



POLICY MEMO

# Civil War in the Horn of Africa? Four Possible Trajectories for Ethiopia

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## Table of Contents

|  |   |
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| Tensions, Once Simmering, Now Boil .....                                       | 2 |
| Scenario One: A Precarious Ceasefire and an Attempt at Mediation .....         | 3 |
| Scenario Two: A Protracted and Bloody Stalemate .....                          | 6 |
| Scenario Three: A Federal Occupation of Tigray and an Ensuing Insurgency ..... | 6 |
| Scenario Four: An Expansion of the Conflict That Draws in Outside Powers ..... | 6 |
| Conclusion .....   | 7 |
| Endnotes .....   | 8 |

A civil war is erupting in Ethiopia—Africa’s second most populous state, a geopolitical fulcrum in the volatile Red Sea arena, and the seat of the African Union (AU).<sup>1</sup> The question now is whether a ceasefire can quickly be brokered that would, in the best case, serve as the basis for a broader national dialogue aimed at stabilizing the country’s political transition; or whether the situation will devolve into a multisided conflict that draws in neighboring states and further destabilizes what is already one of the world’s most fragile regions. As of this writing, the latter unfortunately seems more likely, but there is still hope for a ceasefire, particularly if Ethiopia’s regional and international partners make a concerted push for de-escalation.

One should not use the term “civil war” lightly, but this appears to be the course that Ethiopia is on. While in recent years the country has suffered from intercommunal clashes, assassinations, a coup attempt, and a low-level insurgency, this is the first time that Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed’s government has faced a direct challenge from a well-armed state within the state.

The stakes are high. With a population of over 100 million, the United States Institute of Peace’s senior study group on the Red Sea warns that Ethiopia’s disintegration would constitute “the largest state collapse in modern history.”<sup>2</sup>

### Tensions, Once Simmering, Now Boil

On November 4, Prime Minister Abiy ordered the military to take action in the northern state of Tigray after accusing security forces loyal to the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF), Tigray’s ruling party, of attacking a base belonging to the Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF). On November 5, as clashes continued, the ENDF announced that it was in a state of war with the TPLF.<sup>3</sup> Then on November 7, Ethiopian parliament voted to dissolve the TPLF and approve an interim government for Tigray.<sup>4</sup> TPLF officials, for their part, denied launching the initial attack but have stated that they will prevail

in any conflict.<sup>5</sup> As of November 8, media reports suggested that the ENDF had suffered nearly one hundred casualties in the fighting and TPLF officials claimed to have shot down an Ethiopian warplane.<sup>6</sup>

The hostility between the TPLF and Abiy’s government has been long in the making. Although Tigrayans only constitute roughly six percent of Ethiopia’s population, they have been the politically dominant faction in Ethiopia since 1991, when the TPLF led a multiethnic rebel coalition in toppling the Marxist-Leninist regime known as the Derg. Upon assuming power, the TPLF-dominated coalition set about building an authoritarian developmental state that sought to placate (or, in the eyes of its critics, divide and repress) the country’s many ethnic groups through a controversial system of ethnic federalism.<sup>7</sup> Ethiopia appeared to be embarking on a new political trajectory when Abiy Ahmed became Prime Minister in the spring of 2018 on the wave of anti-government protests. Abiy, who hails from the long-marginalized Oromo ethnic group (Ethiopia’s largest), oversaw reforms at a breakneck pace in his first year in office. Among other achievements, he made peace with Eritrea, which had fought a border war with Ethiopia from 1998 to 2000, an effort for which he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2019.<sup>8</sup>

Upon assuming power, Abiy’s government sacked many TPLF officials in what his allies described as a necessary move against a “deep state” that it blamed for sabotaging the country’s transition. (It has provided no evidence for these claims.) In turn, TPLF officials condemned this as anti-Tigrayan discrimination. In late 2019, Abiy dissolved the ruling coalition, a move decried by the TPLF.<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile, Abiy’s reforms opened the lid on long-repressed grievances against the state which often assumed ethnic overtones. Intercommunal violence increased dramatically and displaced three million people.<sup>10</sup> As local militias proliferated and the security forces began to show signs of fracturing, analysts warned of a Yugoslavia-style breakup.

