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# Ethiopia's Ominous New War in Amhara

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**What's new?** Ethiopia's federal government is battling yet another revolt. This time, militants are engaged in hostilities with federal forces in Amhara, the country's second-most populous region. After tensions escalated all year, insurgents briefly seized control of major towns in August. They remain active in much of the countryside.

**Why did it happen?** Amhara militias fought alongside federal troops in the 2020-2022 Tigray war, but that alliance collapsed when the federal government and Tigrayan leaders reached a deal that ended the conflict. As Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed moved to rein in the Amhara militias, relations worsened. Other grievances abound.

**Why does it matter?** Wars in Ethiopia can take shocking tolls and cause immense civilian suffering. Abiy, who is from the Oromia region, has faced uprisings in all three of Ethiopia's most powerful regions – Tigray, Oromia and now Amhara. This tangle of crises is corroding inter-ethnic relations and posing threats to the country's stability.

**What should be done?** Abiy should reach out to Amhara's armed dissidents to negotiate an end to the violence. His government should follow up by pursuing talks among Ethiopia's competing regional factions to address interlocking disputes. African leaders, the U.S. and the European Union should encourage the government to pursue this much-needed dialogue.

## I. Overview

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Less than a year after war ended in Tigray, Ethiopia's northernmost region, another conflict has erupted in Amhara, which lies to the immediate south and is much more populous. The fighting in Amhara, while not as bloody as that in Tigray, is deadly serious. The insurgents are contesting federal control in much of the region, posing a challenge to Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's government and Ethiopia's stability. In August, they briefly captured major towns and, after federal troops beat them back, entrenched themselves in rural areas from which they can still raid urban centres. While the loosely networked militants do not currently threaten Addis Ababa, the federal capital, they command significant popular support. Abiy should heed calls from Amhara allies to pursue dialogue. He should also work to ease tensions among ethnic groups as a stepping stone toward national reconciliation. Though their influ-

ence is limited, African and Western capitals should encourage Abiy to pivot toward a more conciliatory approach, lest Ethiopia keep veering from crisis to crisis.

Tensions between Abiy and Amhara elites, who were instrumental in bringing him to power in 2018, have bubbled for years but heated up after the November 2022 deal to end the Tigray war. That conflict pitted federal and Amhara forces, as well as those from the Afar region and soldiers from neighbouring Eritrea, against those commanded by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). The TPLF, which runs the Tigray region, was until recently the most powerful political actor in the country. It was predominant in the ruling coalition in Addis Ababa between 1991 and 2018. All the parties viewed the war in existential terms. Hundreds of thousands died, one of the world's highest tolls in a decade.

The federal government's 2022 agreement with the TPLF succeeded in stopping the fighting but shattered Abiy's wartime coalition, alienating large numbers of Amhara and disappointing Eritrea, both of which had invested significant blood and treasure in the federal war effort but did not participate in the peace talks. Many Amhara felt betrayed. They accused Abiy of plotting to hand back to Tigray disputed lands that the Amhara region seized during the war from the TPLF, which had taken administrative control of the territory upon coming to power in the early 1990s. Discord between Abiy and Eritrean leaders, who had forged close ties with Amhara elements during the conflict, added to the unease. Eritrea, which fought a bitter border war with Ethiopia while the TPLF reigned in Addis Ababa, was irked that Abiy had yielded to external pressure to negotiate the peace deal at a time when the TPLF looked to be in full retreat.

The loss of the common TPLF enemy also brought to the fore acrimony between the Amhara and Oromo – Ethiopia's two largest ethnic groups, which together form the backbone of Abiy's ruling coalition. Oromia, a majority-Oromo region, lies south of Amhara, and political leaders from the two communities have long been rivals. Clashes along the boundary have grown more frequent since Abiy took office in 2018, and today many Amhara assert that Abiy (himself from Oromia) is allowing Oromo militants to massacre Amhara civilians in Oromia. Distrust soared when, in February, Amhara politicians said Abiy was siding with Oromo clerics who split off from Ethiopia's powerful Orthodox Church, a cherished institution among the Amhara and many other Ethiopians. As tensions increased, federal authorities increasingly resorted to blocking roads connecting Amhara with Addis Ababa.

Tensions kept rising. In April, many Amhara forces refused Abiy's order to disband the regional paramilitaries and took to the bush with their weapons to join Amhara militias known as Fano, which had not demobilised after joining the anti-TPLF fight. Major clashes then broke out across Amhara in early August, plunging the region into a state of war. After fighting spread to important cities, including the regional capital Bahir Dar, Gondar and Lalibela, which the rebels briefly took over, federal forces succeeded in pushing them out. But the various Fano militias – which lack a central command – regrouped in the countryside, bolstered by paramilitary defectors, and launched new attacks on towns. Even if federal forces can continue to repel these assaults, they will face a gruelling uphill struggle to uproot the insurgents, who have elite backing and strong community ties. At the time of writing, Addis Ababa has made no public effort to engage with the resistance leaders. Fighting continues in various parts of Amhara, ebbing and flowing in intensity, with no resolution in sight.

More broadly, the Amhara insurgency adds to pressures on Abiy as Ethiopia faces a deep economic crisis and violence in many parts of the country. With the Amhara conflict, Abiy has now faced major revolts – each with considerable elite and popular support – in all three of Ethiopia's most powerful regions, including both Tigray and Abiy's native Oromia, where an ethno-nationalist rebellion and counter-insurgency efforts have destroyed livelihoods and brought rampant lawlessness to Addis Ababa's doorstep. While the core of Abiy's Tigray peace deal has held up remarkably well, much remains unresolved there, too, including the dispute between Tigray and Amhara over western and southern territories in the former, known to Amhara as Welkait and Raya. The knot of intertwined grievances in Ethiopia will be difficult to disentangle.

Abiy's defenders view the prime minister as embroiled in an unavoidable battle with foes at home and abroad who oppose his vision to unify and modernise Africa's second-most populous country. They see Abiy, with his inclination to strengthen the federal government vis-à-vis the regions, as a bulwark against the centrifugal forces unleashed by the TPLF when it imposed an ethno-federation in the 1990s. Some in Abiy's camp privately acknowledge that he could have handled relations with the Amhara and others more carefully. But they say his opponents want to weaken Ethiopia with parochial pursuits and are thus dangerous to appease. Further, they say, Abiy is likely to regard his consolidation of power despite these challenges as proof that he should not back down.

The cost to Ethiopia of Abiy's approach to tackling his opponents, however, has been far too great. Conflict has led to hundreds of thousands of deaths, and many more displaced, in the tumult since he came to power. The economy is on life support. Ethiopia's previous reputation as an anchor of the Horn of Africa lies in shreds. Amhara, with around 30 million people, is in a precarious condition. Further, nearly all agree that Abiy's popularity has plummeted, in no small part because his stock has fallen among many previously supportive Amhara, even if the prime minister's hold on the state apparatus seems secure.

Although Abiy appears inclined to press ahead fighting the Amhara insurgents, a military approach alone is unlikely to work. Rather, he should take advantage of the power he has amassed to pursue peace with his opponents. While there is no straight-forward way to end the war, he should ask his Amhara allies to reach out to those who can speak on behalf of militants to explore pathways to a ceasefire.

