

## **2021 Conflict Dimensions in Ethiopia**

Ethiopia's conflict between the federal government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) — acting as the administration of the Tigray region — has dominated the headlines of international outlets since clashes began in early November. Four weeks of intense fighting resulted in what appears to be a decisive victory for the federal government, and troops claim to be squarely in control of all major cities in the region. Now nearly two months after the conflict “officially” ended, in the context of a dire humanitarian situation and a potential costly occupation, questions are now being asked by international and national actors alike about conflict patterns more broadly in Ethiopia, and how secure the state is going into 2021.

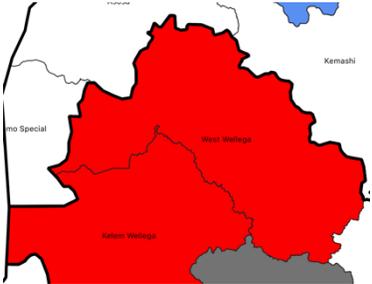
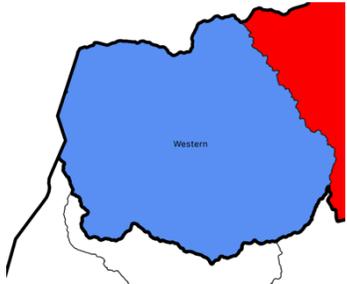
As Abiy's administration moves to replace the political structure in the Tigray region, the Prime Minister will also be looking to tackle a series of threats that pose major challenges to his rule throughout the country. Roughly 32% of the zones in the country are experiencing some kind of significant political violence — details of which are discussed throughout this report. Worryingly, there is every indication that the federal forces are overextended in the Tigray region, and have been forced to rely on armed groups outside of the military structure in order to properly combat the TPLF. This has mostly concerned ethnically exclusive regional state special forces (known as “Liyu”), which are now being sent on combative missions to areas outside of their own home region ([Africa News, 30 December 2020](#)). This is the most dangerous phenomenon occurring in Ethiopia today, as regional militias and their agendas are not necessarily tied to the survival of the Abiy regime. More specifically, the agendas of regional militias are often aligned to different factions within their home region, and the relative dominance of their regional administration and group in border areas.

Violence patterns in the coming year will revolve around how the Abiy regime and allies will use force at various scales to consolidate his authority; the authority concessions he will need to make to secure the state; and the costs of these violent practices. This process has given more power to some, including Amhara political elites, and reinforced that others will not be accommodated in the regime, such as Oromo moderate political elites.

ACLED's research team has identified and categorized areas and forms of potential political violence. Each is based on the form and scale of the local political threat, and its impact on national stability, and overall can illustrate which types of threats may result in specific state and regional responses. Each threat is associated with direct violence conditions and outcomes, including variable levels of civilian killing, displacement, disruptions to economic and political development, and authority shifts.

The objective of this analysis is to create a risk map of Ethiopia that may correspond to how the state understands its extensive current deployment, and the potential likely violence that may characterize high risk regions. The assumptions in this analysis are that the Ethiopian state remains largely in control of the regions and conflicts occurring within its borders, but crucially, it is being spread quite thin in some areas that require federal responses. These vulnerabilities are, in turn, generating new opportunities for violent actors — internally and externally — to challenge the state in order to extract concessions.



	Federal Plus Violence	Sub National Authority Violence	Local Contained Violence
<b>Color and Example</b>			
<b>Characteristics</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introduction of federal troops</li> <li>• Engagement with local violent agents</li> <li>• High intensity and activity count</li> <li>• Presence of an anti-government group</li> <li>• Area is politically contentious at national level</li> <li>• High diffusion or escalation potential</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Concerns contested, historical internal border regions</li> <li>• Ethnic group authority and population contests expressed over territorial control</li> <li>• Focus on the borders of the Amhara region and some singular Oromo dominated areas outside of Oromia</li> <li>• Primarily fought by regional and communal militias</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Areas where the typical violence rate has increased in recent periods</li> <li>• Violence is largely contained within the locality, despite often resulting in high event totals and fatalities</li> <li>• High police presence, arrests and regional security services</li> <li>• Areas is of potential political contestation in the coming year</li> </ul>
<b>Zone counts</b>	10 Zones	3 Zones	16 Zones
<b>Expectations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Command post/Occupation type response by federal forces, who lead security enforcement</li> <li>• Possible removal from election contention</li> <li>• Very high government led violence and arrest rates</li> <li>• Costly, longer term establishment for federal forces, with low regime alignment and support</li> <li>• Possible future areas of reactive insurgency</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Amhara troops (including Liyu police, local, communal and youth (Fano) militias) will lead efforts to occupy border regions</li> <li>• Extremely high rates of violence against civilians</li> <li>• Intermittent clashes with regional contenders</li> <li>• Limited role of federal troops, although the increased violence will affect federal politics during election and increase perception that Dr Abiy is solely beholden to Amhara nationalists, and vulnerable to Amhara internal politics</li> <li>• A likely loss of territory for Tigray region and BSG region</li> <li>• Continued ongoing border violence with Sudan</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continued high violence, mainly against civilians</li> <li>• High number of locally internally displaced</li> <li>• Intermittent involvement of security forces above the local police, but not effective or involved enough to mitigate the conflict</li> <li>• Continued attention to the limitations of the 'administrative/territorial conflict' nexus generated by ethnic federalism</li> </ul>