The crisis between the TPLF and Abiy's government escalated with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, which prompted Abiy's government to postpone elections that were originally scheduled for August 2020.<sup>11</sup> Defying the federal government, Tigray held its own elections in September, which prompted parliament to vote to sever ties with the state. Abiy's finance ministry subsequently stopped sending funds to the TPLF while parliament authorized Abiy to use force against the "traitorous" state. TPLF officials issued calls for Abiy to step down and signaled their preparedness to fight. In late October, the TPLF refused to allow newly appointed ENDF commanders to take up their posts within the Tigray-based Northern Command.<sup>12</sup>

All of which leads us to the clashes that began in the early hours of November 4. Even if the TPLF initiated the fighting as Abiy claims, his forces were not unprepared. Reports suggest that ENDF units had been moving towards Tigray for days.<sup>13</sup>

The situation on the ground could change rapidly. The federal government's decision to cut off phone and internet services in Tigray makes it difficult to assess operations in real time and also gives Abiy's government the upper hand in controlling the narrative.<sup>14</sup> Given the large number of actors both within Ethiopia and the wider region that are liable to become involved in this situation, it is difficult to predict where this conflict is headed.

The other crucial caveat to any analysis is that there is limited open-source information about the composition of either side's forces. The TPLF claims that its paramilitary units and militias, which are battle-hardened and well-equipped, number as many as 250,000, though these numbers have not been independently verified.<sup>15</sup> In theory, Abiy's forces should include the entire Northern Command, which reportedly constitutes approximately half of ENDF personnel and mechanized units.<sup>16</sup> However, many of the command's officers are Tigrayan and some have already defected to the TPLF.<sup>17</sup>

As of November 8, there were reports that the command was not responding to orders from ENDF leadership.<sup>18</sup> Abiy has begun mobilizing troops from elsewhere in the country, including special police forces from certain federal states, though it is not clear how numerous these forces are and when they would arrive on the front.<sup>19</sup>

In short, some degree of ENDF fracturing appears to already be underway, but it is impossible to assess where the loyalties of many specific units lie or how strong they are. It would therefore be futile to "war game" this situation given the paucity of open-source information.

Nevertheless, we can consider, in broad terms, four scenarios of how the conflict might evolve in the coming weeks.

### Scenario One: A Precarious Ceasefire and an Attempt at Mediation

The best-case scenario is that some combination of a military stalemate (or fear thereof), international pressure, or the exigencies of domestic politics force Abiy's government and the TPLF to begrudgingly accept a ceasefire that could serve as the basis for a mediation effort. Unfortunately, the escalation in fighting that has occurred over the past several days makes a cessation of hostilities unlikely in the near-term. It is not out of the question, however, particularly if Abiy's "limited and achievable" operation is stymied in the coming weeks, as seems likely. Each side, but particularly Abiy's government, would have reason to seek de-escalation rather than a protracted conflict given that each faces immense challenges that such a conflict is likely to distract from, if not exacerbate.

For Abiy, the TPLF poses only one of several challenges, albeit the most pressing one at present. Abiy is increasingly unpopular with segments of his own Oromo community, who view his government as having failed to redress the historical injustices against their people. Intercommunal violence simmers in Oromia state and elsewhere. To take the latest

example, on November 1, gunmen suspected of belonging to an Oromo nationalist group massacred more than 50 civilians from the Amhara ethnic community in western Oromia.<sup>20</sup>

At the same time, the fractiousness of Ethiopia's security sector—and the disproportionate role TPLF officials have played within it over the past three decades—has Abiy scrambling to put together a capable team to manage his fight. The fact that Abiy has had to reinstate three generals that he had previously dismissed suggests a degree of desperation on his part (all three are veterans of the Eritrea war known for their anti-TPLF sentiments).<sup>21</sup> One of these generals was appointed ENDF Deputy Chief of Staff on November 8 as part of an unprecedented reshuffling of Abiy's cabinet that saw Abiy replace his Foreign Minister and appoint new heads of the ENDF, intelligence, and federal police services.<sup>22</sup> For the time being, it seems that anti-TPLF sentiment has united Abiy's government, but one should not assume that the security sector will only fracture along pro- and anti-TPLF lines (nor should one assume that every Tigrayan is a TPLF agent, though there are concerning reports of anti-Tigrayan discrimination on the rise).<sup>23</sup> In 2019, for example, a group of Amhara soldiers led by a general assassinated the ENDF's chief of staff and the Amhara state president in what was essentially an intra-Amhara dispute.<sup>24</sup> In short, there are many fault lines within the security sector and Ethiopian politics more broadly. Abiy may therefore face difficult tradeoffs as he is forced to prioritize either those partners and aides who are the most competent or those who are the most loyal.

