

COURTNEY AUCOIN
LAURENCE BROWN
JUSTINE COUTU
RYAN GRAY

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CONFLICT DIAGNOSTIC ETHIOPIA

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since November 2020, clashes between government forces and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) have plunged Ethiopia into a civil war. This diagnostic applies a risk assessment methodology developed by the Country Indicators for Foreign Policy Project to identify trends and risk levels associated with key indicator clusters and formulate possible short to medium-term scenarios. Elusive commitments to a ceasefire, persisting violence fueled by ethnic tensions, and a worsening humanitarian crisis erode prospects for resolution in the near future.

BACKGROUND

Since 1994, Ethiopia has been governed under a federal system allocating control over its 10 regions to different ethnic groups¹. The TPLF served as the leader of a four-party coalition, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), which governed Ethiopia for nearly two decades². Discontent regarding the EPRDF's authoritarian rule and human rights violations led to the election of the first Oromo Prime Minister, Abiy Ahmed, in 2018³. To sabotage the Ahmed government, the TPLF refused to join the newly established coalition Prosperity Party seeking to entrench a centralized government⁴. In defiance of Ahmed's decision to postpone federal elections in August 2020, Tigray leaders conducted an illegal election⁵. Following this, the central government revoked funding for the TPLF, leading the TPLF to declare war and begin attacking Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF) facilities in Tigray⁶. This prompted retaliatory strikes from the ENDF, plunging the region into violent conflict in November 2020⁷. Since then, this governance dispute has rapidly evolved into a major humanitarian crisis underpinned by the perpetration of war atrocities⁸. While troops have been pulled from Tigray by the TPLF and the ENDF, Ethiopians continue to grapple with the consequences of this conflict, as parties have not reached a negotiated settlement.

INDICATOR ANALYSIS

History of Armed Conflict		Risk level: High	Trend: Deteriorating
Stabilizing factors	The withdrawal of Tigrayan forces from the neighbouring Amhara and Afar regions in late 2021 is an important step toward reaching a negotiated ceasefire between the Ethiopian federal government and TPLF ⁹ .		
Destabilizing factors	The civil war in Ethiopia quickly escalated into a high-intensity armed conflict with battle-related deaths ranging from 1200 to 4200+ in 2020 alone ¹⁰ . While total casualties are highly disputed, estimates run as high as 100,000 since the start of hostilities on November 3, 2020 ¹¹ . The number of Ethiopian refugees has also increased dramatically since the beginning of the conflict, jumping from 93,467 in 2019 to 151,427 in 2020 ¹² . Well over two million internally displaced people have also fled their homes due to warfare and famine ¹³ .		
Assessment	The rapid escalation of the conflict and reports of mass casualties have triggered strong retaliatory attacks and deepened mistrust between warring parties. The high number of IDPs in Tigray increases instability and the potential for further conflict as desperation draws more civilians into the fighting ¹⁴ . With nearly 50,000 Ethiopians fleeing to Sudan at the start of the war, the crisis could also escalate beyond Ethiopia's borders as neighbouring states weigh the benefits and risks of further involvement ¹⁵ .		

Militarization		Risk level: High	Trend: Stable
Stabilizing factors	In January 2022, Prime Minister Ahmed stated that he is pursuing efforts to negotiate a ceasefire agreement between the ENDF and the rival Tigray forces and militia groups ¹⁶ . In February 2022, the African Union pushed for a discussion on the resolution of the Ethiopian conflict in order to bring an end to the mass human rights violations and war crimes occurring in the Tigray and surrounding regions ¹⁷ . Lastly, Tigrayan forces announced their withdrawal from the Amhara and Afar regions in late 2021 ¹⁸ . While there are reports that suggest TPLF forces are still present in these regions ¹⁹ , any degree of withdrawal could signal the TPLF's willingness to discuss a potential resolution.		
Destabilizing factors	Ethiopia's military spending had reportedly reached approximately \$460 million in 2020 ²⁰ . Furthermore, while the total military personnel from 2011 to 2018 appears to have remained consistent at 138,000 active members ²¹ , the Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF) in 2022 has supposedly increased its active members to 150,000 ²² . However, these numbers do not account for the ENDF allied militias of the Eritrean Defence Forces and the Amhara Special Force, nor the opposing Tigray Defence Forces and allied Oromo Liberation Army that are involved in the conflict ²³ .		
Assessment	Overall, the flow of accurate information pertaining to the spending and number of military personnel involved appears to be limited and the Ethiopian Government has omitted statistics related to the ongoing conflict ²⁴ . This is perhaps to regain favorable standing within the international community and shield the human rights atrocities perpetrated by all warring parties. While the seeming willingness to hold peace talks amongst the parties appears to be a step in the right direction, military presence on the ground remains significant, both from the ENDF and the TPLF side, as well as from their allies.		

