphasizes the distinctiveness of Eritrea and the importance of reconstructing state expenditures alongside private investment and agricultural settlements (Jerven, Weisdorf and Strangio, 2021; Strangio, 2011).

A net metropolitan profit calculation would require more than nominal export values. It would need to account for military spending, subsidies, capital transfers, debt, customs revenue and private remittances. In the absence of consistent datasets, the strongest supported conclusion concerns the colonial power to allocate opportunities unequally. The sweeping assertion that Eritrea was uniformly rich in minerals and had all its mineral wealth removed is not demonstrated by the works reviewed here (Bertazzini, 2020).

2.2.1 Reading the trade and budget series responsibly

The statistical appendices of Negash's study supply a more discriminating basis for economic interpretation than an undifferentiated claim of imperial plunder. Tables distinguish the Italian share of import and export trade, Ethiopian traffic passing through Massawa, state tribute, revenue and expenditure, the proportion of men in the colonial army, and the scale of industrial-commercial firms (Negash, 1987, pp. 39–53, appendices I–III). Each measures a separate process. An increasing share of imports supplied from Italy implies commercial concentration but not necessarily a positive fiscal surplus for Italy. Exports routed through Massawa may include goods originating in Ethiopian hinterlands; treating them all as commodities extracted from Eritrean fields would exaggerate colonial production. Budget expenditures might support both local transport and military domination; their developmental significance depends on their allocation and distribution. Likewise, privately owned companies' profits cannot automatically be equated with revenue for the Italian state. These distinctions are especially important for comparisons with post-1941 economic performance, since changing boundaries, prices and international shocks can make nominal series misleading. Where possible, deflation, commodity classification and per-capita denominators are prerequisites for responsible quantification. The article therefore separates documented administrative reorientation from still-unmeasured net transfers of colonial wealth.

2.3 Railways, roads and the distribution of connectivity

The Massawa–Asmara railway and the urban development of Asmara are visible markers of Italian-era infrastructure. Their existence is historically significant, but it does not settle their social balance sheet. A railway may improve access for merchants and some residents while serving the dominant needs of troops, exporters and colonial administrators. The correct unit of comparison is not infrastructure versus no infrastructure, but the relative costs, beneficiaries and alternative investments under different political institutions.

For this reason, heritage descriptions should not substitute for evidence about ticket prices, labor practices, freight categories, land clearance and budgets. An accounting of transport geography would compare routes serving colonial commercial centers with those connecting agrarian communities on less favored corridors. Where systematic data are not available, the claim should remain a research proposition. The material record is robust; the net social return requires additional corroboration.

2.3.1 Infrastructure, who could use it, and who paid

Transport investment is often cited as the clearest material achievement of colonial rule. But a railway or harbor cannot be evaluated by its physical presence alone. It matters whether a route was designed to connect local food markets, to supply settlers, to ship goods to the metropole, or to move troops to contested territories. Negash's economic chapter connects trade orientation and administrative finance to strategic decisions, while the military history makes clear that Eritrea's position became increasingly important as a base for campaigns outside its borders (Negash, 1987, pp. 32–54). Assessing transport as economic development requires information about passenger and freight access, the price of transport relative to earnings, the origin and destination of cargo, financing, operational cost and employment discrimination. A track built for military logistics may later serve civilians, but later reuse does not establish that civilian welfare was its initial purpose. Nor does a militarily motivated investment automatically lack any local benefit. This distinction avoids an

equally problematic inverse argument, in which every colonial public work is dismissed as economically worthless. Historical evaluation must identify contemporaneous beneficiaries and losses. Massawa, Assab and the highland routes particularly illustrate the political problem of what a port's hinterland means. A coastal enclave that lacks inland access creates pressure for treaties, roads and coercive penetration. The result can be regional connectivity coupled with expropriation and unequal market entry. Negash's historical narrative is evidence for these intertwined processes, although his data do not permit a modern cost-benefit estimate for every segment of infrastructure.

2.4 Compulsory work and hierarchies of employment

The organization of colonial employment must be investigated through the relation between law, racial categories and actual bargaining power. Some work was waged, some performed under conditions of pressure, and the ability to refuse labor depended on specific historical and administrative circumstances. A comprehensive claim about the extent of forced labor would require dated regulations, contracts, recruitment registers and local testimony, rather than retrospective generalization.

Bigoni et al. (2025) offer a wider analytical framework: colonial budgets, censuses and administrative reports were not neutral mechanisms for aggregating information. During Fascism they could enable the authorities to classify subjects and reshape conduct. A labor history informed by this insight would examine whether economic classifications corresponded to differentiated treatment, access to services and legal protections. The source supports scrutiny of social engineering, not invented counts of conscripted workers.

2.4.1 Military labor as an extractive institution

Colonial soldiers were a key Eritrean resource mobilized by Italy. Negash argues that, particularly after the early settler program was abandoned, the preservation of local political stability supported the recruitment of Eritrean forces for campaigns beyond the colony. He identifies Italian operations in Somalia during 1908–1910 and in Libya during 1912–1932, followed by the renewed use of Eritrea as a military staging ground for Ethiopia (Negash, 1987, pp. 4, 48–53). The extraction of military labor differs from extraction of agricultural surplus, but both link colonized workers to projects defined outside their communities. Soldiers could receive wages and sometimes acquire social status; these possibilities should neither be denied nor confused with equal political citizenship or freedom to determine imperial objectives. A balanced historical calculation would consider household income from army service, enlistment conditions, casualty rates, exposure to other territories and the opportunity cost of young men's absence from productive work. Negash's Table 2.6 points toward analysis of army size in relation to the male labor force (Negash, 1987, p. 51). It would be inaccurate to call every recruit a forced laborer without examining unit-specific enlistment practices; equally, the existence of salaries does not disprove structural compulsion in a racially stratified colonial order.