Meanwhile, he should prepare a broader plan of national reconciliation. Given the predominance of the Oromo, Amhara and Tigrayans in Ethiopian politics, Abiy should seek to bring them all to the table with the agenda of resolving the feuds among factions from those regions. Such an approach is the only convincing road to the stability and economic recovery (debt relief is particularly pressing) that Abiy needs to carry out his governing and modernisation agenda, in addition to post-war reconstruction in Tigray, Oromia and Amhara.

Notwithstanding Abiy's disinclination to bend to outside pressure, international actors still have an important role to play. Horn and Gulf countries should resist the temptation to meddle in the conflict and instead call for a halt to fighting. The African Union (AU), which has its headquarters in Addis Ababa, and other African leaders, as well as officials from the U.S., European Union and United Arab Emirates, should offer quiet support for peace efforts in Amhara. They should also take every opportunity to urge Abiy to start conversations about national reconciliation among the

Amhara, Tigray and Oromia elite – including his adversaries. The AU, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (the regional bloc that includes the Horn) and Kenya should also work to ease tensions between Ethiopia and Eritrea. With the Tigray peace deal a year old, and conflict raging in neighbouring Sudan, the prospect of Ethiopia spiralling further into large-scale violence is chilling indeed. Now is the time for concerted efforts to lay the groundwork for peace and avert deeper conflict that neither the country nor the region can afford.

## II. Abiy and Amhara: A Rollercoaster Relationship

With its hundreds of years of imperial history, followed by seismic reinventions of national government in the late twentieth century, Ethiopia is no stranger to political turbulence.<sup>1</sup> The last emperor Haile Selassie I, who ruled over a quasi-feudal polity that fended off Italian invaders but was beset with internal contradictions, was overthrown in a 1974 popular uprising that was hijacked by a junta known as the Derg. The authoritarian Derg, in turn, led a full-throttle socialist revolution that destroyed the imperial system but spawned a variety of ethno-nationalist revolts, crippled the economy and produced famines. The Derg eventually fell in 1991 to the TPLF (then backed by Eritrean rebels who negotiated Eritrea's secession as an independent country). The TPLF was instrumental in constituting a new ethno-federation in 1995, leading a coalition of ethno-nationalist forces that proceeded to govern Ethiopia with an iron fist.

In some two decades of rule, the TPLF-dominated regime oversaw impressive economic gains, especially after 2010, but failed to forge a more stable or democratic polity. The TPLF faced two main camps of opposition. The first, concentrated among the Amhara and in Addis Ababa, criticised ethnic federalism, warning that it risked balkanising Ethiopia. Under this system, Ethiopia was reordered mostly into ethno-regions (some very large and others small, depending partly on the size of the ethnic group comprising the bulk of the population), including sprawling new regions called Amhara and Oromia, as well as a redrawn Tigray.<sup>2</sup> Amhara elites – who had been integral to the imperial system, establishing Amharic as Ethiopia's lingua franca and instituting Orthodox Christianity as the state religion – felt the TPLF vilified them as despots who had lorded it over other Ethiopians when the emperors reigned.<sup>3</sup> Many Amhara accused the TPLF of annexing Amhara land when it redrew Ethiopia's internal boundaries and seeking to dilute Amhara influence, such as by installing a Tigrayan patriarch of the Orthodox Church.

The second group of TPLF critics arose among the Oromo, Ethiopia's largest ethnic group, as well as minorities who had felt oppressed during imperial rule and under the Derg. They welcomed ethnic federalism in principle but objected to what it meant in

<sup>1</sup> Ethiopia stands apart on the African continent both because of its imperial past and because it is one of the few countries to have escaped lengthy European colonial rule.

<sup>2</sup> Crisis Group Africa Report N°153, *Ethiopia: Ethnic Federalism and Its Discontents*, 4 September 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. Ethiopia's imperial nobility was not ethnically monolithic, and many Tigrayans were also powerful.

practice. They said the TPLF devolved little real power, keeping a firm grip on the security apparatus, its coalition partners and key economic levers. The TPLF's authoritarian system also severely curtailed civil and political rights, stunting Ethiopia's democratic development.

Ethiopia's current round of turmoil kicked off nearly a decade ago, when these two camps put aside their stark differences and teamed up to oust the TPLF from its position of federal dominance. In 2014, two years after the death of Meles Zenawi, Ethiopia's (and the TPLF's) long-time leader, protests flared up in Oromia and spread to Amhara. The Amhara and Oromo elements of the ruling coalition then backed Abiy's rise to prime minister in 2018, in effect dethroning the TPLF and placing an Oromia native in power. Seizing the moment, Abiy criticised systemic state repression and pledged to democratise Ethiopia. The Tigray leadership, suspicious of Abiy and his ambitious agenda, began decamping to their regional capital Mekelle. Two years later, their quarrel with Abiy's new administration exploded in war. Tens of thousands of Amhara security personnel and militia members fought alongside Ethiopian troops and Eritrean soldiers to reassert federal authority in the defiant province.<sup>4</sup>

Yet Abiy's anti-TPLF alliance was shaky from the outset, given the Amhara and Oromo elites' clashing political visions as well as deteriorating relations between the two communities more generally. Many Amhara are leery of Oromo nationalists who demand that the government double down on ethno-national devolution. As their population is dispersed throughout Ethiopia, and is an ethnic minority in many locations, Amhara often say they would have the most to lose in that scenario. Many Amhara thus rallied behind Abiy's pan-Ethiopian rhetoric and sided with him in opposing Tigray's leaders, against whom, as noted, they also harboured longstanding political and territorial grievances. Now, however, they say Abiy is pushing Oromo interests, including by turning a blind eye to Oromo militants' attacks on Amhara and by failing to stand up to Oromo claims on Addis Ababa, where there is a sizeable Amhara population.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, Oromo nationalists tend to see Amhara actions as attempts to restore Amhara dominance under the guise of promoting national unity.

Over time, more and more Amhara have grown wary of Abiy. In their eyes, the first big sign of trouble came in 2019, before the war in Tigray: in June of that year, gunmen assassinated Amhara region president Ambachew Mekonnen and other officials

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<sup>4</sup> Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°171, *Ethiopia's Tigray War: A Deadly, Dangerous Stalemate*, 2 April 2021. The war involved atrocities by all sides. A UN human rights commission found that "Tigray-aligned fighters' presence in Amhara between July and December 2021 was also accompanied by violence and brutality, including rapes of girls as young as eleven and of women, in some cases in front of their children". The commission said it had verified 44 massacres of Tigrayans by Ethiopian and Eritrean troops while the region was under siege. "Report of the International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia", International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia, 18 September 2023.

<sup>5</sup> Addis Ababa is run by an administration answering to the federal government. Oromo nationalists believe either that Oromia should administer the city or that Oromia should reap much greater benefits from proximity to Ethiopia's commercial centre, as a clause in the constitution implies it should. Many Amhara and Addis Ababa residents resist what they see as increasing efforts by Oromo elites to control the city's politics and economy. According to the last census, carried out in 2007, Amhara constitute 47 per cent of Addis Ababa's population and about 27 per cent of the national population. Many Amhara dispute the validity of this and previous censuses, which they say were manipulated to undercount them.

in the regional capital, Bahir Dar, after which federal forces killed Amhara's security chief, Asaminew Tsige.<sup>6</sup> The federal government accused Asaminew of having ordered Ambachew's assassination in a regional coup attempt. Meanwhile, some of Abiy's Amhara opponents alleged that he had orchestrated the entire affair to rein in an Amhara region that was becoming increasingly assertive, due not least to Asaminew's efforts. But whatever tensions were starting to emerge, they were largely sublimated to the anti-TPLF alliance that federal and Amhara leaders formed when war broke out in Tigray in November 2020.