According to this categorization, we identify the level and type of current violence, the underlying government strategy and scale of response, and the likelihood of conflict growth throughout the country.

Whereas violence has been widespread in the country since 2014, the costly areas are only those that the Abiy Regime deem important to the national security narrative. In many other spaces, local forces and local administrations are tasked with dealing with the threats.

## **Costly**

The deployment of federal forces into a/many regions of Ethiopia is a costly intervention requiring planning, equipment, and personnel. The political act represents a failure at the federal level to politically coerce or broker power-share agreements with local elite actors and authorities. Further, it requires the re-structuring of political networks that may lead to weaker local authorities who are more reliant on continued federal support in dealing with local affairs. Thus, while each military intervention strengthens the government's control over localities, it does so in a centripetal way that may be unsustainable given the multiplicity of high-cost areas throughout the state. Essentially, every operation both strengthens and weakens the government's hand; by gaining the control of territory and overtaking the political structure, concessions are made to those agents who will hold the areas for the government and in line with central directives. These decisions, and the overall costs of securing territory, are long term transactions by the government that trades some risks (e.g. direct violence) for others (e.g. the rise of local subnational autocrats and associated violence).

A large federal intervention operation began in Tigray in November 2020 when Federal forces sought to remove the TPLF as the regional government of the northern Tigray region, and to arrest its upper echelon for engaging in treasonous acts against the state of Ethiopia. Federal forces were supplemented with militias from around the country, mainly from the Amhara region ([Africa News, 30 December 2020](#)). The dominance of the Amhara militias in securing ground taken by the combined federal and regional forces has allowed for a growing list of demands from, and concessions to, Amhara regional militias and political elites who continue to now occupy western areas of Tigray region.

There are other areas that are currently functioning outside of the government's reach and ability to control. In addition to continuing operations in the Tigray region, federal intervention into West Wellega is to continue in coming months, after a prolonged occupation. Lower levels of federal intervention could also be expected in areas of Oromia region where electoral violence is to be expected – for example in East and West Haraghe.

As of late 2020, the regime has conducted some operations against militants in West Oromia ([VOA, 17 December 2020](#)), but these areas continue to be characterized by poor local and administrative control over the violence, and emerging violent agents. In response, select areas have been placed under 'emergency command' to formalize federal intervention. The success of the Tigray conflict has emboldened the administration to conduct quick and aggressive federal intervention. This represents a noted change in Abiy's security posture, which was more reluctant at the beginning of his tenure.

## **Tigray Region**

Clashes began in Tigray region on 4 November after months of tension between the central government and the ruling party in Tigray region, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF),

culminating in a preemptive strike by the TPLF on the Ethiopian army's northern command. Directly following the attack, federal troops, bolstered by regional militias from the Amhara region and Eritrean soldiers from the north, advanced swiftly into TPLF-held territory and took control of Mekelle by the end of the month. ([Africa News, 27 November 2020](#)). On 28 November 2020, an official statement by the armed forces announced that they claimed complete control over the region's capital city, Mekelle ([Abiy Ahmed Ali, Twitter, 28 November 2020](#)).