Population Heterogeneity		Risk level: High	Trend: Deteriorating
Stabilizing factors	The separation of church and state along with constitutional protections for religious freedom help mitigate interfaith conflicts within the country ²⁵ . Laws criminalizing the incitement of religious violence and discrimination against religious groups are also meant to reduce faith-based violence ²⁶ .		
Destabilizing factors	Ethiopia is home to over 80 distinct ethnic groups, with the Oromo, Amhara, Somali, and Tigray making up roughly two-thirds of the total population ²⁷ . Ethiopia also encompasses numerous religious denominations, including Ethiopian Orthodoxy (43.8%), Islam (31.3%), and Protestantism (22.8%) ²⁸ . The risk of ethnic rebellion in Ethiopia also remains high as numerous groups compete for power and resources within the federal system ²⁹ .		
Assessment	Ethiopia's system of ethnic federalism divides the country into nine semi-autonomous regions ruled by a dominant ethnic group. While this system has partly mitigated ethnic tensions since the mid-1990s, it has also fueled conflict, with regions claiming overreach or unfair treatment from the central government as is the case in Tigray ³⁰ . Discrimination against Muslims is also a persistent issue and both Christian and Muslim places of worship face increased attacks in the wake of the conflict ³¹ . With numerous ethnic and religious groups competing for power and resources, Ethiopia's highly heterogeneous population greatly increases the potential for conflict, as the central government is perceived as unwilling or incapable to protect the rights of minority groups, prompting further fractionalization along ethnic and religious lines.		

Economic Performance		Risk level: High	Trend: Deteriorating
Stabilizing factors	Prior to the conflict and COVID-19 pandemic, yearly GDP growth averaged 10% since 2006 ³² . This high level of economic development improved trends in poverty reduction ³³ . Ethiopia's strategic location along the Horn of Africa is also optimal for international trade ³⁴ .		
Destabilizing factors	Conflict onset and the pandemic drastically reduced Ethiopia's GDP growth rate from 8.4% in 2019 to 6.1% in 2020 ³⁵ . The official exchange rate has also depreciated by 8% and the annual inflation rate has spiked from 15.8% before the conflict to 34.2% in October 2021 ³⁶ . Ethiopia has lost nearly \$20 million in monthly export revenue since November 2020 ³⁷ . Spillovers from the conflict in Tigray have pushed investors away from the Ethiopian market, with foreign direct investment only accounting for 2.7% of GNP ³⁸ . Due to the worsening economic situation, the Ethiopian bank also froze all lending and money transfers ³⁹ .		
Assessment	Until 2020, Ethiopia was deemed one of Africa's fastest growing economies ⁴⁰ . Many of the economic indicators demonstrate that the decrease in economic performance can be attributed to the \$1 billion in government spending used to address the conflict and for pandemic relief ⁴¹ . As such, the future of the economy is largely dependent on the end of the pandemic, the speed of economic recovery, and the end of the conflict ⁴² . Should these situations be resolved, Ethiopia could build on its previous momentum to regain economic robustness. Until then, it will continue to grapple with an economic downturn.		

