

Armed Conflict

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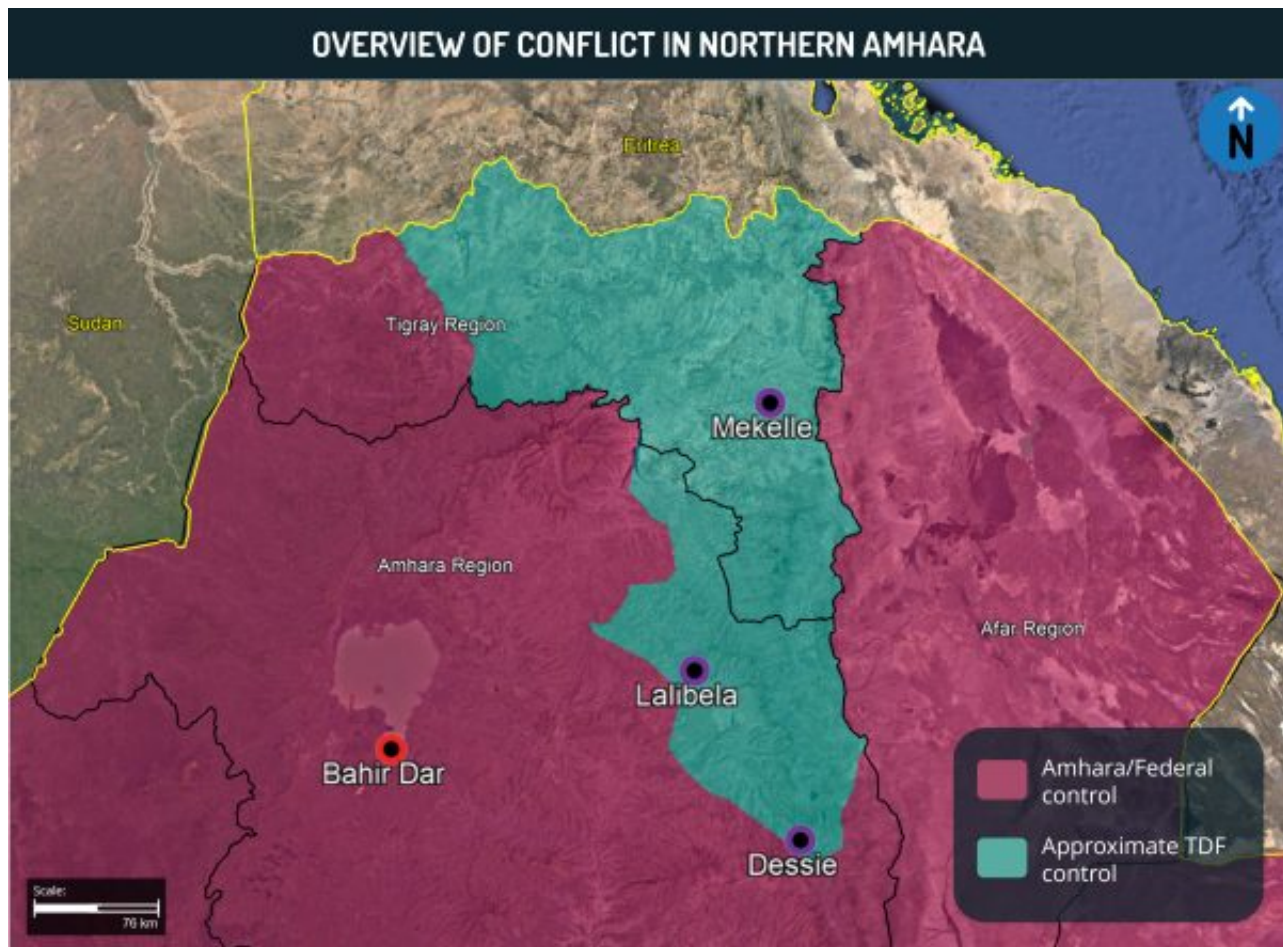
Ethiopia Special Report: Tigray War reaches its first anniversary as conflict deteriorates rapidly, threatens to spread to Addis Ababa

Executive Summary

- One year after the war in Tigray began, the Tigrayan Defense Forces (TDF) have found new momentum as they defeated a government offensive and have progressed southward into Dessie, Amhara Region, where they seem poised to move toward Addis Ababa aided by an alliance with the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA).
- The federal military is largely disintegrating after suffering multiple large-scale losses and the central government has become more dependent on ethnic militias and regional states, now seeking to mobilize the country toward a total war to defend against the TDF.
- In the absence of immediate and effective political negotiations, the situation in central Ethiopia is expected to destabilize.
- PM Abiy Ahmed seeks to project an image of strength to encourage public resistance to the TDF advance as well as maintain support within the government, though there are increased risks of a palace coup.
- The Tigrayans represent the only party capable of filling a power vacuum if the TDF-OLA alliance does enter Addis Ababa, and this would set the stage for renewed and intensified ethnic and political hostilities to come.
- **We advise to defer travel to Ethiopia at this time due to the risks of the escalation of the conflict. Those already in the country are advised to maintain contingency and evacuation plans.**