While current conflict trends suggest a clear victory for the Ethiopian government amidst a poor performance by the TPLF, complicated governance issues, a lack of independent media coverage, and the presence of armed groups with competing agendas portend a difficult security situation moving into the next year. Despite having preparation, experience, and weaponry, the TPLF have proved to be significantly weaker than the federal government throughout the conflict. Yet, there remains a more durable threat. Ethnic nationalism is on the rise throughout the country, and there are many armed Tigrayan militias operating in the region who will undoubtedly resist "occupation" by federal troops or Amhara militiamen. According to informants from Ethiopian intelligence units, Tigrayan ethnic militias began building their ranks in 2018, a "clear reaction to the fiery rhetoric and militarization agenda pushed by some elites in the Amhara Regional State."<sup>1</sup> As indicated in Mai Cadra, Samri (ethnic Tigrayan) youth militias are capable of serious atrocities, and governing structures appear to hold little control over them ([Washington Post, 25 November 2020](#)). More than a sustained insurgency led by the TPLF, the Ethiopian government is likely to face a long and costly occupation where it competes with militias for control of localities. Imposed administrators in the Tigray region will likely not possess the political leverage and communal control that their TPLF predecessors did, meaning that they will require significant federal assistance in maintaining stability.

The federal intervention into the Tigray region has already been extremely costly. Although initial reports seemed to suggest that the federal government security troops had led an effective campaign against the TPLF, recent details emerging from the region reveal extensive involvement by Eritrean forces ([Reuters, 8 December 2020](#)). Ethnic militias from the Amhara and Afar regions were also key to the operation, posing a dangerous precedent for ethnic violence against local Tigrayans. Furthermore, governance in the region has already been a struggle. Lawlessness, rapes and looting are being reported in Mekelle – indicating that governance and security even in locations squarely under control of the federal army is not effective. ([VOA, 21 January 2021](#)).

Governance is, and will continue to be, a major issue. Some local administrators may be simply recycled and asked to continue their duties as members of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's Prosperity Party, while others may be dismissed. At higher levels, the removal of TPLF officials from their offices began during the first week of the conflict with the stripping of TPLF leaders' immunity and the appointment of a new regional president ([VOA News, 13 November 2020](#)).

Amidst economic disruption and change in political leadership, local officials in the Tigray region have estimated that some 4.5 million people are in need of emergency food assistance ([Addis Standard, 25 January 2021](#)).

### **West and Kelem Welegga**

Splinter factions of the Oromo Liberation Front are actively operating across Oromia, engaging in violent operations against local government representatives and federal troops. These splinter factions (Shane) militants have been accused of using tactics of violence against civilians – being

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<sup>1</sup> Yusef, Semir. *Drivers of Ethnic Conflict in Contemporary Ethiopia*. Institute for Security Studies, 9 December 2019.

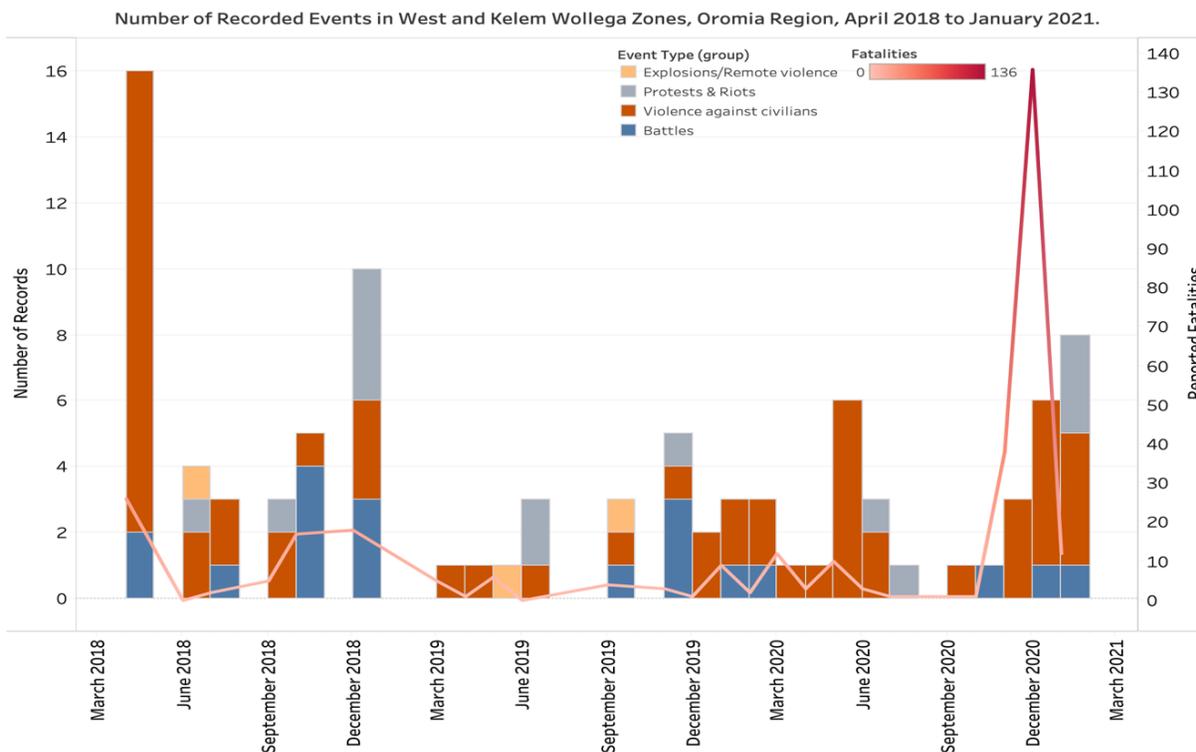
associated with massacres, killings, and intimidation. Although Shane operatives have been reported throughout many parts of Oromia, the insurgent group has most successfully challenged government rule in West and Kelem Wellega zones through the killing of local administrators, the holding of territory, and conducting hit-and-run attacks against police and military forces ([Addis Standard, 20 March 2020](#)).