Human Development		Risk level: High	Trend: Deteriorating
Stabilizing factors	Access to improved water sources and sanitation has increased slightly in recent years, reaching 76.3% and 17.7% of the population in 2020 ⁴³ , respectively. The infant mortality rate has declined, reaching 36.5 deaths per 1,000 births in 2019, down from 43.1 in 2015. ⁴⁴ Life expectancy has remained relatively stable since 2015, with values ranging from 65 to 66.6 years. ⁴⁵		
Destabilizing factors	Low rates of secondary school enrolment ⁴⁶ are compounded by the damages inflicted to 7,000 schools ⁴⁷ and the periodic closing of schools for war mobilization. ⁴⁸ The humanitarian situation in Tigray is catastrophic—four million people are currently facing acute food insecurity ⁴⁹ as a result of the conflict.		
Assessment	With an inequality-adjusted HDI value of 0.348 ⁵⁰ , Ethiopia is grappling with low levels of development. While some slow gains occurred recently, the conflict is threatening the survival of millions in the north. The recent lift of a ban on humanitarian NGO operations in northern regions ⁵¹ warrants cautious optimism, as organizations grapple with decreased capacity, staff shortages ⁵² , and a \$284 million funding gap. ⁵³ Given the government's limited ability to rebuild key infrastructure, including schools and hospitals, and the growing level of displacement, levels of human development will likely remain low in the near future.		

Environmental Stress		Risk level: Moderate	Trend: Deteriorating
Stabilizing factors	Between 2000 and 2020, the rate of deforestation has remained stable, with a forest loss of 92,000 hectares per year primarily due to land conversion for agriculture, wood extraction, and livestock grazing. ⁵⁴ Conservation and reforestation policies were enacted to limit net forest loss. ⁵⁵		
Destabilizing factors	Ongoing climate change poses threats to the environment, as temperatures are predicted to increase by 1.8 C by 2030 and precipitation levels will become more variable. ⁵⁶ Arid regions are acutely vulnerable to droughts, which have become more frequent and severe since the 1970s. Other climatic events, including flash floods, also present		

	a significant threat. In addition, renewable internal freshwater resources are steadily declining, going from 1,512 cubic meters per capita in 2007 to 1,146 in 2017. ⁵⁷
Assessment	Environmental conditions appear to be deteriorating, as lowland regions grapple with prolonged drought, threatening the livelihoods of more than 6.8 million people. ⁵⁸ This drought is also threatening agricultural and pastoral systems, both of which are still recovering from the devastating 2019-2021 desert locust invasion. ⁵⁹ Coupled with deficient land tenure arrangements ⁶⁰ that lead to unequal access to productive land, increasing resource scarcity will put a strain on communities that rely on natural resources for subsistence, potentially leading to additional humanitarian emergencies ⁶¹ and heightened inter-communal tensions.

Governance and Political Instability		Risk level: Moderate	Trend: Stable
Stabilizing factors	Since 1993, the level of democracy has fluctuated from -3 to -1, pointing to a less autocratic regime ⁶² . Ahmed has remained in power for three years after a regime change in 2017. In 2019, he unified the ethnically heterogeneous EPRDF and several other opposition parties into his Prosperity Party to overcome ethnolinguistic disagreements, further include marginalized parties, and unify the country by emphasizing national identity over ethnic federalism ⁶³ . Corruption has been steadily improving since 2009 ⁶⁴ . The state of emergency that began in November 2021 was lifted in late January 2022 ⁶⁵ .		
Destabilizing factors	Restrictions on civil and political rights are consistently very repressive (i.e. 12 or 13/14) ⁶⁶ . Similarly, restrictions on press freedom have been consistently stringent since 1996 and the indicator continues to increase ⁶⁷ . The 2021 state of emergency resulted in mass detentions allegedly based on ethnicity and an increase in hate speech towards Tigrayans ⁶⁸ . Furthermore. The Ethiopian Media Authority has threatened to remove licenses for the BBC, Reuters, Associated Press, and CNN, claiming that they spread hate and undermine sovereignty ⁶⁹ . These realities may point towards potential genocide against Tigrayan civilians ⁷⁰ .		
Assessment	Despite Ethiopia's improving performance on governance and political indicators, especially compared to its historical performance, Ahmed's response to the conflict remains authoritarian in nature. The decisions to postpone the 2020 election, to hold the 2021 election during conflict, and to declare a national state of emergency have drawn a wedge between the government and the United Front of Ethiopian Federalist and Confederalist Forces (UFEFCF), sustaining ethnic divisions and a degree of political instability. However, the recent release of prisoners, including leaders of the TPLF and other opposition parties, and the founder of the Oromiya Media network, as well as the government's stated openness to dialogue may promote further reconciliatory action ⁷¹ .		