2.5 Quantifying confiscation and assessing its limits

Negash reports that between January 1893 and early 1895 more than 400,000 hectares were expropriated and declared available for Italian colonists (Negash, 1987, p. 36). The wording is decisive: land designated for settlers is not necessarily land actually cultivated by them, and the recorded administrative claim should not be misrepresented as an equally large successful settlement. Military governor Oreste Baratieri challenged the costs and destabilizing consequences of Franchetti's scheme; the latter resigned in February 1895, and the settlement office was then abolished. The contrast between official ambition, actual settlement and the resistance it produced makes dispossession measurable without converting every registered hectare into proven agricultural production. The source is a historical study drawing upon colonial archives, and independent triangulation of cadastral and local land records remains desirable.

2.6 Trade concentration and the commercial meaning of empire

Negash's Table 2.1 gives the share of Italian goods in Eritrea's recorded import trade as 2.9 percent in 1900, 28.2 percent in 1905, 30.7 percent in 1910, 47.9 percent in 1915, 37.5 percent in 1920, 65.4 percent in 1925 and 50.7 percent in 1930 (Negash, 1987, p. 39). These figures are a stronger basis than the abstract claim that colonialism necessarily enriched the metropolis. They document shifting trade orientation and dependence on suppliers, not a net rate of return to the Italian Treasury; nor do percentages alone reveal prices, consumer welfare or the purchasing power of Eritrean households. The same study explicitly distinguishes Eritrea as a projected settler colony, a raw-material supplier, a recruiter of colonial soldiers and a later strategic platform (Negash, 1987, pp. 32–54). Trade, fiscal support, forced or structured recruitment and military geography therefore need separate causal analyses. Changes over time also matter: the late nineteenth-century settlement project cannot be treated as identical to the 1935–1941 mobilization.

IV. LANGUAGE, RACE, EDUCATION, AND THE COLONIAL STATE

4.1 The institutional hierarchy of languages

The prominence of Italian in colonial administration and urban employment created asymmetric opportunities. Language matters politically when it conditions access to offices, contracts, credentials and legal proceedings. This form of hierarchy need not eradicate existing local languages to be effective. Tigrinya, Arabic and other languages persisted in varied religious, community and commercial contexts; their continuation must be distinguished from equality of institutional status.

The Wuchale treaty controversy furnishes an extreme diplomatic example, whereas classroom policy and clerical recruitment require distinct evidentiary paths. Analysis must therefore separate diplomatic translation, schooling policy, courtroom practice and ordinary communication. Treating these diverse arenas as one simple process of linguistic replacement would overstate uniformity and understate resistance and adaptation (Giglio, n.d.; Negash, 2005).

4.1.1 Language use versus colonial authority

It would be imprecise to argue that colonial administrators simply replaced all Eritrean languages with Italian. Negash describes diverse social formations and linguistic communities, and his study of education focuses on restricted opportunities rather than evidence of comprehensive cultural homogenization (Negash, 1987, pp. 5–8, 66–83). The more defensible argument is that colonial administration structured which languages and forms of knowledge were rewarded with access to government functions, documentation and employment. This imposes a hierarchy without extinguishing the languages used in households, religious practice and local commerce. The dispute over the language of Article 17 of the Wuchale treaty, discussed elsewhere in the article, belongs to a related but distinct sphere of diplomatic authority: a translation controversy surrounding a treaty provision cannot establish that one common language was imposed uniformly across all schools and villages. At an institutional level, the relevant question is who controlled the official text and which interpretation carried force internationally. At a societal level, the key question is who gained or lost opportunities through colonial schooling and administration. A research design integrating both levels would compare languages of treaties, court orders, school materials, employment recruitment and local correspondence. Because educational sources most often represent state policy or selected textbooks, a further step is needed to reconstruct how Eritrean teachers, parents and students interpreted or resisted those policies. Negash's study illuminates the structure of unequal opportunity, while oral history and community records could establish language practices beyond formal institutions.

4.2 Educational policy and colonial purpose

Tekeste Negash's chapter on educational policy in Eritrea, published in the Ben-Ghiat and Fuller collection, identifies colonial education as a distinct and important institutional field. Its title and placement establish the topic as relevant, but the present analysis does not claim to have verified claims from the full chapter text. The critical empirical questions are who could enter school, in which language, to what educational level, and for which occupational possibilities (Negash, 2005).

A comparative educational history would contrast official curricular aspirations with school registers, teacher reports, language-of-instruction records and student outcomes. This avoids both reducing the system to ideological proclamations and taking modern schooling as automatically emancipatory. Access to basic literacy may coexist with racial or occupational ceilings. Such a pattern must be established in Eritrea through dated evidence before any precise distributional claim is made.

4.2.1 Schooling as a technology of differentiated opportunity

Negash locates education at the heart of colonial ideology, and his source base includes laws, administrative reports, textbooks and enrollment data. His question is not simply whether a handful of Eritrean children were able to study Italian, but how authorities defined the scope and purpose of their schooling. In the earlier Martini period, colonial officials feared that broad education might stimulate opposition to colonial control; in the following administration, state provision remained narrow and differentiated. The Keren school established in 1911 was directed in part toward sons of Muslim notables and future auxiliary personnel, rather than a universal system of equal citizenship (Negash, 1987, pp. 66–83). Colonial curricula reinforced a symbolic hierarchy by presenting Italy as the source of civilization and protector of the territory while withholding equivalent paths to advanced political or professional formation. The crucial evidence is therefore the relationship among stated educational objectives, actual enrollment, type of instruction and positions available after graduation. Negash provides an enrollment series for government schools covering 1921–1922 through 1939–1940 (Negash, 1987, appendix IV). Yet enrollment is not literacy, and school attendance alone cannot

show what students believed about Italy or their own languages. Such claims would require local testimonies and post-school life histories. Colonial educational policy structured opportunities while Eritrean learners retained agency that cannot be read mechanically from a textbook.

4.3 Interracial families and the policing of belonging

Giulia Barrera's contribution in *Italian Colonialism* addresses patrilinearity, race and the upbringing of Italo-Eritreans. The chapter provides a clearly identified path for investigating how colonial power operated inside family and identity categories, rather than exclusively through borders and markets. Without the full text, however, specific legal assertions cannot responsibly be attributed to its author here (Barrera, 2005).