While information in this region is extremely difficult to access, reports of continued police violence, displacement, and insecurity suggest that the issue has continued far beyond the capacity of a local law enforcement operation ([EBC, 27 January 2021](#), [BBC News, 16 January 2021](#), [Kello Media, 27 January 2021](#)). Increased military efforts will be required to gain full control over the area and root out the OLF/Shane. As the Tigray crisis comes to a close, areas of West Oromia where the OLF/Shane are a high priority for federal military engagement.

Federal interventions into West and Kelem Wellega include risks to reputation and an increase in violent behavior throughout Oromia. A recent investigation by the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission found that “two boys aged 11 and 12 and a girl, aged 14, had been detained since mid-December 2020 on suspicion of being members of OLF Shane” ([Ethiopian Human Rights Commission, 25 January 2021](#)).

OLF/Shane militias are embedded into local populations, making high civilian casualties likely during operations, and seriously exacerbated by the presence of a larger, more heavily armed fighting force. Abiy’s popularity among the Oromo is already low, and operations against the OLA are risky in that civilian casualties, destroyed housing, or non-professional behavior by troops could radicalize those who support opposition but do not currently side with the OLF/Shane movement.

Government-associated media has recently (January 2021) been publishing daily reports of anti-OLF protests taking place in West Wellega, with interviewed residents denouncing OLF/Shane for their tendencies of violence against Oromos and non-Oromos alike. This coverage represents an effort to re-frame the key political issues in the area and turn public opinion against the militants. Months of insecurity and killing of civilians by both the government and OLF/Shane affiliates has resulted in a fatigued population. Repositioning the key political issue in West Wellega from issues related to ethnic federalism to a reduction of violence appears to be a key government strategy in the run-up to local elections ([EBC, 15 January 2021](#)).



### East/West Hararghe

The East/West Hararghe area of Oromia region has been characterized by inconsistent levels of federal control over the past two years. Recent incidents of short, intense bursts of violence have revealed that local youth groups contain the capacity to challenge government control during key moments of instability, creating a dynamic that is costly for the federal government. Outside of major cities, grazing land conflicts have been transformed into prolonged violence between the Oromo and Somali ethnic groups that reside in the area. These conflicts, while not a new phenomenon, have been exacerbated by competitive ethnic rhetoric and perceived weakness of the federal government.

In late October 2019, rumored attempts to harm a popular Oromo activist sparked days of violent protests across East and West Hararghe. A second incident occurred with the killing of Hachalu Hundessa in the summer of 2020 in Addis Ababa; which prompted waves of youth to mobilize for protests and riots. During both of these incidents, rioters blocked roads, destroyed infrastructure, and attacked ethnic minorities throughout Oromia state, including Hararghe. The violent riots and peaceful protests were organized by Oromo youth organizations called Qeerroo. According to local sources in East Hararghe, during both of these incidents federal police were delayed in their abilities to mobilize and respond to crisis, and in some cases local Qeerroo militias were mobilized to provide security and even make demands over resource allotment and utilization.