A prolonged shift of military resources to the country's north could not only leave security vacuums elsewhere in Ethiopia at a dangerous moment, but also undercut Abiy's status as a regional heavyweight and Western security partner. In the past, Ethiopia has temporarily withdrawn forces from Somalia in response to domestic instability, and there are reports that it is doing so again.<sup>25</sup> Drawing down in Somalia would reduce Ethiopia's influence in a country where Abiy has vested

political interests and also risk frustrating internationally-backed AU efforts to combat the terrorist group al Shabaab. While the Tigray crisis is a higher priority for Abiy than anything happening in Somalia at the moment (though we should expect Somalia-based jihadists to accelerate their efforts to expand into Ethiopia in the event of a civil war), it is worth considering the notable geopolitical costs of a total mobilization for war in Tigray.<sup>26</sup> Needless to say, war bears immense financial costs as well. Ethiopia's economic situation is already precarious, as the country faces a foreign currency shortage and high youth unemployment.

The biggest challenge the TPLF faces is that of running an independent state and maintaining its supply lines without any external support. Tigray is landlocked and not particularly rich in natural resources. Abiy's government is aiming to besiege Tigray economically as well as militarily by cutting off the state's trade and business activities. The TPLF has publicly struck a defiant tone, but achieving autarky is no small task. Senior party cadres can speak as much as they like about the prowess of 19th century Tigrayan warrior-princes or evoke the spirit of self-sacrifice that characterized the TPLF's multi-year struggle against the Derg. But the experiences of the old guard in hiding guerrilla camps from Soviet aircraft are of little relevance to the question of financing and delivering governance to several million people, accustomed to hardship as they may be.

The other major challenge facing the TPLF is Eritrea, with which it shares a long border. If there is any political entity in the Horn of Africa that matches the TPLF in terms of its militarized mindset, it is Isaias Afwerki's Eritrean regime. Afwerki and the TPLF, once aligned as guerillas against the Derg, have been bitter foes since the 1990s. Indeed, it was a segment of the TPLF that drove the hawkish line against Eritrea during the 1998-2000 war when other Ethiopian factions were open to dialogue. Eritrean forces have reportedly made provocative maneuvers along the Tigray border (some

reports suggest there has already been cross-border shelling) and the TPLF fears they could attack at any moment.<sup>27</sup>

All of this is to say that each side has reasons to avoid further conflict. Should cooler heads prevail and a durable ceasefire materialize (it goes without saying that ceasefires can quickly collapse), there will still be a long, uphill struggle to forge a lasting peace within Ethiopia. Given that essentially every major constituency harbors some grievance against the status quo or their neighbors, a comprehensive national dialogue would be needed to truly put Ethiopia's transition on track.

### What if No One Settles for an Unfavorable Peace?

Unfortunately, while each side has much to lose from this conflict, each side also sees much to gain. There is no guarantee that Ethiopia's political elites, who came to power through a protracted, multi-sided conflict (or were reared in a system built by those who did), view peaceful compromise as the natural state of political affairs to which all roads invariably lead. Each side may very well believe that it can and must impose its will on the other by force.

Abiy seeks to bring the TPLF to heel for several reasons, chief among them a desire to recentralize Ethiopian politics. Abiy no doubt fears that the TPLF's disregard for the central government's authority could encourage factions outside of Tigray to question or resist his government's mandate, accelerating a Balkanization of the state. Ethiopia's constitution allows for ethnic groups to campaign for greater autonomy and, while the TPLF has not declared any intention to secede, Abiy must constantly be alive to the possibility of state fragmentation. Needless to say, an attack by the central government on an autonomous federal state could well backfire and increase anti-government sentiments elsewhere in the country, including among Oromo nationalists. Nevertheless, Abiy's rhetoric to date suggests that he believes that the best way to prevent Ethiopia's dissolution is through a massive show of force against this dissident faction.