The topic itself exposes a methodological requirement: archival law must be compared with social practice. Households, churches, community networks and colonial officials may have understood identity differently. Citizenship decisions, recognition of paternity, educational admission and institutional care potentially connected intimate life to the distribution of rights. A rigorous article can formulate these testable relationships without pretending to have reviewed unprovided archival case files.

Ben-Ghiat and Fuller (2005, pp. 7–9) specifically draw attention to research on the gendered and racialized afterlives of Italian rule, including Giulia Barrera's examination of mixed families and the category of madamismo. In the anthology's introductory framework, these are not marginal episodes of private life: the recognition or exclusion of relationships and descendants formed part of the colonial ordering of legitimate belonging. The article therefore treats racial hierarchy as a legal and administrative problem, not merely a question of derogatory language or prejudice. However, since the supplied PDF extract does not contain Barrera's complete contribution, its detailed empirical claims and case examples are not attributed here to unread pages.

The same source highlights how competing interpretations of Italian colonial identity survived the formal end of empire (Ben-Ghiat and Fuller, 2005, pp. 5–9). This complicates any simple equation between colonial school language and popular language change. Linguistic hierarchy can persist through credential requirements, employment differentiation and representations of European expertise, even when local languages continue to structure everyday social interaction. A defensible formulation therefore links Italian as an official medium to asymmetries of status and access, while using Negash's analyses of colonial schooling to establish concrete patterns in Eritrea (Negash, 1987).

4.3.1 From administrative paternalism to racial separation

Negash devotes an entire chapter to the ideology and practice of colonial native policy, contrasting Italian arrangements with British and French precedents and identifying important changes within the Italian period. The Martini years, a phase of more administratively pragmatic rule, and the intensified discrimination associated with the 1932–1941 era should not be flattened into a single unchanging regime (Negash, 1987, pp. 92–120). Policy variation did not imply an egalitarian state. Colonial authorities structured relationships with recognized indigenous leaders, redistributed administrative prerogatives and imposed rules backed by foreign military power. In the fascist period political hierarchies acquired more explicit doctrines of racial separation. Interpretation must nevertheless distinguish legal discrimination, everyday policing and the varied experiences of different communities. Italian colonial categories cannot be mapped perfectly onto the complexity of Eritrean language, region, religion and landholding. In research on interracial families, one must additionally consult the relevant Italian statutes, registration practices and individual case archives, because Negash's institutional history alone does not reconstruct every family's experience. This is why racial domination is best described as a changing apparatus of law, schooling and administration rather than a presumed uniform sentiment among all Italians or Eritreans.

4.4 Administration, budgets and biopolitics

Bigoni, Antonelli, Funnell and Cafaro (2025) examine accounting practices in Italian Fascist Africa between 1922 and 1941. Their central contribution is to show how budgets, censuses and colonial reporting could function as instruments of biopolitical classification rather than as administrative records concerned only with efficiency. The authors connect these practices to the Fascist aspiration to organize a highly racialized society. This interpretation broadens the analysis of colonial domination beyond direct expropriation.

The implication for Eritrea is particularly important. Administrative visibility can make groups legible to the state, facilitate differential services and create categories used for surveillance or allocation. Yet one must not conflate the availability of administrative techniques with evidence that every official achieved the intended social transformation. Policy purpose, implementation and experienced outcomes are three separate questions. The article's value is conceptual and documentary, not a license to assign undocumented local outcomes.

4.5 What the educational archive actually demonstrates

The evidence from Negash complicates the simplistic formulation that colonial educational policy was uniformly designed to make Eritreans culturally Italian. His comparison of regulations, school practice and eight colonial textbooks instead argues that officials restricted and channeled African education in ways that would preserve colonial superiority (Negash, 1987, pp. 66–83). Under Governor Ferdinando Martini (1897–1907), fear that schooling would provide a basis for political challenge was used to justify withholding state schooling. Under Salvago-Raggi a government school opened at Keren in 1911 for children of Muslim chiefs and other prominent families; vocational and clerical instruction served designated administrative functions rather than granting educational parity (Negash, 1987, pp. 68–70). Thus the crucial mechanism was not simply the spread of Italian words but the unequal distribution of educational possibilities and occupational pathways. The use of textbooks to legitimate the metropolis must be analyzed independently from the actual distribution of language proficiency. Claims of complete linguistic replacement are not supported by this source.

4.6 Gender, kinship and the legal production of colonial race

Giulia Barrera demonstrates that the legal production of racial categories extended into the daily practices of paternity, schooling, naming, inheritance and family care. The children of Italian men and Eritrean women were not simply an administrative category: recognition or non-recognition by fathers could alter their legal status and social possibilities. Barrera shows how colonial officials and Italian fathers, but also Tigrinya mothers and children, participated in struggles over identification. In this sense, the colonial state attempted to make descent and racialized family relations instruments of unequal belonging (Barrera, 2005, pp. 97–105). The colonial regulations on children of mixed parentage in 1940 sharpened legal divisions, while the source also follows the identity problems that persisted beyond the fall of Italian rule. Barrera records some families' strategic use of Italian surnames and attempts to secure recognition, against a framework in which paternal acknowledgment did not reliably produce equal citizenship or protection. These documented strategies complicate any account in which Eritrean women and children were merely passive recipients of colonial classification (Barrera, 2005, pp. 99–108).

The new material also changes the interpretation of Italian linguistic influence. A child's Italian surname, a bureaucratic classification, or school exposure to Italian should not be mistaken for widespread voluntary language replacement. The documented problem is selective access to legal recognition and schooling through colonial institutions. A claim that Italian remains widely spoken across Eritrea, Ethiopia and Djibouti would require present-day language-survey evidence not provided by these historical chapters (Barrera, 2005, pp. 103–108; Negash, 1987, pp. 66–83).