There is another dangerous element to the East/West Haraghe areas that put its risk of armed conflict higher than other areas of Oromia region. The zone's close proximity to the Somali border and long-standing border disputes have led to inter-communal violence that have been inflamed by ethno-nationalistic rhetoric. Clashes have continually resurfaced as ethno-federalism continues to undermine the authority of the central state ([Ethiopia Insight, 30 December 2020](#)). This has led to a heavily armed population and highly mobilized ethnically exclusive militias – many espousing OLF Shane ideology of Oromo independence. Armed clashes between ethnic militias have occurred as

recently as the first week of January ([OMN, 1 January 2021](#)), despite high-profile peace conferences between the two region's leaders ([EBC, 27 January 2021](#)).

In the context of rising ethno-nationalistic ideals within the country, formerly tribal conflicts over resources have gotten bigger in scale and widened to potentially include members of the ethnic group even far away from the actual conflict locations. Examples of this are the ethnic clashes that occurred on the borders of East and West Hararghe and Somali region's Fafan district, where ethnic clashes culminated in 'pogroms' of ethnic minorities in Jijigga city on 4 August 2018<sup>2</sup> following months of clashes along the Somali/Oromo border area ([Africa News, 30 January 2020](#)).

Bringing East/West Hararghe under more consistent government control will require federal engagement with the Qeerroo organization and addressing the prevalence of armed militias operating outside of government control throughout the state. Arrests, violence, and other repressive measures risk radicalizing moderate Oromo youth and creating flashpoints of additional violence.

### **Metekel**

Over the past year, Metekel has been one of the most violent locations in the state. Since 2018, ACLED has recorded over 1,000 fatalities (likely a conservative estimate) of mostly ethnic Amhara who have been attacked by unidentified armed groups as they attempt to engage in agricultural work.

Official sources have continually refused to definitively identify the perpetrators of the violence, although they are almost certainly made up of Gumz ethnic militias who may or may not be associated with more officially organized ethno-nationalistic movements. Locals say that the OLF is behind the killing, which the latter denies. Some OLF leaders believe splinter groups that once formed the front could be responsible.<sup>3</sup>

The conflict in Metekel has deep roots. Ethnic Amhara from areas of Welo were resettled into the fertile land in Benishangul/Gumz region during a severe drought in 1984-1985, leading to immediate land conflicts. This issue was exacerbated by the ethnic-based politics of the EPDRF, which came to power in 1991 and placed sovereignty into the Gumz community, effectively excluding ethnic Amhara (and other "settlers") of political representation and exposing them to attacks by ethnic-based militias and a lack of proper government protection ([Foreign policy, 6 January 2021](#)).

Although the federal government has thus far conducted some operations against armed groups in the region, little has changed. In the face of increasing fatalities as a result of attacks on Amhara civilians, Amhara authorities have begun to demand that additional actions are taken. Abere Adamu, Commissioner of the Amhara Regional State Police Commission, recently requested that his force be responsible for solving the crisis in Benishangul regional state, or that the federal government intervene ([Amhara Mass Media Agency, 7 December 2020](#)).

The Amhara security sector's ability to influence the federal government has increased since Amhara militias played a critical role during the conflict against the TPLF in Tigray region. This comes to the alarm of administrators of the Benishangul/Gumz region, who reacted to Amhara

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<sup>2</sup> T. Hagmann & M. M. Abdi. 2020. 'Inter-ethnic violence in Ethiopia's Somali Regional State, 2017-2018', Conflict Research Programme, London: LSE

<sup>3</sup> Yusef, Semir. *Drivers of Ethnic Conflict in Contemporary Ethiopia*. Institute for Security Studies, 9 December 2019.

requests for intervention by labeling them as “repeated threats of intimidation”, stating that these threats were tantamount to a declaration of war ([Metekel Zone Communication Bureau](#)).

Yet, Amhara entrance into the Benishangul/Gumuz conflict seems almost unavoidable, and some credible rumors suggest they are already present. Amhara civilians are being killed on a near-daily basis, and the federal government seems unable or unwilling to do anything substantial to stop the violence. The entrance of Amhara militias into Benishangul may trigger intensified conflict on a more formal scale between local militias and armed groups from the Amhara region, catching hundreds of thousands of people in between. The vicinity of the Oromo region and presence of the OLF/Shane operatives in the jungle areas in Benishangul could likewise pose a more dangerous sub-conflict between the Oromo hardline nationalists and Amhara Liyu forces, which would have devastating consequences reaching far beyond the Metekel zone. Federal troops created a command post within Benishangul in late January 2021.