Demographic Stress		Risk level: Moderate	Trend: Stable
Stabilizing factors	Ethiopia's population is primarily rural, with only 22.2% of all Ethiopians living in cities ⁷² . However, due to population growth, Ethiopians are moving to urban settings for employment. While the urban population growth rate is slowly declining, the percentage of the population living in cities has increased by 4% over the last decade ⁷³ .		
Destabilizing factors	While the annual population growth rate in Ethiopia has steadily declined over the past decade, the country continues to have the 36 th fastest growing demographic in the world ⁷⁴ . The total population in Ethiopia has increased by over 25 million people in less than ten years ⁷⁵ . While the country's youth bulge has steadily shrunk over the past decade, with the percentage of the population under 15 years of age decreasing from 44.4% in 2011 to 39.9% in 2020, it remains modestly high when compared to other countries in the region ⁷⁶ .		
Assessment	While Ethiopia's youth bulge has been declining, the potential for employment disruptions during the conflict increases the risk of youth involvement in armed conflict. A rapidly rising population in a low-income country can also place significant strain on infrastructure and social programs—particularly during a protracted conflict when GDP growth is threatened and equitable resource allocation becomes more challenging ⁷⁷ . However, these risks are partially mitigated by Ethiopia's growing urban population. As Ethiopians move away from rural areas, there is a greater potential for improved living standards and reduced overall poverty rates in the coming years if employment opportunities keep pace with the changing demographic ⁷⁸ .		

International Linkages		Risk level: Low	Trend: Stable
Stabilizing factors	Positive Ethiopia-Eritrea cooperation stems from a 2018 bilateral peace agreement (preceded by war in 1998-2000 and conflict thereafter), shared goals for regional security and stability, and shared historical dissatisfaction with the TPLF ⁷⁹ .		
Destabilizing factors	Ethiopia views the US sanctions on the Eritrean military, individuals, and entities supporting the Ethiopian government and the exclusion of Ethiopia from the African Growth and Opportunity Act as betrayal, not as pressures to promote the likelihood of mediation ⁸⁰ . While Ethiopia has relations with many economic organizations and UN specialized agencies, humanitarian assistance convoys, resources, or supplies have struggled to enter Tigray since mid-October 2021 ^{81,82} .		

Assessment	The African Union and/or the A3+1 group of Kenya, Niger, Tunisia, and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines may be tapped as potential mediators given their regional authority and mutual interest to contain spillover effects of the conflict ⁸³ . The outcome of the conflict may either strengthen or weaken ties between Ethiopia and Eritrea as the victor could either champion or condemn Eritrean involvement according to the outcome ⁸⁴ . After meeting with Ahmed and TPLF leader Debretsion Gebremichael, former Nigerian president Olusegun Obasanjo noted that the differences are political and may be addressed through dialogue and political action ⁸⁵ . Permitting and safeguarding humanitarian intervention may enable Ahmed to demonstrate international goodwill and openness to peacebuilding by addressing previous harmful ethnic discriminatory action.
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STAKEHOLDER ANALYSIS