V. FASCIST OCCUPATION, INTERNATIONAL LAW AND DECOLONIZATION

5.1 Eritrea and the renewed invasion of Ethiopia

The Fascist invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 and subsequent occupation from 1936 to 1941 marked a radical enlargement of Italy's regional project. Eritrea was integral to the logistics and political geography of this effort. The Ethiopian campaign should not be described as the peaceful incorporation of a neighboring country, because military coercion and organized resistance remained central throughout the occupation. A key historical difference is that Ethiopia had preserved its independence after Adwa, whereas Eritrea had already been subjected to Italian colonial administration.

The apparatus of Fascist rule also reshaped the ambitions of administration itself. As shown by Bigoni et al. (2025), accounting, reporting and population classification served projects that went beyond ordinary fiscal bookkeeping. Such documentation helps explain how imperial governance attempted to bind the conduct of settlers and indigenous populations to state priorities. The relationship between intent and actual coercive practices must nonetheless be established with geographically and temporally specific evidence.

Rochat (2005, pp. 37–39) examines the Italian air force in the Ethiopian war of 1935–1936, documenting its expansion and the assumptions of political and military planners about aviation's role in conquest. His analysis makes possible a more precise periodization of the relationship between Eritrea and Ethiopia: Eritrea was already a colonial territory from which the dictatorship prepared and supported a new campaign against an independent neighbor. It was not simply another occupied district after the fact. The logistical mobilization of routes, stores, men and aircraft must be read in conjunction with Negash's account of Eritrea as a strategic military base. This also distinguishes the 1935–1941 war-and-occupation phase from nineteenth-century efforts at land settlement (Negash, 1987; Rochat, 2005, pp. 37–44).

Rochat (2005, pp. 40–44) distinguishes military air support, reconnaissance, transportation, and bombing, and reflects on the limitations of official statistics. This caution should guide the use of military totals in the article: figures from operational records have to be dated, their scope identified, and claims about civilian

casualties distinguished from documented military sorties. Nevertheless, the contribution demonstrates the deployment of organized state aviation, not merely isolated battlefield incidents. For a historical institutional analysis, air power was one component of a larger coercive network that linked the colonial base, transport infrastructures and decisions taken by the metropolitan political command.

5.2 Chemical warfare and atrocities

The Italian campaign in Ethiopia is inseparable from the scholarly literature on poison gas and the broader violence of conquest. Alberto Sbacchi's chapter on poison gas and atrocities, Giorgio Rochat's chapter on the Italian air force, and other work in Italian Colonialism demonstrate that these questions are not marginal to serious research on the empire. Their chapter titles and bibliographic information have been verified, but detailed assertions from chapters not available in full are not presented here as direct readings (Rochat, 2005; Sbacchi, 2005).

A properly documented evaluation should triangulate military orders, diplomatic correspondence, contemporary reporting, surviving Ethiopian testimony and later scholarship. Such a method distinguishes orders, individual episodes and estimated aggregate harms. The moral significance of chemical warfare does not diminish when the exact casualty estimates are uncertain; rather, reliable quantification is essential to prevent both minimization and sensationalism. The existing draft's mention of the Addis Ababa massacre calls for targeted verification against specialized historical studies before specific figures can be included.

Sbacchi's chapter supplies direct support for the discussion of prohibited weapons. According to Sbacchi (2005, pp. 47–49), the Italian government prepared stocks of chemical munitions, and its military forces used poison gas during the 1935–1936 Ethiopian campaign despite Italy's ratification of the 1925 Geneva Protocol. The text discusses both mustard gas and other chemical agents and links policy authorization to military decision-making. These details are more evidentially precise than a generic statement that atrocities occurred during an occupation. They support a claim about organized methods and chains of command rather than spontaneous misconduct by individual soldiers.

Sbacchi (2005, pp. 49–52) additionally discusses attacks affecting villages, livestock, people fleeing combat and Red Cross facilities, drawing on reports and archival testimony. These claims raise distinct evidentiary questions: the decision to employ chemical weapons; the types of targets attacked; the number of missions; and the resulting military and civilian losses. None should be reduced to an unverified single casualty total. In particular, the presence of documentary reports of bombing hospitals or protected emblems warrants careful attention to the circumstances and sources. The analysis here follows the narrower, well-supported proposition: chemical warfare was repeatedly implemented as part of the Italian campaign, contradicting retrospective accounts that minimize state violence (Sbacchi, 2005, pp. 47–53).

Rochat (2005, pp. 40–44) and Sbacchi (2005, pp. 47–53) should be read together rather than as interchangeable witnesses. Rochat situates the air force within the campaign's operations, while Sbacchi concentrates on chemical weapons, their deployment and the evidentiary controversy. Their combination improves causal specificity: military technological capacity provided a means, political and military authorization enabled particular uses, and aerial bombardment created consequences for combatants and civilians. This does not establish that every Italian bombing used chemicals or that every disputed casualty estimate is accurate. It establishes that the invasion's techniques cannot be described adequately through territorial conquest alone.

5.3 Resistance and the limits of imperial consolidation

The Italian occupation of Ethiopia was short and faced persistent resistance. The territory cannot be treated as a consolidated decades-long extractive economy in the manner of some longer-lived colonies. This temporal boundary matters for claims about rail development, rural modernization or the transfer of vast resource stocks. Wartime military expenditure, insecurity and disruption may overshadow conventional commercial calculations.

Resistance also demands analytical recognition of Ethiopian agency. Narratives centered exclusively on Italian military decision-making tend to reduce Ethiopians to objects of policy. Military history should document the organization of opposition, protection of communities and the political contest over legitimacy. Source asymmetry is a challenge: colonial reports may be abundant while local records are uneven, making systematic cross-checking crucial.

Nicola Labanca (2005, pp. 27–34) examines colonial internment in Libya and its relation to state repression. The chapter is geographically focused on Libya, not Eritrea; for that reason, its figures and individual cases must not be transferred to the Horn of Africa. Its comparative value lies instead in demonstrating that internment, displacement and coercive confinement existed within the repertoire of Italian imperial government before and during fascism. Labanca traces continuities between earlier colonial legal

practices and the escalation of repressive systems, while warning against the comforting idea that exceptional violence was confined to a few moments of war. Such a comparison provides context for, but does not replace, Eritrea-specific archival evidence (Labanca, 2005, pp. 27–34; Negash, 1987).