Overview of the Tigray War

- The war in Tigray Region began on November 3, 2020 and has since been characterized by ethnic cleansing and war crimes, a widespread humanitarian crisis, and the unraveling of national and social cohesion, with [growing national economic consequences](#). PM Abiy Ahmed has called on the public to join the war, particularly as the government has suffered a series of losses in recent months.
- Following a Tigrayan Defense Forces (TDF) counter-offensive in June, the Tigrayans hold eastern Tigray Region, including the state capital of Mekelle. Western Tigray was annexed in March by Amhara Region, which has been affiliated with the federal government, and at least three woredas remain under Amhara administration at present.
- The front lines of the conflict have been in Amhara Region since the June campaign, with the vast majority of the fighting being in eastern Amhara as well as periodic clashes in western Afar Region.



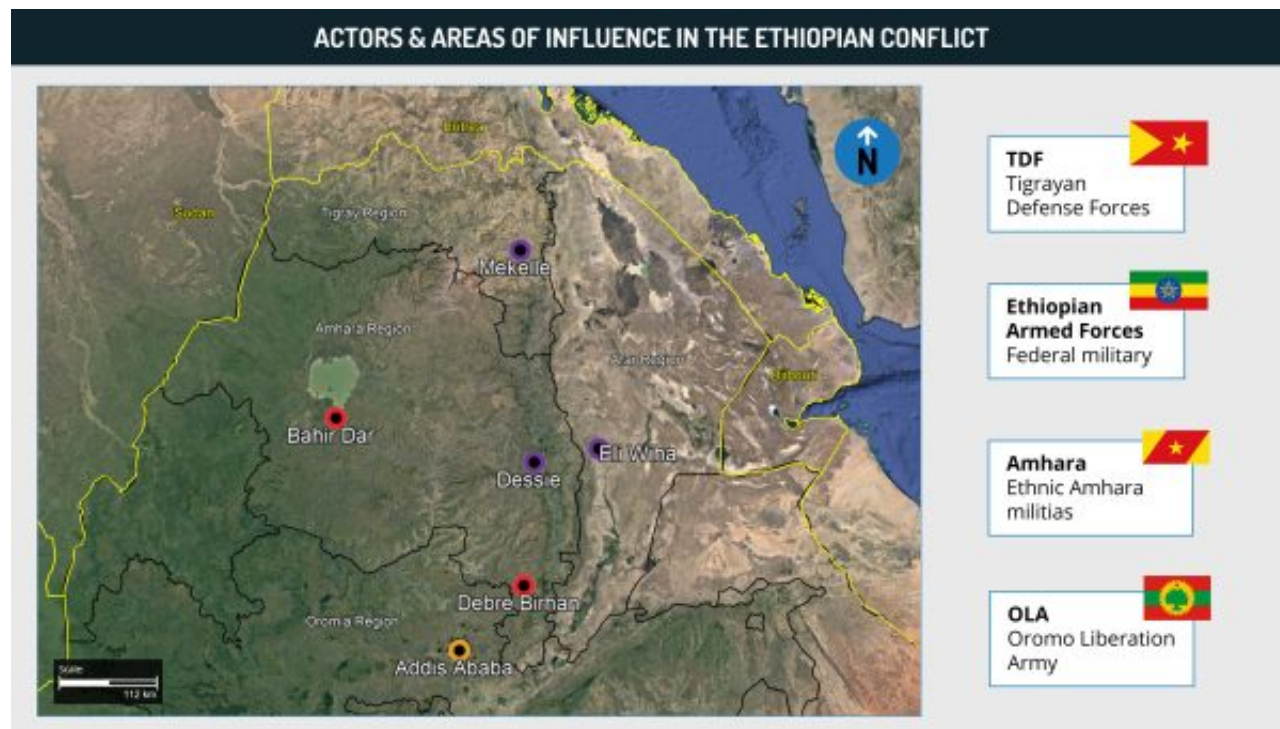
- Telecommunications services have been suspended across Tigray Region since the war began and are disrupted in northern Amhara in areas where the conflict has spread. Other infrastructure and services such as electricity are variable in major towns in Tigray.
- Humanitarian agencies have described a de facto humanitarian blockade of Tigray, where there is a severe lack of access to affected areas to distribute food, fuel, and other essential goods. The malnutrition rate in Tigray is more than 22 percent.
- According to media investigations and human rights groups, hundreds of ethnic Tigrayans have been harassed, forced to close businesses, and arbitrarily arrested in Addis Ababa and other cities. Some Tigrayans, including children, have been detained in camps outside of the capital and others have been disappeared to unknown locations.