Primary Stakeholders

<p>Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF)</p> <p>Goals: maintain pre-2018 decentralized governance structure, promote self-autonomy in the Tigray region</p> <p>The TPLF was formed in 1975 and its ideals reflected a left-wing nationalist ideology representing the Tigrayans which account for approximately 5% of the Ethiopian population in the Northern part of Ethiopia⁸⁶. The TPLF eventually established a militia alliance, the EPRDF, which opposed the Soviet-backed Union regime in the 1990s⁸⁷. The TPLF was the dominant political force in Ethiopia from 1992 until the election of Prime Minister Ahmed in 2018⁸⁸. Since then, the TPLF has advocated for self-autonomy in each of Ethiopia’s cultural regions. Furthermore, The TPLF wants to end the blockade in the Tigray region to allow for the transport of food and medical supplies to the population in the region⁸⁹. Lastly, the TPLF wants to end the occupation of Western Tigray by the Amhara militia groups which are allies of the ENDF⁹⁰.</p>
<p>United Front of Ethiopian Federalist and Confederalist Forces</p> <p>Goals: dismantle the federal government, install a transitional authority</p> <p>The UFEFCF is a formal alliance between the TPLF, the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA), and six other Ethiopian rebel groups representing various ethnic factions across the country⁹¹. Since its formation in November 2021, the coalition has shared intelligence and coordinated numerous military offensives across Ethiopia with the aim of toppling Abiy Ahmed’s regime and installing a transitional government⁹². The coalition’s ultimate objective is the return to a confederal system of governance that emphasizes more regional autonomy while minimizing centralized federal authority⁹³.</p>
<p>Ethiopian Federal Government and Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF)</p> <p>Goals: remain in power, minimize political opposition</p> <p>Both Ahmed and the Prosperity Party (PP) seek to win and remain in power. While the PP have substantial differences between ethnic chapters, they are united through their opposition to the TPLF. Constituent parties that were previously marginalized from the EPRDF wish for the PP to remain in power so that these parties may contribute to the political life of Ethiopia. The state-owned media spread partisan narratives and the government-imposed connectivity restrictions for political means, such as supporting the ENDF while it withdrew from the Tigray region. The ENDF supports the Ahmed government in its fight against the TPLF and has been deployed in northern regions since the beginning of the conflict.</p>
<p>Eritrea</p> <p>Goals: defeat the TPLF, cement military and political power in the Horn of Africa</p> <p>In line with the Ethiopian government’s position, Eritrean Prime Minister Isaias Afwerky seeks to defeat the TPLF, primarily in retaliation for their victory in the 1998-2000 Ethiopia-Eritrea border war,⁹⁴ which led to a decades-old rivalry between Afwerky and TPLF leaders. While both Ahmed and Afwerky initially denied the presence of Eritrean troops in Tigray, Eritrea acknowledged its involvement in April 2021⁹⁵ and its troops are now blamed for carrying out atrocities in numerous Tigrayan villages. Involvement in the conflict has also allowed Ethiopia to demonstrate its military capabilities, a key priority for the highly militarized state.</p>

Secondary Stakeholders

<p>International Aid Organizations</p> <p>Goals: provide humanitarian assistance and emergency response</p> <p>Several high-profile international aid organizations have been involved in delivering aid across Tigray as local communities grapple with a humanitarian emergency resulting from the ongoing conflict. Active humanitarian actors include Médecins Sans Frontières⁹⁶ (MSF), the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), and United Nations convoys. They provide basic services such as food delivery, community clinics, mental health resources, and support for internally displaced persons. Although they provide vital support, aid organizations have faced significant barriers to delivery. In 2021, the government suspended permits for MSF and NRC operations after claiming they actively spread false information.⁹⁷ In July 2021, a government roadblock kept a convoy of 170 World Food Program trucks from reaching Tigray.⁹⁸</p>

Sudan

Goals: assert sovereignty over disputed territory

Since the start of the Tigray War, over 50,000 primarily Tigrayan refugees have flooded into Sudan causing a major humanitarian crisis along the border⁹⁹. The crisis has inflamed a decades-long border dispute between Sudan and Ethiopia in the fertile Al-Fashaga district where Ethiopian farmers have been evicted from the area by Sudanese forces¹⁰⁰. Following border clashes, Sudan has reclaimed the disputed territory while both sides have reported dozens of casualties¹⁰¹.