Read alongside Negash's chapters on resistance and political mobilization, Labanca's findings suggest a cross-colonial research design attentive to how administrative law, military authority and the definition of the colonial subject affected coercion. Comparison must be institutional rather than numerical unless commensurable datasets become available. The presence of concentration camps in Libya cannot prove analogous camp populations in Eritrea; conversely, the absence of such data from a particular Eritrean archive would not establish an absence of repression. What can be tested across regions is the state practice of classifying resistance as a security problem and using legal exceptions and collective penalties to protect imperial authority (Labanca, 2005, pp. 27–34).

5.4 The end of Italian rule and the status of Eritrea

Italian control in East Africa collapsed during World War II in 1941, followed by British administration in Eritrea. The 1947 peace settlement formalized Italy's renunciation of its colonies. The United Nations subsequently addressed Eritrea's political future; General Assembly Resolution 390 A (V) of 1950 provided for federation with Ethiopia, implemented in 1952. These developments should not be confused with a transfer of Eritrea to France.

The later termination of Eritrean autonomy within Ethiopia, the struggle for independence and the emergence of an independent Eritrean state belong to the postwar trajectory and cannot be reduced to a decision made by Italy. A chronological table or legal audit should distinguish the relinquishment of Italian colonial sovereignty, British occupation, UN resolution, federation, annexation and eventual independence. The documentary foundation includes United Nations and US diplomatic historical collections (United Nations, 1950; 1952; US Department of State, 1947).

5.5 Djibouti as a separate French colonial history

Djibouti's colonial history is principally associated with French Somaliland and French rule until independence in 1977. Its connection to Eritrea and Ethiopia is geographic and strategic, not evidence that Djibouti formed part of Italian East Africa. The components of Africa Orientale Italiana included Eritrea, Italian Somaliland and occupied Ethiopia; substituting Djibouti for Somalia is historically incorrect.

A comparison nevertheless remains productive. French Djibouti and Italian Eritrea occupied related positions within the same Red Sea commercial system, and both are useful for studying how ports and infrastructure mediate external control. But comparable mechanisms of asymmetry do not establish identical legal origins or administration. The evidence supports a comparative framework, not a fabricated history of Italian donation of territories to France or China.

5.6 Eritrean soldiers and the logistics of Italian imperial expansion

The use of Eritrean recruits is not a marginal feature of the colonial economy. Negash treats the colony as a source of soldiers in a separate analytical section and notes Eritrean military deployments in support of Italian operations in Somalia and Libya as well as the later preparation for Ethiopia (Negash, 1987, pp. 4, 48–53). Their military labor demonstrates that an empire can appropriate human capabilities even when direct extractive returns from local agriculture or minerals are modest. Recruitment should not, however, be described generically as slavery without documentation of the contracts, obligations and coercion applicable to each period and unit. Conversely, wages and formal service cannot by themselves show that an asymmetrical colonial power relation was equitable. For future quantification the relevant series are the share of adult male labor absorbed by the military, pay differentials, battlefield losses and the longer-term consequences for households (Negash, 1987, Table 2.6, p. 51).

VI. RED SEA GEOPOLITICS, CONTEMPORARY PORTS AND ACCOUNTABILITY

The contemporary evidence in the accompanying transcript adds a sharper economic-security puzzle: since Eritrean independence in 1993, landlocked Ethiopia has relied heavily on Djibouti for maritime trade. This creates reciprocal—but asymmetric—exposure: Ethiopian importers and exporters depend on external port and corridor performance, whereas Djibouti's port economy relies on Ethiopian traffic. The relevant outcome is not legal ownership of the strait, but bargaining leverage over tariffs, transit reliability, infrastructure investment and emergency access (World Bank, 2021, 2023; research transcript, sections 4–6).

Assab and Massawa are analytically distinct from Djibouti. Their relevance to Ethiopian proposals for maritime diversification should be evaluated through capacity, treaty arrangements, safety, investment costs and

Eritrean sovereignty, not described as an entitlement to territorial acquisition. Bab el-Mandeb is the natural southern passage into the Red Sea, whereas the Egyptian-administered Suez Canal is the northern artificial link to the Mediterranean. The geographic chain explains why a regional port dispute carries external commercial and security implications (research transcript, sections 6–8).

The transcript contrasts Italy's earlier territorial conquest with modern influence through energy diplomacy, trade, development initiatives and maritime security. Under Giorgia Meloni, the Mattei Plan is relevant as a foreign-policy and energy-cooperation instrument; its existence does not establish Italian command of regional conflicts or equivalence between contemporary Italy and Mussolini's regime. Italy's position must also be distinguished from France's distinct colonial history in Djibouti, China's infrastructure and military presence, and United States security interests (Santini and Prontura, 2025, as cited in the accompanying transcript, sections 12–17; independent verification required for precise bibliographic details).

The conflict–corruption proposition requires narrower inference. Emergency expenditure, confidentiality of military procurement and executive concentration may diminish ordinary scrutiny, but neither the presence of corruption nor the coexistence of violence proves that any government initiated war to conceal wrongdoing. A causal test would examine procurement files, beneficial ownership of concessionaires, port and railway contracts, audited budget allocations, debt commitments, diplomatic documents and the chronology of decisions against conflict events (research transcript, sections 9–11).

These comparisons generate three distinct dependent variables for further investigation: concentration of transit routes and their costs; political and fiscal transparency of security-linked infrastructure contracts; and the distribution of economic benefits among state agencies, firms and affected communities. Historical land confiscation and racially unequal schooling are documented types of colonial power, whereas present-day contractual dependence and corruption claims require separate evidence. The continuity established by this article concerns the strategic value of geography—not a demonstrated continuity of imperial legal authority.