## Sub-national Authority Shifts

The war with the TPLF was fought by both troops from the federal forces and a host of regional militias from across the country. The neighboring Amhara region supplied significant man-power for the operation, and have since been associated with securing territory in the Tigray region, and administrating subregions for the transition/occupation. These patterns are pronounced specifically in Western Tigray.

The Amhara political elites have sought to extract significant concessions for their actions in Tigray and for their ongoing support for Abiy, if less so the Prosperity Party. In particular, the Amhara police and National Movement of the Amhara (NAMA) have engaged in an overt campaign to both overtake territory that they believe was illegally taken from their region by the TPLF when they were in power. Further, Amhara political elites have advocated for controlling areas where Amhara people live outside of the region, and are being persecuted. Areas that Amhara actors have vested interest in due to ethnic Amhara residence include (in part or in whole) include: Wolkait, Tegede, Telemt, and Raya of the current Tigray regional state, and Metekel zone of Benishangul Gumz regional state. ([National Movement of the Amhara, Facebook 11 November 2020](#)).

Claims to 'rightful' possession (i.e. Amhara Lebensraum) and 'Amhara Genocide' are political dynamite for Abiy, who has been abandoned by the Oromo political elites and whose current coalition depends heavily on keeping Amhara support. This suggests that violence specifically by Amhara militias and its Liyu police will be met with silence at the federal level, and eventually accepted as the new 'lay of the land', and that in particular areas where the federal government does not deem as national important, and where it has no interest in contesting Amhara domination, it will support their efforts.

### Wolkait, Tegede, Telemt and Raya

As part of the efforts against the TPLF, Amhara communal militias and more formal Liyu Police (special forces) occupied swaths of Western Tigray, a zone inhabited by Amharic-speaking populations that have historical ties to areas now included in the Amhara region. Initial reports indicate that Amhara administrators and security forces are being utilized as interim directors in areas of Western Tigray ([France24, 23 November 2020](#)). Their presence could exacerbate already fraught ethnic tensions. Following the massacre of 500 Amhara civilians in Mai Cadra by an ethnic Tigray militia, the Amhara in control of these localities likely see themselves as protectors of their co-ethnic populations rather than actors playing a role in the federal strategy and narrative of re-integration ([EHRC, 24 November 2020](#)).

Any request to return control of these areas to Tigray or federal government control will be met with resistance. Security in these areas is now being provided by Amhara militias, and administrative duties have been handed over to Amhara transitional authorities; sparking many fears of ethnic-based retaliation attacks against ethnic Tigray who live in the area.<sup>4</sup> Displacement trends as published by humanitarian actors support these claims; in Western Tigray, now administered by Amhara forces, reports indicate widespread violence, looting, and forced displacement of ethnic Tigrayns out of the zone, either to Sudan or to North-Western Tigray Zone.<sup>5</sup>

A general restriction of journalist access to all areas of Tigray make many details of the Amhara occupation of previously TPLF-administered lands difficult to obtain. Suppression, discrimination,

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<sup>4</sup> Ethiopian Human Rights Commission, Brief Monitoring Report - Humera, Dansha and Bissober, January 2021.

<sup>5</sup> OCHA, DTM, Regional DRMO, 19 January 2020.

and further acts of violence against ethnic Amhara during the TPLF rule makes it very unlikely that interim Amhara administrators will be willing to relinquish control of the newly taken territories. Some experts have suggested that a solution could be the re-structuring of political administration so that officials in Western Tigray fall directly under the mandate of the Federal government instead of being included in the administration of Tigray or Amhara region.<sup>6</sup>

Amhara ethnic and youth militias were strengthened and formalized by the late Brig Gen Asaminew Tsige, who is said to have established another force called “Mils” (the returnees), that included thousands of previously dismissed members of the national defense force.<sup>7</sup> Asaminew was killed after he attempted to enact a coup in the Amhara regional state ([BBC, 25 June 2019](#)).