Somalia

Goals: undermine the federal system through regional cooperation

A long-time regional rival, the Somali and Ethiopian governments have drawn closer since Abiy Ahmed came to power in 2018. Along with Eritrea, the leaders of Somalia and Ethiopia share a common objective to weaken the federal systems in their countries in order to centralize and consolidate power¹⁰². Prior to the Tigray conflict, Ethiopian forces were deployed in Somalia to aid the federal government in Mogadishu by helping to undermine state authority in Jubaland¹⁰³. Somali troops have also been actively training in Eritrea with several reports indicating Somali military involvement in the Tigray region¹⁰⁴. Emerging evidence suggests that Somali soldiers have committed massacres and other atrocities against Tigrayan civilians while embedded with the Eritrean army¹⁰⁵.

African Union (AU)

Goals: improve regional stability, address deteriorating security situation

The African Union (AU) is a continental organization consisting of 55 member states that are situated within the geography of the African Continent¹⁰⁶. The AU's main objectives are to coordinate cooperation for development across the continent, promote the territorial integrity of Member States, and encourage international cooperation¹⁰⁷. The AU has called for regional peace initiatives to enter into a ceasefire agreement to prevent the deepening of the conflict in the Tigray region along with the potential expansion of the violence into surrounding areas and beyond Ethiopia's borders in neighbouring countries¹⁰⁸.

CONFLICT SCENARIOS

Worst Case

There is no willingness on either side to engage in meaningful peace talks and a ceasefire cannot be achieved. Ethnic tensions flare up again and the conflict continues, with both ENDF and TPLF forces engaging in active combat in Tigray and neighbouring regions. This results in added casualties, atrocities against civilians, destruction of infrastructure, and an increase in internally displaced people. This entrenches resentment towards Ahmed in northern regions and the stability of the current federal system is threatened as discontent mounts. The United States and other international actors impose additional sanctions on those involved in the conflict, including the Ethiopian government, further entrenching Ethiopia in its position, and decreasing its economic performance. The humanitarian crisis worsens, as communities grapple with the simultaneous impacts of conflict and extreme drought, while humanitarian actors are denied access to war-torn regions and refugee camps.

Most Likely

Following a push by the African Union and Ahmed's show of goodwill, ceasefire negotiations between the government and the TPLF begin. However, underlying grievances and mistrust stall the process and weaken the parties' willingness to uphold any resulting agreement. The frequency and intensity of armed clashes may decrease, but violence and human rights abuses remain a threat in Tigray and neighbouring regions as armed actors fail to fully withdraw and ethnic tensions persist. Abiy Ahmed's reluctance to include the TPLF, officially labeled as a terrorist organization, in his efforts towards building a "national dialogue" for reconciliation harms his legitimacy and reduces prospects for lasting, inclusive peace. Combined with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, uncertainty regarding the conflict's resolution narrows the scope for economic recovery. Low levels of human development persist as the government struggles to rebuild basic infrastructure damaged by the conflict and international aid organizations continue to face significant obstacles to delivery in conflict-affected regions. Unprecedented droughts persist, leaving local communities and refugees highly vulnerable to widespread famine.

Best Case

With the withdrawal of Tigray forces from surrounding regions along with increased pressure from the AU, NGOs, and other international partners to end hostilities, the Ethiopian government and TPLF agree to a ceasefire to address the humanitarian crisis and engage in further dialogue. Despite reports of sporadic clashes between the ENDF and other rebel groups in the UFEFCF coalition, the ceasefire remains intact, allowing supply lines to be opened and aid organizations to operate on the ground. With the cessation of hostilities and increased flow of aid to the Tigray region, the federal government begins prioritizing the gradual repatriation of refugees from Sudan, which in turn helps to ease regional tensions. As IDPs begin returning to their homes and with the end of the COVID-19 pandemic in sight, early economic indicators begin to show signs of improvement as the unemployment rate steadily falls. With drought levels slightly below predictions, returning farmers in Tigray are able to once again cultivate crops, significantly reducing the level of famine in the region. While ethnic tensions remain elevated, concessions on both sides along with the prospect of peace talks through AU mediation offer hope to disaffected groups that a just settlement within the federal system can eventually be reached.

ENDNOTES

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