6.1 Suez and Bab el-Mandeb: different geographic instruments

The Suez Canal and Bab el-Mandeb are successive maritime links but fundamentally different geographic objects. Suez is an artificial waterway through Egypt; Bab el-Mandeb is a natural strait between the Horn of Africa and the Arabian Peninsula. Ships traversing the Red Sea corridor may depend on both, yet the sovereignty and regulatory arrangements applying to each are not interchangeable (Suez Canal Authority, n.d.; National Geographic, 2024).

The distinction exposes the limits of explanations based on control of a single port. A port can supply bunkering, repair, storage or transshipment services without conferring sovereignty over an international strait. Militaries can secure access through agreements without owning either shore. Thus geography creates opportunity but does not automatically determine ownership. The analytical issue is the relationship between commercial dependence, security arrangements and political bargaining.

6.2 Djibouti and the changing architecture of strategic access

Contemporary Djibouti illustrates the convergence of civilian logistics and military interests. Analyses of Chinese engagement have described commercial infrastructure and security objectives as intertwined, making the case especially useful for comparison with historical European strategies (Council on Foreign Relations, 2018). France also has a longstanding strategic relationship with Djibouti rooted in a separate colonial and postcolonial history.

The relevant comparison is institutional, not a claim of identical colonial conduct. Modern port concessions, sovereign contracts and foreign military basing agreements differ in formal legal status from nineteenth-century annexation. Nonetheless, dependence on external finance, specialized infrastructure or security partners can constrain negotiation. Measuring such influence demands attention to contract terms, debt obligations, concession duration, public disclosure and Djiboutian governmental choices.

6.3 China, infrastructure finance and the problem of inference

Chinese involvement in Red Sea logistics is commonly interpreted through strategic rivalry, but neither investment nor base access proves territorial ownership. The correct questions concern financial contracts, usage rights, procurement, traffic and security guarantees. Treating China as the beneficiary of an Italian territorial gift conflates periods and legal categories separated by decades.

Moreover, a rigorous comparison needs a counterfactual. States may choose to cooperate with foreign lenders because infrastructure and port development require capital and technical expertise. Whether a particular agreement improves national bargaining power or deepens dependency is a measurable question about costs, revenues, alternatives and governance transparency. Describing all cooperation as coercion without examining

these dimensions would repeat the same evidentiary errors criticized in celebratory accounts of colonial development.

6.3.1 Similar geography does not mean identical sovereignty

A comparison across a century requires a consistent analytical unit. Italy's occupation of Eritrea relied on foreign territorial administration, unequal racial rules and military conquest. Contemporary states negotiating foreign port investment or military basing agreements operate under a different international legal order, whatever the asymmetry of financial bargaining power. A Chinese-backed infrastructure investment in Djibouti, for instance, cannot be described as a direct inheritance of Italian colonial ownership because Djibouti was not an Italian colony and because commercial debt, concession agreements, and military access are not identical to colonial annexation. What persists is the strategic value of geography: the narrow southern entry to the Red Sea continues to attract competition between governments and commercial actors. What changes is the formal institutional mechanism by which foreign actors obtain access and the available legal powers of the territorial state. This comparison must neither romanticize commercial agreements as inherently fair nor classify every asymmetric contract as a nineteenth-century colonial occupation. Negash's historical definition of colonial rule emphasizes military subjugation, differentiated institutions and policies that placed the colony's economy in service of an external power (Negash, 1987, pp. 1, 9–12). To test continuity in today's port economy would instead require contemporary financing contracts, port-usage data, labor arrangements and administrative decisions. Evidence of strategic similarity should generate research questions, not substitute for those records. This separation between analogy and historical causation protects the article from overclaiming.

6.4 Bab el-Mandeb: Djibouti and the geography of international vulnerability

Unlike a canal, Bab el-Mandeb is a naturally occurring maritime chokepoint, flanked by African and Arabian coasts. Its position makes Djibouti strategically important even though the state does not exercise sovereignty over the entire passage. The U.S. Energy Information Administration identifies the strait as the connection between the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden and notes that rerouting around the Cape of Good Hope raises transport times and costs (EIA, 2019; EIA, 2025). As a historical comparison, control over access to the coast was valuable to Italy, but the current juridical landscape consists of sovereign states, bilateral arrangements, foreign facilities, and maritime security operations—not a surviving Italian colony. The importance of this chokepoint is not purely retrospective. Reuters reported on 6 October 2026 that energy firms were reassessing route concentration because disruption around Hormuz and Bab el-Mandeb exposed vulnerability in global supply networks (Reuters, 2026). That report supports a contemporary relevance claim, but not a causal assertion that the current Iran-related conflict derives from Italian imperialism. The relevant historical lesson is functional: military threats to concentrated transit infrastructure can transmit costs far beyond the battlefield.

6.5 Italy's present-day presence and other foreign actors

The assertion that Italy simply ceded power to France, China, or the United Arab Emirates is not historically sustainable. France had its own separate colonial jurisdiction over Djibouti; Italy lost control over Eritrea during World War II and renounced colonial claims in the 1947 peace settlement. Contemporary port investment or military access must be established by each present-day agreement. They cannot be inferred from Italian rule over Eritrea (Negash, 1987; United Nations, 1950).

Italy remains a regional actor. In December 2025 the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs reported approximately one hundred personnel at the Guillet base in Djibouti and Italy's participation in the EU Aspides maritime-security mission; the same communiqué stated that Italy had contributed to training approximately nine thousand Djiboutian and Somali security personnel since 2014 (Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2025). These are concrete instruments of security cooperation, not evidence of renewed Italian territorial sovereignty. France, China, the United States, and Japan maintain distinct security interests in Djibouti, while UAE-linked commercial and port interests should be evaluated contract by contract and location by location. Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Djibouti cannot be collapsed into a single political unit.

6.6 Ethiopia's maritime dependence: separating costs, exposure and sovereign claims

The Addis Ababa–Djibouti corridor illustrates a two-sided dependency with unequal adjustment options. Ethiopia's large domestic market generates transit demand, but international cargo must cross an international boundary and a logistics chain involving roads, railways, ports, customs agencies, and shipping lines. Djibouti derives commercial opportunities from this traffic, while Ethiopian producers face the risk that disruptions raise freight charges and delivery times. These relationships are economically significant without

implying that Ethiopia possesses an automatic legal right to a neighboring country's coastline. The World Bank's corridor initiatives make the basic policy issue concrete: infrastructure performance depends not only on construction but also on coordination among border, transport, customs, and port institutions (World Bank, 2021, 2023).