Relations between Amhara elites and Abiy's federal government got stormier after the November 2022 peace deal, which federal officials negotiated with the TPLF to end the two-year war. Many Amhara felt their interests were neglected at the talks despite all they had contributed to the war effort.<sup>7</sup> Some suspected that the federal government aimed to return the two disputed territories referenced above to Tigray as part of the pact.<sup>8</sup> Tigray officials have claimed the same to defend the deal from internal criticism. In reality, the federal administration may be keen to maintain control of the territories itself. Addis Ababa says it plans to have federal forces take over security and law enforcement duties, bring back the (overwhelmingly Tigrayan) displaced population, select locals as interim administrators and eventually hold referendums on the territories' future.<sup>9</sup> While Tigray welcomes the pledge on displaced people, neither region backs referendums (which could include the option to stay separate from either region).<sup>10</sup> More generally, many Amhara viewed the deal with great suspicion.

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<sup>6</sup> Crisis Group Statement, "Restoring Calm in Ethiopia after High-profile Assassinations", 25 June 2019.

<sup>7</sup> While the Amhara region was not formally party to the dialogue, the deputy president of the Amhara region, Getachew Jember, was a member of the federal government's negotiating team. Some Amhara do not credit the regional administration with legitimacy and thus felt unrepresented at the talks. For instance, some major Amhara interest groups proposed including Amhara opposition politicians in the talks.

<sup>8</sup> As noted, Welkait and Raya are the names Amhara give to the areas they claim. These areas have both been part of Tigray during the federal era as censuses assessed that they had a plurality of Tigrigna speakers. Amhara assert that the TPLF changed the region's demographic balance by killing and uprooting thousands of Amhara when it seized power in 1991. See Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°156, *Bridging the Divide in Ethiopia's North*, 12 June 2020.

<sup>9</sup> "Statement of the Government of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia regarding the first anniversary of the signing of the 'Agreement for Lasting Peace through a Permanent Cessation of Hostilities'", Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia Government Communication Service, 6 November 2023. See tweet by @FdreService, 8:58am, 6 November 2023. The plan had been outlined by Defence Minister Abraham Belay, a Tigrayan TPLF opponent and member of Abiy's ruling party, in earlier comments. "Efforts to fully return IDPs to Western and Southern Tigray, install new administrations underway – Defense minister", *Addis Standard*, 22 August 2023.

<sup>10</sup> The proposed referendums may not decide that the contested territories go to either Amhara or Tigray. Residents may be given the third option of becoming a new region or administrative zone, which could keep the territories under federal control. Abiy's government has already carved out three new regions elsewhere in the country following referendums. The federal plan indicates that de facto autonomous territories will be created in the disputed areas in the interim period before referendums are held.

The activities of the tens of thousands of irregular fighters known as Fano after the Tigray war also heightened tensions between Amhara and the federal government, as well as with Oromia.<sup>11</sup> Some have clashed with Oromo militants near the Amhara-Oromo boundary. Others, along with regular Amhara security forces, received training from and allegedly maintained connections with Eritrea.<sup>12</sup> These ties frustrate federal officials, who view them as foreign meddling. Their distrust of Eritrea, which has never fully withdrawn from Ethiopian territory after the Tigray war, has grown (see Section III below).

Amhara-federal relations soured further in February, when a group of Oromo clergy broke away from the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and declared their own rival synod, in part so that they could conduct services in their own language instead of Amharic.<sup>13</sup> Amhara critics accused Abiy of backing the dissenting Oromo faction as part of a scheme to divide the Church (to them, a treasured institution and a cornerstone of Ethiopian heritage) and the country. The Church's main branch called on the faithful to wear black in silent protest, yielding striking shows of defiance in Addis Ababa (which has a large Amhara population) and major Amhara cities. Hinting at fear of greater unrest, federal authorities responded by restricting the internet in Amhara, a measure they did not lift until late July, and closing two of the five main roads between the region and the capital. Abiy eventually brokered a deal between the two groups of priests, but the tense showdown made many worry that a catastrophic Amhara-Oromo civil war was a distinct possibility.<sup>14</sup>

That conflict has so far mercifully been avoided, but discontent in Amhara has continued to curdle. In what proved to be a critical juncture in April, tens of thousands of Amhara special forces rejected a federal attempt to dissolve and merge them into other units, fleeing into the bush to team up with the Fano militants.<sup>15</sup> The federal decree disbanding regional paramilitaries applied nationwide, but many Amhara believed that it was designed to defang them and leave them exposed in the face of what they view as threats emanating from Oromia, Tigray and, increasingly, the government in Addis Ababa. Some Amhara further argue that the edict was not enforced upon their enemies in Tigray, who have yet to fully demobilise or disarm after the war,

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<sup>11</sup> Fano is an Amharic term that means "the people who have joined the struggle". It originally came to prominence in reference to Ethiopians who formed the armed resistance to Italy's occupation from 1936 to 1941. Of late, it has been used to describe anti-government protesters, insurgents and militia members from Amhara region.

<sup>12</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Ethiopian intelligence official, June 2023; Ethiopian federal official, July 2023; regional and Western officials, 2023. Some Amhara acknowledge the partnership with Eritrea, justifying it on tactical grounds. Crisis Group interviews, leading Amhara opposition politician, July 2023; Amhara analyst, October 2023.

<sup>13</sup> Hone Mandefro, "How years of tension in Amhara boiled to the surface", *African Arguments*, 4 August 2023.

<sup>14</sup> The dispute did turn violent, for instance, when security forces in Oromia tried to remove the splinter faction of clerics from Church properties. But these episodes were brief. See, for example, "Addis police says 19 officers injured in confrontation with group gathered in Orthodox church in Oromia special zone; urges refrain from 'actions to disturb peace'", *Addis Standard*, 7 February 2023.

<sup>15</sup> A senior ruling-party official said 60 per cent of the special forces defected. Crisis Group interview, August 2023. The paramilitary force is thought to have been about 30,000 strong before the defections.

or in Oromia, whose regional government they say has received special treatment under Abiy.<sup>16</sup>

### III. The Seeds of a Prolonged Conflict

Over the course of the spring of 2023, Amhara anger at Abiy's government boiled over into armed confrontation. Federal and regional forces faced off against an array of dissenters, led by Fano militias but also including units defecting from the Amhara special forces and emergent rebel groups. Early on, this group mostly mounted street protests and roadblocks, but militants among them also committed violent acts. Gunmen assassinated several local officials, including Girma Yeshitila, head of the Amhara branch of the ruling party, on 27 April.<sup>17</sup> Perhaps the most serious incident took place in late May, when five days of heavy fighting between a group led by Amhara opposition politician Eskinder Nega and government forces in the Debre Elias district of East Gojjam Zone left many combatants dead and dozens injured.<sup>18</sup> The federal government said it had killed 200 militants and accused Eskinder of trying to topple it.<sup>19</sup>

The Amhara rebellion intensified in the summer months, leading to major clashes in many of the region's biggest cities, including the capital. On 26 July, Fano fighters ambushed a federal army convoy in the West Denbiya district of Central Gondar Zone, killing more than a dozen, including several soldiers.<sup>20</sup> Insurgents then stormed major cities, including Lalibela, a UNESCO world heritage site known for its centuries-old rock-hewn churches.<sup>21</sup> Clashes also occurred in Bahir Dar (the regional capital) and near historic Gondar (the seat of Ethiopian emperors from the 17th to the 19th century), as well as around Debre Markos in East Gojjam Zone, close to Debre Berhan in North Shewa Zone and in South Wollo Zone.