### **Fashiqa Triangle (Sudan)**

Lt. Gen Abdel Fattah Al-Burhan (the head of Sudan’s ruling Sovereign Council), dispatched over 6,000 soldiers to the Ethiopian border at the start of the TPLF conflict as part of an agreement that Sudan would close the borders “to prevent border infiltration to and from Sudan by an armed party” – referring to the TPLF ([Sudan Tribune, 17 January 2021](#)). Deployments reportedly include areas of the border that have been historically contested. Negotiations in 2008 between the TPLF and Sudanese officials designated the land known as the Fashiqa Triangle as legally Sudanese, but specified that Amhara farmers would be allowed to continue farming there ([Asharq Al-Awsat, 12 April 2020](#)). This decision was reversed at the outset of the Sudanese troops that deployed to the contested area, accused of driving out Amhara farmers after Amhara forces re-deployed north to assist the federal government in the war against the TPLF in northern Tigray region ([Addis Standard, 28 December 2020](#)). Amhara regional militias and special forces have since responded, attacking Sudanese forces in areas historically occupied by Amhara farmers ([Sudan Tribute, 24 December 2020](#)) ([Watson, 2021](#)).

These actions have placed Abiy in a difficult position. On one hand, Abiy depends on his alliance with the powerful Amhara elite to continue military operations in the Tigray region. On the other, he can hardly afford an international conflict that would certainly involve other actors like Egypt given contestations over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD).

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<sup>6</sup> Key informant interview, 25 January 2021

<sup>7</sup> Yusef, Semir. *Drivers of Ethnic Conflict in Contemporary Ethiopia*. Institute for Security Studies, 9 December 2019.

## Local Repression

Several areas of the state have witnessed sustained violence in recent years, and the changes to national and local administrations have exacerbated tensions over control and alignment with new political elites and agendas. Perceived fragility of state and party institutions have led to ethnic mobilizations to seek greater autonomy and control of resources. Examples include Wolayta, Sidama, Konso, Gujji, and Gedao, as well as administrative locations across select locations in Oromia region.

Local police established by the regional governments have come to perform especially useful security work for the administration, which is characterized by extreme repression in order to deal with that region's unique threats. This is distinctly different from the cases outlined in the first section of this report, in that local administration and security forces are mostly responsible for these operations instead of federal troops. Resistance to federal agendas in these locations, in contrast to the active armed movements outlined above, is mostly made up of poorly organized or inadequately armed movements that produce brief bouts of extreme violence usually in the form of mob violence. Killings by mobs of rioting youth during the summer of 2020 illustrated that these areas can be every bit as violent as the active conflicts described in Tigray and West Wellegga during moments of political unrest.

The police have conducted major operations across regions to repress coordinated, but locally specific, movements like the Qeerroo; and to suppress the actions of 'mis-aligned' residents who may support alternatives to Abiy's Prosperity party or who seek their own, ethnically based, zone or region (such as the successful Sidama campaign). In response, mass arrests, acts of violence against civilians, and midnight raids of houses have taken on an intense frequency in recent months. Abiy is determined to create a 'law and order' state by eradicating, rather than negotiating or integrating, opponents. In this quest, he has allowed for a broad brush of security operations conducted regionally, whose aim is to subdue any subnational opposition — violent or otherwise.

### Western Oromia

Although Abiy initially rode a wave of Oromo mobilization into office, his popularity has plummeted following the arrest of several popular Oromo opposition leaders and a series of violent incidents that left Oromia region engulfed in unrest ([Al Jazeera, 19 September 2019](#)). Since then, protest rallies against the government have been quickly and violently put down. Thousands of people have been arrested, and journalists are routinely blocked from reporting on the region.

The main Oromo opposition party — the Oromo Federal Congress — suggested that participation in upcoming elections would be difficult under the current circumstances, given that most of their leaders are currently in custody of the state and many campaign offices are barred ([VOA, 9 December 2020](#)). While parts of Oromia have been categorized as areas at risk of "costly" violence (see West Welegga, East/West Hararghe), Western Oromia at large is an area where political support of Abiy's Prosperity Party is extremely low. In an absence of political space for opposition figures, repressive violence during the election runoff period is to be expected in areas of Oromia region where support for Abiy's Prosperity Party are low, but could be manipulated into higher support through intimidation or other unsound electoral practices.

## **Wolayta**

Seizing political space and amidst increasing uncertainty about future political opportunities, a host of ethnic groups especially in Ethiopia's southern region, have launched bids for greater political autonomy. Under constitutional rules made by the EPRDF, such bids were legally possible.