The appropriate measurements are disaggregated. Port concentration can be estimated as the share of total Ethiopian maritime cargo passing through each gateway; exposure can be estimated using transit time, transport charges per unit of freight, border delays, and the frequency and duration of service interruptions. The bargaining position of each party may then be assessed through credible alternative routes, available capacity and the investment needed to activate them. A diversification proposal that seems attractive on a map may have poor short-run economics if it requires expensive corridor rebuilding, insurance adjustments or new diplomatic guarantees. Conversely, dependence can create costs even where normal transit operations are efficient, because a crisis has a high economic impact when substitutes are scarce.

Assab and Massawa cannot therefore be treated as interchangeable symbols of a lost Ethiopian coast. Both lie within Eritrea, whose sovereignty and security interests are analytically prior to any proposal to access or develop its port facilities. A commercially negotiated transit arrangement would differ fundamentally from annexation, a coercive ultimatum or exclusive military control. The 1993 transformation of Ethiopia into a landlocked state helps explain the salience of Eritrean and Djiboutian corridors; it does not settle what political bargain would be legitimate or economically efficient in 2026. For Ethiopia, Eritrea and Djibouti alike, the policy test is whether an arrangement increases predictable market access while preserving the authority of each state to consent, regulate and scrutinize the terms.

6.7 War, corruption and the limits of causal attribution

The accompanying research transcript raises a distinct proposition: sustained conflict can enlarge the scope for discretionary procurement, secrecy and concentrated executive decisions. That proposition is plausible and testable, but it is not proof that conflict was deliberately engineered to conceal corruption. The inferential sequence must be explicit. A conflict or emergency may change procurement rules; these changes may reduce publication of tenders, competitive bidding or parliamentary review; the resulting environment may increase opportunities for connected suppliers; and those opportunities may or may not produce observable misappropriation. Each link requires evidence. Finding war and corruption in the same country establishes neither intent nor causation.

Three research designs would strengthen this investigation. First, a before-and-after comparison of emergency legislation and military budgets could determine whether normal procurement safeguards were suspended and whether the suspension outlasted a documented security need. Second, contract-level analysis could compare tenders awarded competitively with negotiated or classified contracts, matched by sector, supplier, delivery and audited performance. Third, network analysis could identify beneficial ownership and political connections among logistics, port, energy and defense firms. None of these tests should assume that a firm with political access is automatically corrupt; they define verifiable observations capable of either supporting or rejecting the hypothesis.

For Ethiopia, Eritrea and Djibouti, cross-national comparison requires caution about differing legal regimes, public-data availability, exposure to civil conflict, state capacity and the structure of port revenues. A higher level of secrecy in one jurisdiction may reflect a security rationale, an authoritarian administrative structure, institutional weakness or corruption, sometimes in combination. Claims must be graded accordingly: documented institutional rule, measurable economic outcome, plausible mechanism and unproven allegation should not share the same evidentiary status. The research transcript itself expressly rejects the assertion that the three governments are demonstrably coordinating wars to obscure wrongdoing (research transcript, sections 9–11).

The contribution to the article's central question is not to replace imperial expropriation with a contemporary accusation. It is to ask whether concentrated control of strategic infrastructure—through a colonial ministry then, or through sovereign agencies, foreign operators and security institutions today—reduces the opportunities for affected populations to contest decisions. This comparison concerns accountability mechanisms. It must not equate the legal and moral status of colonial racial coercion with ordinary contemporary foreign investment, nor assume that a state's sovereign decision to host a military facility is evidence of corruption.

6.8 The Mattei Plan and contemporary Italian influence

Italy's contemporary African policy operates through institutions different from the architecture of fascist conquest. The government of Giorgia Meloni has promoted the Mattei Plan as a platform for cooperation

in energy, infrastructure, investment and development. Its name invokes Enrico Mattei and an Italian tradition of energy diplomacy, but its historical symbolism is not evidence that the plan reproduces an earlier colonial administrative system. An analytical comparison must identify instruments rather than rely upon the visibility of political rhetoric. Energy agreements, public funding, guarantees, technical cooperation, commercial contracts and security partnerships constitute distinguishable forms of influence (Santini and Prontura, 2025).

The Red Sea matters to Italian interests because energy shipments, maritime insurance, commercial supply chains and security risks connect the Horn of Africa to the Mediterranean economy. Djibouti occupies a particularly important position for the logistics and security of traffic around Bab el-Mandeb; Ethiopia offers substantial market and development opportunities despite its absence of a coastline; and Eritrea's coastal geography gives it potential relevance to transit diversification. These roles, however, should not be collapsed into a single Italian territorial strategy. The existence of an Italian military presence in Djibouti or a partnership with an African government does not confer authority over that government's ports or political decisions. To evaluate whether the Mattei Plan changes regional dependency, future studies should trace named projects from announcement to signed agreement, financing, implementation and distribution of gains. The relevant data include loan-versus-grant composition, procurement procedures, the identity of contractors, environmental and social obligations, local labor participation, tariffs and long-term maintenance liabilities. A headline investment commitment is not the same as disbursed finance; a diplomatic memorandum is not the same as an operating power plant or freight corridor. The underlying question is whether cooperation creates measurable and mutually acceptable bargaining capacity or reproduces narrowly concentrated advantages. Contemporary Italian policy may be critiqued rigorously on those grounds without asserting an unsupported equivalence between Meloni and Mussolini.

This distinction also helps compare Italy to other powers without exaggeration. French historical rule in Djibouti followed a separate trajectory from Italian colonial Eritrea; Chinese commercial financing and overseas military basing are contemporary contractual and strategic relationships; United States and other foreign security facilities reflect another set of arrangements. No one historical imperial transfer explains all of these presences. The evidence needed is country- and agreement-specific, including Djiboutian law, base leases, port ownership and operating rights, security obligations, debt terms and parliamentary or public oversight. Strategic geography makes outside interest intelligible, but political authority remains a question of institutions and documents.