<sup>16</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Amhara opposition politicians and activists, 2023. One senior opposition figure told Crisis Group that the Amhara rebellion would not have gathered strength if the federal government had not acted to weaken Amhara's security forces. Crisis Group telephone interview, October 2023. While Tigray's leaders handed over some heavy weapons to the federal military, the bulk of their forces have not demobilised. (Some suggest that Abiy shares an interest in letting Tigrayan forces stay mobilised, since they are potential allies against both Amhara and Eritrea.) The federal military chief of staff has said all regional paramilitaries, including in Oromia, have been integrated into other security forces. "Army chief proclaims end of regional special forces 'as of today'", *Addis Standard*, 15 April 2023. In Oromia, some paramilitaries are still fighting insurgents, alongside federal troops (probably under federal command) and in uniform, but there is no longer an Oromia Special Force structure or commander.

<sup>17</sup> "Joint Task Force says taking 'decisive measures' against 'extremist forces' in Amhara region in wake of official's killing", *Addis Standard*, 28 April 2023.

<sup>18</sup> "Fighting at local monastery in Amhara region leaves multiple casualties, authorities confirm military action", *Addis Standard*, 1 June 2023.

<sup>19</sup> "Forces tried to overthrow the government in East Gojjam", Fana Broadcasting Corporation, 3 June 2023.

<sup>20</sup> "Amhara region local council admits casualties after confrontations during senior army members' visit to Gorgora resort", *Addis Standard*, 27 July 2023.

<sup>21</sup> "Multiple injuries as Ethiopian military, militia clash in Amhara: Sources", Al Jazeera, 2 August 2023.

The insurgent attacks prompted authorities to step up their response. On 3 August, Yilkal Kefale, then Amhara's president, requested federal assistance. The regional government's cooperation with the federal government against the insurgency highlights a key difference between this crisis and the one in Tigray, when the regional government itself led the revolt.<sup>22</sup> On 8 August, federal forces began to restore order, quickly pushing the militias from Amhara's largest cities, causing civilian casualties in the process.<sup>23</sup>

Addis Ababa also declared a six-month state of emergency on 4 August, focused on Amhara, as it appeared to dig in for a longer fight. The state of emergency affords federal representatives sweeping powers to abridge individual rights, which they exercise from a command post that answers directly to the prime minister.<sup>24</sup> Abiy tapped Temesgen Tiruneh, Ethiopia's intelligence chief and a former Amhara president, to lead the command post in Amhara.<sup>25</sup> Yilkal resigned on 25 August – possibly forced out by Abiy – and Amhara lawmakers replaced him with Araga Kebede, a former mid-ranking regional official.<sup>26</sup> Abiy faces growing opposition from the Amhara elite that once supported him, though he retains some allies there, and mainstream figures are still serving in key government positions.<sup>27</sup>

Battles for the towns of Debre Tabor and Debre Markos resumed in the month's final week, with federal troops maintaining control. Their success may have demonstrated that the Amhara movement cannot hold populous urban areas at present, but the rebels also showed signs of resilience, in that they were able to fight for weeks and impose serious costs on the government. As of 29 August, the fighting had killed almost 200 people, UN human rights officials said.<sup>28</sup> The UN added that the authorities had arrested more than 1,000 people during the state of emergency. The detainees include prominent figures such as Christian Tadelles, an opposition member of parliament who is one of Abiy's more outspoken detractors, and Yohannes Buayalew, a senior Amhara official who has criticised government policies.

The various groups of militants that are fighting on seem to be mostly uncoordinated, for now. One leader has claimed that local bands are united under an umbrella

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<sup>22</sup> Many members of the Amhara resistance consider Amhara officials serving at the federal level, the Amhara branch of the ruling party and top regional officials to be subservient to federal authorities and thus unrepresentative of Amhara views.

<sup>23</sup> "Ethiopia says Amhara cities 'freed' after days of fighting", Agence France Presse, 10 August 2023.

<sup>24</sup> Under the state of emergency, the federal authorities can detain suspects and search property without a court order. They can also restrict movement in groups, ban public gatherings and impose curfews. The Ethiopian government has declared several states of emergency in the last decade. At times, especially since Abiy took power in 2018, it has set up command posts without a formal declaration.

<sup>25</sup> "Intelligence chief Temesgen Tiruneh to lead command post overseeing SoE in Amhara region, Ministry of Justice reveals further details", *Addis Standard*, 5 August 2023.

<sup>26</sup> "Leader of Ethiopia's Amhara region resigns", Reuters, 25 August 2023. "Amhara state council appoints Arega Kebede after regional president resigns", *Addis Standard*, 25 August 2023.

<sup>27</sup> Former allies who have turned against Abiy after the Tigray peace accord and the new Amhara conflict include Neamin Zeleke and Andargachew Tsige, previously exiled opponents of the TPLF-dominated government who formed strong ties with Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki and staged armed incursions from bases in Eritrea while the TPLF was in power.

<sup>28</sup> "Ethiopia: Deteriorating human rights situation", press release, UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 29 August 2023.

called the Amhara Fano Popular Movement.<sup>29</sup> But the movement appears to be fragmented, lacking a single political leadership and with militants operating under local command structures. This fragmentation does not necessarily indicate dissension or weakness, however, as they are all battling for the same cause. It is hard to assess the number of fighters in a region of around 35 million people, many of whom own firearms, but locals believe there is no shortage of disgruntled Amhara willing to take up arms.<sup>30</sup>

With Fano and other groups scattered across Amhara, the rebellion is unpredictable, posing major difficulties for any peace efforts. Fighters continue to engage in guerrilla actions such as ambushing army convoys and assassinating local officials.<sup>31</sup> In Eastern Amhara, the Fano is led by a high-profile commander, Mihretu Wodajo. Another major Fano leader is Zemene Kassie, who operates in Gojjam Zone. There are other less influential senior militia figures in North Shewa and Gondar. In May, Eskinder formed a new armed group, the Amhara Popular Front (distinct from the Amhara Fano Popular Movement mentioned above), partly to create a more cohesive resistance movement with the goal of toppling Abiy.<sup>32</sup>

The rebels' hit-and-run tactics already suggest that they will present a challenge for the authorities going forward; whether they will coalesce into something more formidable is uncertain. What does seem clear is that popular support for the rebels is increasing.<sup>33</sup> Many see the militias as needed for communal defence, as Oromo militants ambush and kidnap Amhara near Addis Ababa, some of whom are merchants headed to the capital on business. Amhara traders worry that these attacks have made travel unsafe amid a deepening economic crisis.<sup>34</sup>

It also appears plain that many Amhara will see their lives get worse as the conflict drags on, which in turn may stiffen popular backing for the revolt.<sup>35</sup> Transport to

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<sup>29</sup> This group is led by Colonel Fantahun Mohaba, a defector from the Amhara special forces. A U.S.-based Amhara activist said some Amhara perceive the group to be aligned with Amhara opposition leaders who used to be part of the exiled Ginbot 7 movement, which is also linked to President Isaias. Crisis Group telephone interview, 20 September 2023.