Additionally, Abiy likely fears that a failure to punish the TPLF for its perceived treason risks making him appear weak at a time when his domestic base of support has shrunk considerably. Abiy is likely wagering that beating the war drum will improve his political prospects in the near term by rallying Ethiopians—many of whom have unpleasant memories of the era of TPLF-dominance—around the flag. His weak position opens him up to pressure from anti-TPLF hardliners, particularly those among the Amhara political elite who—due to demographics, geography, and their historically dominant position in Ethiopian politics—are an influential bloc Abiy cannot afford to lose. The Amhara state government is engaged in a border dispute with Tigray and its officials have already called on Amhara citizens to prepare for war.<sup>28</sup>

It is also in Abiy's interest to present an image of strong leadership amid rising tensions with Sudan, and particularly Egypt, over Ethiopia's construction of a massive Nile dam, which could dissuade him from adopting any stance that external rivals might view as "weak."<sup>29</sup> Similarly, Isaias, an important if problematic partner for Abiy, is likely to push for a hard line against the TPLF given his own paranoia and grudges. While unlikely, it is conceivable that Eritrean forces would conduct an incursion into Tigray without consulting Abiy, which could force his hand and bring about a multi-front war against the TPLF.

The TPLF, being the defensive actor in this conflict, has more limited objectives than Abiy and appears to see this as an existential struggle. On November 8, Tigray president Debretsion Gebremichael called on the AU to play a mediating role in the conflict, suggesting that the TPLF intends to hold the ENDF at bay while simultaneously launching a diplomatic offensive aimed at increasing international pressure on Abiy to cease military operations.<sup>30</sup>

From the TPLF's perspective, Abiy's weaknesses play to Tigray's advantage. It is precisely because the federal security

forces are so fractured that Tigray officials may believe that they have a real chance of military victory. In this sense, the question of how Northern Command fractures could determine the future of the conflict.

It is also crucial not to forget the ideological dimension to this conflict. Ethiopian politics are not simply a transactional game of extracting rents and accumulating power. The TPLF and Abiy hold different visions for the Ethiopian state and Tigray's role within it. The TPLF seems to believe that it can and must fight for its ideals against a "dictator" who is rolling back the party's legacy.

With this in mind, we should consider three alternative scenarios, all far more concerning than the first.

### Scenario Two: A Protracted and Bloody Stalemate

A military stalemate may offer the best hope for a ceasefire, but it is no guarantee of one. Both sides could settle into a prolonged, bloody stalemate without making any sincere effort to negotiate. Abiy's government may end up lacking the resources and manpower to seize and occupy the province, or Abiy may fear that his control of the armed forces would collapse under the weight of sustained operations in Tigray. Consequently, Abiy may seek to besiege the state rather than occupy it. The TPLF, meanwhile, is likely to conduct a largely defensive campaign.

Such a scenario could look similar to the Ethiopian-Eritrean war, which devolved into horrific trench warfare after the Ethiopian forces' initial offensives failed. In such a situation, both sides could use proxies to operate "behind enemy lines" in the hopes of sufficiently weakening the other's hand to allow a military breakthrough. The TPLF would likely have an easier time doing so, given that its authority within the Tigray state appears relatively unchallenged, whereas Abiy's opponents are manifold.

### Scenario Three: A Federal Occupation of Tigray and an Ensuing Insurgency

The ENDF reportedly attempted a commando operation in Tigray's capital of Mekelle on November 5 with the intention of seizing key military installations and neutralizing TPLF leadership. A repeat of such a limited assault is unlikely to succeed now that TPLF forces appear to have seized the main ENDF base in Mekelle, but it is conceivable that the ENDF could seize the city through a multi-front conventional assault from neighboring Afar and Amhara regions (and possibly with Eritrean support from the north). Assuming such an operation is successful—which is certainly not guaranteed—Abiy's challenge would be to expand his forces' control across Tigray and eventually assume responsibility for local governance. This is no small task, given that the TPLF has exercised control over every hamlet in the state for decades. The TPLF might not be able to govern a state in isolation indefinitely, but its credentials as a guerrilla force are not to be questioned. Its fighters would prove formidable opponents, particularly if most federal forces are unfamiliar with the local terrain and language. In other words, capturing Mekelle might signal little more than the beginning of another grueling Tigrayan insurgency against the central government.