When a request for regional statehood by Wolayta officials was ignored, officials from the zone withdrew from participating in the Southern Regional Council, prompting their arrest by federal forces. This sparked days of violent protest throughout Wolayta zone, leading to the death of 21 people ([Addis Standard, 12 August 2020](#)). Although this violence has since subsided, future repression is likely as bids for autonomy re-emerge in the face of an uncertain future.

## **Moyale**

Moyale is a border town that bridges Ethiopia's Somali and Oromo regions with Kenya. Oromo tribal lands spread across the border, making it a location where OLF/Shane groups are active and able to exploit operations where federal troops would be unable to pursue them across national boundaries.

Moyale is likely to see increased federal attention and repression due to its strategic location, presence of OLF militants, and nomadic populations. This has already become a clear area of concern for the federal administration: during a recent meeting with the Kenyan President, PM Abiy requested Kenya's assistance in combating the OLF/Shane militants along the border region in a bid for increased regional security cooperation ([BBC](#)). Abiy has also attempted political pressure by attempting to sway the Oromo population away from the OLF through appeasing traditional Oromo leaders in the area – an initiative that appears to be working as the Abbaa Gadaa in Borana recently denounced the OLF as the “enemy of Oromos” ([BBC, 16 January 2021](#)).

Moreover, what makes Moyale and the Borana area of Ethiopia more dangerous than other border areas of Ethiopia is its violent history. Similar to the West and East Hararghe locations, Somali and Oromo clans have historically fought over land and resources in infrequent clashes. These clashes were intensified in 2017 under rising ethno-nationalist tensions and perceived state fragility, where actors became more involved in the national debate instead of local grazing conflicts. While intense state intervention will not be likely in this area, it will be an area of major concern for the Oromo state elites loyal to Abiy.

## **West Guji**

West Guji has been characterized by intensified ethnic-based conflict over recent years, with Oromo Guji clashing with Gedeo leading to high levels of displacement and an overall headache for the federal government. Historical border disputes in the area and cyclical violence have been exacerbated by nationalist rhetoric and increasing lawlessness throughout the region. The Guji in Oromia, like the Gumz in Benishangul, are awarded political dominance under Ethiopia's ethno-federalist system. Their perceived economic poverty has led to blaming the Gedao for taking land, controlling resources, etc.

While this area experiences frequent armed clashes, historical incidents have not spread far from the border areas and thus it is unlikely that federal forces will be used on a large scale to contain violence. Furthermore, this conflict is characterized by “flaring” violence, inconsistent in nature and largely dependent on local actors with little connection to the national debate.

The Guji in Oromia are a good example of accorded political superiority in their location as a result of the federalism policy. However, their economic precarity versus the relative economic stability of

their competitors (Gedao) drives frustration, which is then let out using the existing political infrastructures of repression against them.

### **Konso**

Like West Guji, Konso has recently been the scene of intense bouts of ethnic-based violence over administration borders. In November of 2018, Konso zone was split from the Segen area People's Zone, resulting in violence from armed groups that opposed the decision. While border disputes are common across Ethiopia, the scale and destruction that has resulted in Konso is shocking. Some 94,000 people have reportedly been displaced, with an unknown number killed ([Addis Standard, 23 November 2020](#)). These clashes mirror trends throughout the country: Local elites seeking to control greater territory and resources engage in conflict to promote their own material agendas. While large and devastating, the Konso violence does not contain the capacity to spread more generally throughout the region as conflicts in Oromia, Tigray, or Amhara do. This is due to its highly localized nature, where local politicians engage little with overall political decisions at the central level and are more concerned with immediate territorial administration and resources.

Thus, although federal forces may play a limited role in engaging with actors involved in the conflict, it is unlikely that a large-scale intervention will be taken by the Federal government and instead responsibility will fall largely upon regional government administrators.

### **Little risk**

While the above-mentioned areas are likely to see increasing levels of violence over the next few months, increasing government capacity and competency in the security sector lends to increased security in most areas of the state throughout the coming years.

Although several small bomb attacks have been reported, the capital city of Addis Ababa is unlikely to see any major violence during coming months as Abiy rides popular support amid his spectacular victory against the TPLF. Likewise, large cities in the Amhara region (Bahir Dar, Gondar), are unlikely to see any major bouts of violence as nationalist Amhara movements and more central idealists are more or less in-line with Abiy's current trajectory.