<sup>30</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Amhara resistance supporters, October 2023. See also "Ethiopia shaken by a new and growing rebellion in Amhara", *The New Humanitarian*, 15 August 2023.

<sup>31</sup> An Amhara activist based in Addis Ababa said there are 21 different Fano groups in Amhara. Crisis Group telephone interview, 21 September 2023.

<sup>32</sup> Its diaspora organising committee (which is headed by former Derg official) says the struggle's goal is to topple Abiy and establish a new system. While some Amhara activists claim that Eskinder's organisation is influential, others allege that despite successful fundraising and promotion it has only a small number of people at its disposal. Crisis Group telephone interviews, September 2023.

<sup>33</sup> While the restrictions on transport and communication in Amhara make assessing public opinion there difficult, there have been several mass protests in the region over the last few years, demonstrating that Amhara grievances are widespread. In addition, several media outlets and former Abiy supporters are openly backing the Fano, again indicating the loss of faith in his government at both the federal and regional levels. See, for example, "'Death sentence': Massacres fuel protests, resentment in Ethiopia", *Al Jazeera*, 6 July 2022; and "Ethiopia shaken by a new and growing rebellion in Amhara", *op. cit.*

<sup>34</sup> "Farmers in Amhara region face setback as fertiliser distribution disruptions compound amidst reignited conflict", *Addis Standard*, 31 August 2023.

<sup>35</sup> Amnesty International said the government had denied detainees in Addis Ababa access to legal advice. It also said it had received unconfirmed reports of mass killings in the cities of Finote Selam,

and from the region has been severely restricted since early August, including for humanitarian workers, exacerbating economic woes and disrupting essential public and private services. The government has restricted mobile phone services outside major towns and cut off internet access since 3 August (after restoring it in July). Many schools remain shuttered while banks face a high risk of robbery due to the anarchic situation. Rights organisations, including a UN commission and an Ethiopian state-funded one, accuse the authorities of mass killings of Amhara, including in several airstrikes, and arbitrary detentions.<sup>36</sup> The government has stated it is holding suspects in makeshift detention centres, such as schools, in five locations.<sup>37</sup> Amhara activists say there have been cholera outbreaks at these sites, which they call “concentration camps”.<sup>38</sup>

#### IV. Wider Risks

While a major Amhara rebellion would pose a significant challenge to Abiy in and of itself, this new crisis comes on the heels of the Tigray war and on top of the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) insurgency in Oromia, plus rising tensions with Eritrea.<sup>39</sup> It occurs even as the prime minister continues to consolidate power after shunting aside domestic rivals. Given the competing but interlinked grievances in its three most powerful regions, Ethiopia faces grave risks to its overall stability. The federal government is now battling insurgents in both Amhara and Oromia even as wounds remain raw in Tigray, where war is barely in the rear-view mirror and fighting could

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Bahir Dar and Shewa Robit. “Ethiopia: Authorities must give investigators and journalists access to Amhara region under state of emergency”, press release, Amnesty International, 18 August 2023.

<sup>36</sup> The Amhara Association of America, an advocacy group, said federal troops summarily executed seven civilians on 30 August in the Ashifa area near Gish Abay town and at least six more on 21 September in Dangila town in Amhara’s Awi Zone. “AAA Confirms Extrajudicial Killing of 7 Amhara Civilians by Abiy Regime Forces on August 30, 2023”, Amhara Association of America, 25 September 2023. A UN human rights commission said it had “received multiple credible reports of violations, including mass arbitrary detention of Amhara civilians”. “Report of the International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia”, op. cit. On 18 September, the state-funded Ethiopian Human Rights Commission accused federal security forces of extrajudicial killings and arbitrary detentions, mostly of Amhara and Orthodox Christians. With regard to airstrikes, the conflict mapping organisation ACLED said the federal air force had carried out four drone strikes in the first week of September, killing at least 50 people. “Ethiopian Peace Observatory Weekly: 2-8 September 2023”, ACLED, 13 September 2023.

<sup>37</sup> The number of prisoners is contested. The latest government figure is 3,200, while activists claims that tens of thousands have been detained. “Lawyers and witnesses say Ethiopian police have arrested hundreds during state of emergency”, Associated Press, 14 August 2023. “The status of the human rights of the suspects in custody”, Deutsche Welle, 3 September 2016. See also “Actions taken in Amhara region to safeguard constitutional order”, Facebook post by Ethiopian Government Communications Services, 2 November 2023.

<sup>38</sup> “Cholera outbreak in concentration camps where thousands of ethnic Amhara detained”, Borkena, 13 September 2023.

<sup>39</sup> “As violence subsides in Tigray, Ethiopia’s Oromia conflict flares”, *The New Humanitarian*, 12 January 2023.

reignite.<sup>40</sup> A spike in tensions with Eritrea is now compounding the peril, with some officials in the broader region fearing a border war.

Perhaps the most inflamed issues, and risk of greater combustion, lie between the Amhara and Oromo elites. Well before this latest Amhara war, clashes between Fano elements and Oromo militants had been escalating in areas near the Amhara-Oromia boundary. Many Amhara accuse the federal government and Abiy-aligned regional Oromia authorities of complicity in attacks on Amhara civilians.<sup>41</sup> Rights groups have recorded a series of massacres of Amhara in Oromia in recent years, many attributed to the OLA.<sup>42</sup> Amhara figures claim that the regional government is supporting the OLA in such depredations, although no concrete evidence of complicity has emerged. Regardless of whether they think Abiy himself endorses the OLA's misdeeds, many Amhara have lost faith that the Ethiopian state under Abiy will protect them.

Meanwhile, Abiy's relations with Oromia's various opposition factions are hardly in a good place. Even though he has returned to relying heavily on his Oromo base, having lost most Amhara support, he has far from a free hand in the region. His rough-and-tumble methods of sidelining rival Oromo politicians since his rise to power have helped make Oromia a hotbed of grievance, where many still see the Ethiopian state as a historical foe suppressing Oromo self-rule. Abiy's government and the allied Oromo regional administration have also been unable to quell the OLA rebellion, though the two sides have made progress in peace talks (with those close to the discussions expressing increasing optimism about chances of a deal).<sup>43</sup> Thus, Abiy faces significant political opposition in Oromia, especially from Oromo nationalists, even as many Amhara accuse the prime minister of acting in Oromo interests.

With deepening polarisation between the two communities, elites have less and less wiggle room to maintain a moderate stance and still command legitimacy with their constituents. The resulting dynamic is perilous. Unless it is arrested, a burgeoning power struggle between politicians from Ethiopia's two largest regions threatens even wider turmoil and even nationwide civil war. In the most dangerous scenarios, the ruling party, the military and other federal institutions could split along Amhara-Oromo lines, with collusion between senior Oromo and Amhara officials and their respective ethno-nationalist militias. Thankfully, there is no sign yet of such cataclysmic fissures in government organs.