6.9 Synthesis: continuity of strategic geography, change in legal power

The Red Sea remained strategic across colonial conquest, decolonization and twenty-first-century military-commercial expansion. That long continuity, however, should not suggest institutional stasis. Annexation, trusteeship-like administration, federation, sovereign independence, commercial concession and foreign basing agreement are different modes of authority with different claims to legitimacy and avenues of resistance.

The article's comparative contribution is to connect them through observable mechanisms: control of access routes, classification of populations, unequal allocation of capital, competition over ports, and struggles about who can authorize decisions. The same analytical vocabulary can be used across periods only if differences in law, local agency and material conditions remain explicit. The result is neither nostalgia for imperial infrastructure nor a reduction of all contemporary agreements to nineteenth-century conquest.

The combined sources clarify the article's comparative contribution. Atkinson (2005, pp. 15–24) explains the colonial production of strategic geographical knowledge; Negash (1987) documents economic and social institutions in Eritrea; Rochat and Sbacchi (2005, pp. 37–53) demonstrate the military escalation linked to the invasion of Ethiopia; and Ben-Ghiat and Fuller (2005, pp. 1–9) situate these developments within contested political memory. No single work is sufficient on its own. Together they allow a multi-level explanation linking the representation of territory, allocation of resources, reproduction of hierarchy, military coercion and the later political narration of empire.

This explanation does not imply that present-day Chinese investments or foreign military bases in Djibouti legally replicate the colonial state. The continuity lies in the strategic advantages of the Red Sea corridor, and the discontinuity lies in the international law of sovereignty, the actors involved and the formal status of commercial and security agreements. Any further claim about contemporary economic dependency must be supported by contract terms, debt service, port throughput, military access and domestic distributive outcomes—not by historical analogy alone. The comparative historical evidence therefore sharpens the questions to ask of present institutions without turning the colonial past into an all-purpose metaphor.

VII. Research contribution and findings

The principal research question is how the Italian colonial state combined land appropriation, military organization, schooling, racial law, gender regulation and transport infrastructure in Eritrea and occupied Ethiopia, and to what extent this history helps formulate—not prejudice—questions about foreign military and port access near Bab el-Mandeb today. The first historical finding concerns institutional interdependence: economic extraction was supported by political administration and coercive classifications (Negash, 1987, pp. 32–65, 66–91, 92–120). The second concerns the unequal boundaries of Italianization: the sources document racialized family law and gendered representation rather than comprehensive replacement of Eritrean languages or identity (Barrera, 2005, pp. 97–108; Iyob, 2005, pp. 231–244). The third finding is methodological: commemorations of benign Italian settlers must be tested against colonial law, dispossession and coercion, with the geographical limits of comparative sources kept explicit (Doumanis, 2005, pp. 227–230).

For the contemporary period, the article proposes a bounded hypothesis rather than claiming empirical identification: strategic leverage now can arise through logistics, military access and financing even where no foreign state holds colonial sovereignty. Demonstrating a causal path from a specific Italian institution to a current Djiboutian or Eritrean agreement would require administrative continuities, contract records and longitudinal economic outcomes beyond the provided books. The case is relevant to Ukraine and conflicts affecting Iran only at this level of comparison—sovereignty, contested transport routes, coercive infrastructure and postwar economic costs—not as proof that the belligerents share Italian colonial motives.

VIII. Conclusion

The history of the Italian empire in the Horn of Africa is best understood through interconnected institutions rather than through an isolated catalogue of colonial buildings or raw materials. The acquisition and administration of Eritrean territory gave the Italian state instruments for shaping land tenure, fiscal priorities, commercial transportation and social hierarchy. The attempt to translate linguistic ambiguity into Ethiopian dependency at Wuchale, its repudiation at Adwa, and the renewed Fascist invasion clarify that sovereignty was contested and never simply a gift of European powers (Giglio, n.d.; Jerven, Weisdorf and Strangio, 2021). The available economic scholarship cautions against two mutually reinforcing distortions. Physical infrastructure should not be treated as proof of equitable development, and colonial inequality does not justify unsupported aggregate claims of immense mineral profits. The effects of enterprises, fiscal expenditures, irrigation, employment and trade must be measured separately, including impacts on local populations. Recent work on accounting and biopolitics additionally demonstrates that control operated through categories and reporting systems designed to govern populations as well as production (Bertazzini, 2020; Bigoni et al., 2025). The historical succession after 1941 cannot be described as Italy donating Ethiopia, Eritrea and Djibouti to France or China. Ethiopia, Eritrea and French Somaliland followed different political histories. Their continued connection is the maritime setting linking Suez to Bab el-Mandeb, where present-day logistical and military partnerships introduce contractual asymmetries distinct from direct colonial annexation. Colonial responsibility is properly assessed through documentary evidence of laws, military conduct, economic privileges and their distributional effects, while modern dependencies require their own legal and financial analysis.

IX. Future research

A coordinated research program should link Eritrean and Ethiopian land records, Italian concession archives, export statistics, Gash irrigation accounts, the Massawa–Asmara railway ledgers, school registers, legal and identity records, military documentation and postwar restitution files. The resulting longitudinal evidence could test when economic gains accrued to the colonial state, private enterprises, settlers and local communities; whether development claims survived adjustment for coercive costs; and how forms of sovereignty and bargaining power shifted between 1890 and the present. Such a project would prioritize explicitly reproducible datasets, translations of relevant primary records and African archival perspectives.

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- [23] Source boundaries: Negash (1987) is the principal monographic source for Eritrea; the 133-page and 48-page user-provided PDF selections from Ben-Ghiat and Fuller (2005) contain selected chapters and non-consecutive, sometimes repeated pages. Claims about these chapters are restricted to visible page ranges; they are not presented as an exhaustive reading of every chapter of the edited collection. The

- contemporary political comparison relies on separately cited materials and is not independently established by the colonial histories.
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