One analyst ominously suggested that the most appropriate analogy for such a scenario would be the US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, i.e., "a quagmire."<sup>31</sup>

### Scenario Four: An Expansion of the Conflict That Draws in Outside Powers

This is the worst-case scenario and the most difficult to forecast with any precision. One could imagine a conflict that combines elements of both conventional warfare and insurgency, much as Ethiopia's last civil war, and rages on multiple fronts. In this sense, it could reflect a combination of the second and third scenarios i.e. a partial occupation of Tigray that is met with a TPLF-led insurgency in addition to a grueling conflict between conventional forces in another part of the state.

Rather than speculate about which factions might partner with one another or which battlegrounds are most likely to emerge, it is sufficient to note that a multi-sided, multifront war in Ethiopia would be catastrophic, both for the lives and livelihoods of millions of Ethiopians and for the stability of the wider region. Given its centrality within the Horn of Africa, both geographically and politically, an Ethiopian civil war would invariably draw in outside powers in ways that would both compound the country's crisis and increase the likelihood that it spills into neighboring states.

Sudan, which is also suffering high levels of intercommunal violence while undergoing an uncertain political transition, would likely be drawn into a larger Ethiopian conflagration. Abiy has made overtures to Sudan's two most powerful generals in recent months. These efforts may have helped Abiy isolate Tigray as Sudan recently closed its border with the state (Tigray's only other international border is with Eritrea).<sup>32</sup> Sudan's internal politics could end up influencing the Ethiopian conflict in unpredictable ways. Given the infighting within Sudan's transitional government as well as the many armed groups presently operating in the country, it is quite possible that different factions within Sudan would support opposing sides in an Ethiopian civil war—and vice versa.<sup>33</sup>

Egypt, a historical adversary of Ethiopia, could offer covert support to the TPLF or other anti-Abiy factions. One would hope that Cairo views the possibility of total state collapse in Ethiopia as an unacceptable risk and will not seek to stir the pot, but we should not assume that is the case. Ethiopia's construction of a massive dam on the Blue Nile, the first stage of which was completed this summer, has already raised tensions between Ethiopia and Egypt. It is quite plausible

that Egypt was already looking for avenues within Ethiopia to clandestinely sabotage the dam—which it claims poses an existential threat to Egyptians—or otherwise cause trouble for Abiy. The outbreak of civil war within Ethiopia would provide many such avenues.

A protracted civil conflict could trigger a massive refugee crisis in a region that can ill afford it. For context, Ethiopia's population is more than five times that of pre-war Syria. Up to nine million people in Tigray alone are at risk of displacement, according to the UN.<sup>34</sup> Neighboring countries like Sudan, South Sudan, Somalia, and Kenya—all of which are under existing strain—would be immediately impacted, but so too could countries further afield such as the Arab Gulf states, longstanding destinations for migrants from the Horn.

## Conclusion

In the 21st century, Western powers have generally treated Ethiopia as a stabilizing force in a volatile region, be it through its participation in AU and UN peacekeeping missions, its cooperation on counterterrorism, or its hosting of regional and international organizations. Whatever the merits of this approach, it was based on an understanding of Ethiopia as a historical powerhouse in East Africa, one with Pan-Africanist credentials gained from its valiant resistance to European colonialism. The flip side of this history, however, is that the Ethiopian state has gone through multiple periods of internal discord and dissolution over the centuries.

This more tragic aspect of Ethiopia's history need not be repeated. Ethiopia's international partners should do everything in their power to ensure that it is not.

## Endnotes

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## About the Author:



James Barnett is an independent researcher and writer specializing in African security issues. He was previously a Public Interest Fellow at the Hudson Institute and an analyst at AEI's Critical Threats Project. He has also worked with the United States Institute of Peace as lead researcher and writer for the final report of the Senior Study Group on the Red Sea and as a research assistant at the Africa Center for Strategic Studies. He was a 2016-2017 Boren Scholar in Tanzania and has been awarded a Fulbright research grant for Nigeria for 2020-21. He holds a B.A. with Highest Honors in History and Plan II Liberal Arts Honors from the University of Texas at Austin and is currently pursuing an MA in War Studies at King's College London.

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