Meanwhile, navigating Amhara-Tigray tensions poses similar challenges for Abiy, not least because any further conflict risks drawing in Eritrea as well, particularly in

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<sup>40</sup> It is possible that Tigray's authorities could return to war with Eritrea or with Amhara over Western Tigray/Welkait, although a rerun of the federal-Tigray conflict is a more distant possibility. In a report, the UN's International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia went as far to say that the "conflict in Tigray has not ended, with Eritrean troops and Amhara militias engaging in ongoing violations". "Report of the International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia", op. cit.

<sup>41</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Amhara politicians and activists, 2023.

<sup>42</sup> "Ethiopia: Authorities Must Investigate Massacre of Ethnic Amhara in Tole", Amnesty International, 21 July 2022.

<sup>43</sup> Government-OLA talks in Dar es Salaam, the Tanzanian capital, restarted in late October. The Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, a Geneva-based mediation organisation, helped start the negotiation track earlier this year. Officials from the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), Kenya, Norway and the U.S. are all involved. Sources close to the negotiations say there are signs of a power-sharing compromise taking shape. Crisis Group interviews, October and November 2023. Higher-level talks involving senior leaders from both sides started in November.

view of the wider brewing tensions between the two countries.<sup>44</sup> As part of its efforts to weaken the TPLF, Eritrea trained Amhara militants to tighten their hold on the disputed Western Tigray/Welkait, a fertile area bordering both Eritrea and war-torn Sudan.<sup>45</sup> As noted, many in Amhara see hints in the 2022 peace deal that the federal government will side with Tigray in the quarrel over the disputed territory, though in reality Addis Ababa has kept its options open and very well may prefer de facto federal control.<sup>46</sup> For now, the federal military continues to hold the area, with Amhara forces also present, but that arrangement could collapse if the fighting in Amhara continues and Abiy's tentative alliance with the TPLF deepens.<sup>47</sup> On 22 August, Abiy's defence minister, Abraham Belay, one of two Tigrayans in his cabinet, heightened Amhara fears when he said the federal government would dismantle the "illegal" Amhara administrations there.<sup>48</sup>

The federal government has now confirmed that plan, adding that federal forces will handle security until referendums are held. Eritrea's links to Amhara elements could give Abiy incentive to speed up federal efforts to take over Western Tigray/Welkait for good, so as to cut off Amhara from Eritrea (just as the federal coalition grabbed the area from Tigray in 2020 to sever its links to Sudan).<sup>49</sup> This move would further inflame the Amhara and stoke their fears (however unfounded these may be) that Addis Ababa will give the disputed area back to Tigray.<sup>50</sup>

Should the federal plan for Western Tigray/Welkait progress, it would not only create even more fury in Amhara but could also help tip Abiy and Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki into outright hostility. Already, their détente is fraying, especially since Abiy's claim (publicised in October) that landlocked Ethiopia has a right to sea "access".<sup>51</sup> (Before Eritrea's independence, Ethiopia had a Red Sea coast.) Abiy named the Eritrean ports of Assab and Massawa as places where Ethiopia could exercise this right, suggesting that Eritrea could get equity stakes in Ethiopian state-owned entities (including the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam) in exchange for Ethiopia becoming the owner or privileged user of a port.<sup>52</sup> Eritrea called these comments

<sup>44</sup> Crisis Group Briefing, *Bridging the Divide in Ethiopia's North*, op. cit.

<sup>45</sup> For more on TPLF-Eritrea enmity, "Eritrea's Long Bitter Feud with Ethiopia's Tigray", The Horn (podcast), Crisis Group, 9 November 2022.

<sup>46</sup> The agreement said the federal government and the TPLF "commit to resolving issues of contested areas in accordance with the [Ethiopian constitution]". "Cessation of Hostilities Agreement between the Government of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia and the Tigray Peoples' Liberation Front (TPLF)", IGAD, 2 November 2022.

<sup>47</sup> Ashenafi Endale, "Ethiopia wavers between chaos and compromise in Amhara region", *The Reporter*, 5 August 2023.

<sup>48</sup> "Efforts to fully return IDPs to Western and Southern Tigray, install new administrations underway", op. cit.

<sup>49</sup> Sudan appeared to offer some support to the TPLF during the war, including hosting training camps for Tigrayan fighters.

<sup>50</sup> See footnote 9.

<sup>51</sup> "Fana Broadcasting Corporation: ከጥብቃ ውሃ አስከ ባሕር ውሃ [From a single drop to sea water]", video, YouTube, 13 October 2023. Ethiopia's former province Eritrea became an independent country in 1993.

<sup>52</sup> The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam is a huge hydropower project on the Blue Nile river. Its construction has been opposed by downstream Egypt and Sudan, which fear it will curtail their water supply. For background, see Crisis Group Africa Report N°271, *Bridging the Gap in the Nile Waters Dispute*, 20 March 2019.

“excessive”, while Abiy himself has since tried to reassure Ethiopia’s neighbours that he was not hinting at an invasion (though he has previously said continuation of the status quo would lead to conflict).<sup>53</sup> Diplomats privately warn that Ethiopian and Eritrean troops have mobilised along the border. They fear escalation or miscalculation could lead to war.<sup>54</sup>

Given the parties’ perceptions that the Amhara-Tigray and Amhara-Oromo disputes are zero-sum in nature, it is unclear how Abiy can make overtures to any of the three major regional factions without inflaming grievances within another. For instance, if the federal government were to endorse either the Amhara or Tigrayan position on the disputed lands, it would enrage the other party and risk further conflict there. Likewise, any major concession to Amhara on its main points of contention with Oromia, such as its tussle with Oromo nationalists over their efforts to gain greater control of Addis Ababa, could fuel the OLA insurgency or other Oromo opposition.<sup>55</sup> Given these considerations, Abiy needs both a near- and a long-term strategy for dealing with the challenges he faces. The short-term objective – de-escalation to prevent another sustained brutal civil war in Amhara – is necessary but not sufficient if the country is going to find its footing. It looks like a national project of reconciliation, especially among Ethiopia’s three most powerful ethnic groups, will eventually be required to restabilise the country.

## V. Addressing the Crisis in Amhara and Beyond

As noted, Abiy should respond to the Amhara war on two levels. First, he needs a near-term strategy to staunch the fighting. He should seek to de-escalate by signalling willingness to tackle grievances that have driven the uprising. He should ask his Amhara allies among the political establishment to bring credible interlocutors to the table who can represent Amhara rebel interests. Secondly, Abiy needs a long-term strategy to address the overlapping challenges presented by current and past unrest in Amhara, Oromia and Tigray as these both drive Amhara discontent and pose broader risks to Ethiopia’s stability. African and international actors, including the African Union, Horn leaders, the U.S. and the EU, should stress the imperative of dialogue to all sides and offer support for peace efforts. They should also offer to facilitate broader reconciliation, especially between Amhara and Oromo elites and between Amhara and Tigrayan leaders, given the frightening centrifugal forces now unleashed.

### A. *A Peaceful Path out of the Amhara Impasse*

One of the primary challenges to finding a path out of the Amhara crisis may be in persuading Addis Ababa that military force alone cannot succeed, especially as that tack in Tigray eventually led to favourable peace terms. More generally, Abiy’s

<sup>53</sup> Tweet by Eritrean Ministry of information, @shabait, 12:12pm, 16 October 2023. On Abiy’s reassurances, see, for example, Dawit Endeshaw and Giulia Paravicini, “Ethiopia PM Abiy seeks to quell neighbours’ concerns over invasion”, Reuters, 26 October 2023.

<sup>54</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Addis Ababa, Nairobi and by telephone, October 2023. The location of other interviews has been withheld.

<sup>55</sup> For details of the Addis Ababa dispute, see footnote 5.

actions to date indicate that he will seek to first quash revolts militarily; that is the approach he is taking in Amhara. Even though a federal military response is understandable, if only to restore law and order, the scale of popular support for the Amhara militias and the federal government's inability to reimpose its writ in the countryside thus far suggest that it could be setting itself up for failure. Indeed, absent a strategy for de-escalation, the military response could well exacerbate the situation in Amhara and Ethiopia as a whole, given the risks outlined above.

Some officials have already sent welcome signals that they are aware of the problems with a military-only response. For example, two days before the state of emergency declaration, Abiy's long-serving deputy, Demeke Mekonnen, an Amhara, said the government should use peaceful means to resolve the crisis in Amhara. In a Facebook post, he said a conciliatory government approach should take account of what he called "legitimate Amhara demands", a possible reference to Amhara concerns about massacres in Oromia and the fate of the disputed territories.<sup>56</sup> Likewise, Gedu Andargachew, Abiy's former foreign minister and national security adviser as well as an ex-Amhara president, said the ruling party should not make the same mistake in Amhara that it made in Tigray, namely trying to resolve a political problem through force. Dialogue with Amhara's dissidents is required, he added.<sup>57</sup>

What would a conciliatory approach mean in practice? With federal troops having mostly restored security and lawful administration in Amhara's urban areas, Addis Ababa should balance its military response with efforts to address the concerns articulated by the likes of Demeke and Gedu, while not undercutting itself with inflammatory rhetoric. Through Abiy's Amhara allies, it should reach out to Amhara rebel commanders and those who can speak on their behalf to open back channels for exploring de-escalation and a peaceful path out of the impasse. This task will not be easy. As noted, the diffuse Amhara rebel movement does not yet have unified command or a clear political leadership. Moreover, many Amhara hold dismal opinions of Amhara ruling-party figures, who may therefore struggle to act as a bridge.<sup>58</sup> Still, it is an approach worth trying.

As for whether Addis Ababa will see it the same way, Abiy may well believe that his victory over the TPLF vindicates his inclination to muscle through such disputes. It might, however, be argued that Addis Ababa's talks with the TPLF in the run-up to the 2022 peace deal, as well as the engagement with the OLA in 2023, are precedents for coming to the table with Amhara rebel leaders. Abiy's interlocutors should encourage him to see it that way.

At the same time, those with influence should encourage the dissidents to lay the groundwork for future negotiations, such as by forming a committee that includes representatives of the armed groups, even if there is no sign that either side is keen to

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<sup>56</sup> "Security problems in different areas of Amhara", Facebook post by Demeke Mekonnen Hassen, 2 August 2023.

<sup>57</sup> "High-profile gov't official calls for an immediate withdrawal of defense forces from Amhara region", Borkena, 14 August 2023.

<sup>58</sup> The obvious candidates are Abiy's deputy Demeke, federal intelligence head Temesgen and Gedu, the former national security adviser. Gedu has fallen out of favour with Abiy, however, and his allies are unlikely to be well received by Amhara's armed actors or their political representatives. A former senior Ethiopian diplomat cast doubt on whether any senior Amhara figure could still command the respect of both Abiy and the Amhara rebels. Crisis Group telephone interview, 22 September 2023.

pursue talks yet. They should also nudge the armed groups toward dialogue by stressing that the Amhara could find themselves the odd party out should Abiy succeed in forging workable pacts in Tigray and Oromia.

### B. *A Broader Effort*

As noted, some of the drivers of Amhara discontent are related to disputes with elements in Tigray and Oromia. Given the risks to Ethiopia's overall stability that such feuds pose, Abiy's government should pursue reconciliation that can begin to dampen the terrifying levels of ethnic polarisation in the country. Such reconciliation could (and should) serve as a stepping stone toward the broader dialogue that many have long argued Ethiopia needs to wrestle with its cascading crises, even if that looks unlikely in the current circumstances and out of character for Abiy.

Specifically, Abiy should turn his attention to stopping the feuds among the Amhara, Oromo and Tigrayan elites that lie behind Ethiopia's recent tumult. True, he may be loath to take this step, given that he and his supporters see his administration as a rock of moderation amid a swirl of parochial agendas that he should squash rather than appease. He may also be reluctant to ease tensions among potential rivals, preferring to keep them at odds with one another.<sup>59</sup> Still, Abiy needs to get Addis Ababa and Ethiopia's three most powerful regions out of the morass of disagreements that have opened among them.

One approach, albeit with its own steep challenges, would rely on sequencing. Abiy could focus first on wrapping up peace talks with the OLA in Oromia and then pivot to negotiating an end to the war in Amhara (which, as discussed above, he should begin laying the groundwork for right away). The OLA pact, which would likely be centred around regional power sharing, could serve as a model for the Amhara one.<sup>60</sup> If, in this scenario, Abiy did manage to conclude both wars, and the peace in Tigray held, the prime minister could facilitate or encourage negotiations among the three regional administrations to ease broader tensions and restabilise the Ethiopian polity.

But this sequenced approach could only go so far and accomplish so much, given how many of the underlying issues between the three groups are federal in nature and go beyond simple boundary disputes. Therefore, it looks clear that more structured discussions among Amhara, Tigray and Oromo elites (or between the Amhara and Oromo and between the Amhara and Tigray) are warranted parallel to or in conjunction with peace efforts in those regions. Abiy could start by trying to reconcile the Amhara and Oromo elites within the ruling party, even if doing so can only yield so much given their respective legitimacy issues. Others should also work to ease such ethnic tensions through concerted quiet dialogue.

However the parties go about it, the hope would be that easing the animosity among elites from the three powerful communities could pull Ethiopia out of its worrying spiral. Even more ambitiously, such reconciliation could also pave the way for the sincere effort at broader national dialogue that Ethiopia clearly needs to finally settle the longstanding disputes over the country's constitution, structure and future.

<sup>59</sup> In a 2022 speech, Abiy blamed the country's woes on what he cast as backward groups that do not want to see "the continuity of Ethiopia". "Ethiopian PM infuriates Ethiopians with his 'Amhara Shane' remark", Borkena, 25 December 2022.

<sup>60</sup> See footnote 43.

While none of these ideas looks likely at present, those with influence should continue to push Abiy in the direction of wider talks given that the country's fissures cannot be healed by force alone and, if they keep growing, could tear the country apart.<sup>61</sup> More generally, these actors should try to convince Abiy that a more conciliatory, consensual approach will be necessary to alleviate Ethiopia's economic plight – which, if it continues to deepen, may make the other problems worse by driving more unemployed youth into the various ethno-nationalist camps. Without broader peace and greater stability, Abiy will likely struggle to achieve the economic recovery and ambitious modernisation he envisions. He may stay in charge in Addis Ababa, but the federation could look increasingly fragmented and anarchic, discouraging foreign grants, loans and investments.

As ever, international actors have an important but sensitive role to play in Ethiopia – both taking into account their interests in arresting instability that threatens the broader region and remaining mindful of Addis Ababa's resistance to unwanted foreign interference.<sup>62</sup> Though they are understandably preoccupied with Sudan's war, African Union member states, the U.S., the EU and allied actors should make renewed efforts to foster a wider, more firmly anchored peace in Ethiopia. Outside powers, including in the Gulf, should support such multilateral efforts and desist from meddling or sending more arms into the country.

Meanwhile, the various international Horn envoys could coordinate to lay the groundwork for the type of assertive diplomacy that helped catalyse the critical quiet first meetings between Tigray's wartime leaders and Abiy's officials in 2022 – identifying key players and facilitating talks in neutral locations. The AU Commission and PSC, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and AU member states such as South Africa and Kenya, which helped broker the federal-Tigray talks, should also quietly encourage Addis Ababa to enter negotiations, which they should be on standby to facilitate.

In addition, Abiy's Red Sea ambitions combined with the Amhara conflict raise the risks of further deterioration in ties between Ethiopia and Eritrea – which are already on thin ice given that, as noted, Asmara has not fully withdrawn its troops from Ethiopia's territory and reportedly maintains links with key Amhara elements. Eritrea seems especially keen that Amhara keep administering Western Tigray/Welkait. While it is doubtful that either Addis Ababa or Asmara wants outright hostilities, the risk of miscalculation or an escalatory spiral remains too high. The AU, IGAD, Algeria (which helped broker an accord two decades ago to end the last Ethiopia-Eritrea border war), Kenya, Gulf powers and every other actor with channels to both capitals should discreetly nudge the parties toward back-channel talks to prevent a disastrous flare-up.

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<sup>61</sup> Although a national dialogue is now formally under way, it has little momentum or opposition participation and done nothing so far to resolve Ethiopia's chronic disputes.

<sup>62</sup> This resistance is compounded by deep grievance that, as Ethiopian officials see it, Western powers failed to deliver promised economic and financial carrots for ending the war in Tigray. Crisis Group interviews, 2022-2023.

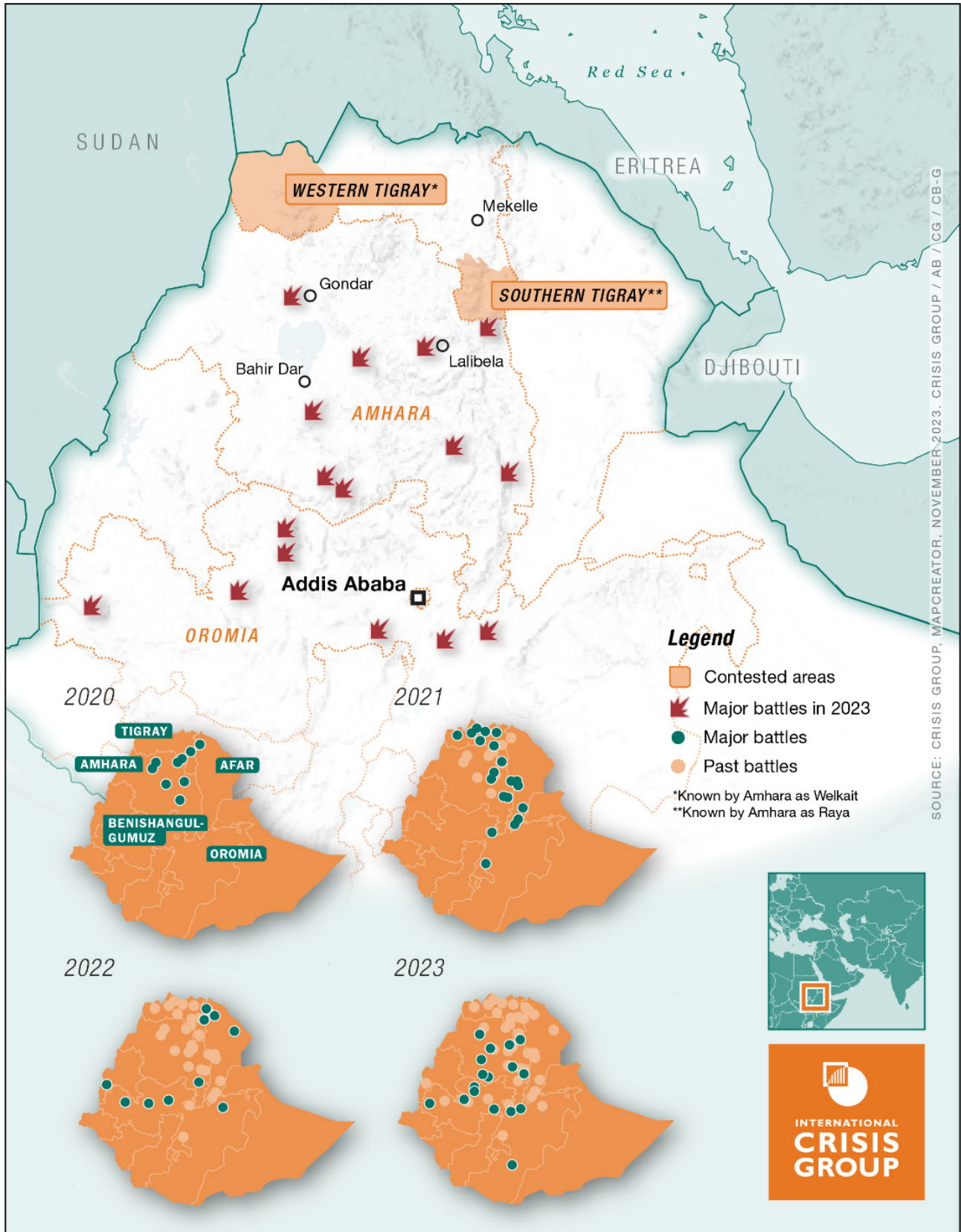
## **VI. Conclusion**

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Ethiopia is yet again at a historical crossroads. After a brutal war in Tigray that left hundreds of thousands dead and battered the federal government's international standing, Ethiopia is sliding into another conflict as many of Abiy's key wartime allies among the Amhara revolt against his rule. Tensions between Amhara and factions in the neighbouring Oromia region, which faces its own rebellion, add to the challenge. With encouragement from outside actors, the federal government should reach out to offer discussions aimed at addressing the Amhara grievances. The political and military leaders of Amhara's resistance should take them up on the offer of engagement. More broadly, both Addis Ababa and outside actors that engage with it should turn their gaze toward the future. Drawing lessons from the recent violence, they should encourage the difficult discussions among Ethiopia's three most powerful regions – Tigray, Amhara and Oromia – which must find a way to coexist if Ethiopia is to peacefully resolve its complex political, security and economic challenges.

**Nairobi/Brussels, 16 November 2023**

Appendix A: Cascading Crises in Ethiopia





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