Recent Developments

- The government launched a military offensive in October intending to push the front line back into Tigray Region after months in Amhara, but this failed and instead led to weeks of clashes in the same general location.
- Over the past week, the TDF captured the cities of Dessie and Kombolcha, which is the farthest south that the conflict has reached during the war. The Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) subsequently announced that it captured several towns south of Dessie on the A2 highway, including a town about 260 km north of Addis Ababa. The TDF and OLA have additionally attacked eastward into Afar Region toward the A1 highway.
- TDF spokesperson Getachew Reda said on November 1 that fighters from the TDF and OLA had made contact on the ground and the groups' goal is to reach Addis Ababa. The deputy commander of the OLA also said to the media that the group has "encircled" the capital.
- The Addis Ababa City Administration called on residents to register their personal firearms and

prepare to defend their neighborhoods by organizing by block and coordinating with security forces.

- On November 2, the federal government declared a nationwide state of emergency. This allows authorities to establish roadblocks, disrupt transport, and impose curfews. It enables the military to take over certain areas of government as well as to arrest individuals suspected of having links to “terrorist groups”. Any citizen of age may also be conscripted to fight.



Assessments & Forecast

Federal offensives have failed with the military rapidly disintegrating, with the government to prioritize defending Addis Ababa, supply lines to Djibouti

1. The failure of the government offensive in October underscores the rapid deterioration of the capacity of the federal military and the weakening of the central government that will set the stage for the next phases of the conflict. The military likely suffered its fatal blow in June during the TDF campaign that led to thousands of Ethiopian soldiers being killed or taken prisoner. This has resulted in the government’s need to hastily rebuild the army, increasingly rely on state and ethnic militias, and recruit new fighters with limited time for training. The consequences of this hurried effort are evident in their inability to push the TDF back from Amhara despite seemingly having the advantages of greater access to supplies, equipment, and funding.
2. The government’s strategy going forward is increasingly uncertain as the army further diminishes. The call to arms evokes a scenario of total war with the diversion of all possible resources to the conflict, but this may not be sufficient, particularly if the government is not able to persuade the wider population to commit to the cause. Furthermore, the ethnic mobilization that this will require will continue to elevate the importance of the regional states and undermine the power of the central government, further emphasizing its weakened position.
3. **FORECAST:** The government is expected to prioritize the defense of Addis Ababa and prevention of encroachment on the capital. Ethiopian troops will likely also focus on keeping the highway and railroad from Djibouti to Addis Ababa open, as this is Ethiopia’s access to the sea and nearly all of its trade passes through this route. To the extent that they are able to isolate the TDF, the government will seek to do this. They will be unable to prevent the TDF from making contact with

their allies on the ground, and so the government will instead likely ensure the blockade of Tigray Region remains in place. This is not especially resource-intensive given that Tigrayan territory is surrounded by enemies and those who can provide assistance will not enter Tigrayan airspace without Ethiopian approval. This will prevent any substantial amount of humanitarian aid from entering Tigray in hopes that siege tactics will break the Tigrayans' resolve.

TDF gains momentum with capture of Dessie as it moves southward, allies with OLA with potential to move on Addis Ababa

1. After the TDF retook Mekelle and eastern Tigray, the group was faced with options to focus their military campaign toward recapturing Western Tigray and potentially gaining access to Sudan, or to continue south into Amhara. Although many factors would have gone into this decision, their recent victories suggest that it paid off. It has put pressure on the government by bringing conflict to areas that were previously untouched and allowed the TDF to raid towns that still had supplies, unlike most of Tigray. The capture of Dessie and Kombolcha are important both practically and symbolically as it harkens back to the capture of Dessie in 1991, which was a turning point in the march from Tigray to Addis Ababa during the previous civil war. The TDF likely wishes to recall this history to create a sense of inevitability around their potential advance toward the capital.
2. More importantly, these developments provide the TDF with a great deal of momentum after spending three months mired in clashes in northeastern Amhara. The capture of Dessie and Kombolcha will also benefit them practically, as the TDF will be able to resupply from the fuel and other goods in the towns, which the group badly needs. This will help to sustain them moving forward. Furthermore, Dessie is where the terrain becomes easier to maneuver as the topography flattens out going south, with the A2 highway to Addis Ababa now running parallel to the mountains rather than through them. This has the potential to benefit all parties to the conflict, but is liable to increase the speed at which the war progresses.
3. Along with the advance to the south, the TDF's alliance with the OLA is extremely significant and holds the potential to transform the conflict and expand the TDF's options as it moves into Oromia Region or seeks to put pressure on the capital. Although they had initially announced their pact in August, this is the first indication that the groups have made contact on the ground and this could materialize as a shared military strategy. In recent months, the OLA has expanded and released a steady stream of recruitment propaganda but nevertheless maintained a fairly low profile in terms of attacks. Their apparent capture of areas in Amhara and new operations near the TDF brings the OLA back to the forefront, particularly with the declaration to besiege Addis Ababa. The OLA is likely overstating their capabilities and the extent to which they have actually surrounded the capital, but they may prove able to assist the TDF in their campaign.
4. With that said, the TDF and OLA are not natural allies. The OLA leadership has openly acknowledged that the Tigrayans perpetrated abuses against ethnic Oromos during their reign, and this leaves the potential for suspicion and tension in their alliance. **FORECAST:** This is likely to heighten if and when TDF forces move into Oromia Region where there may be disputes over the direction and control of the mobilization. This would only be exacerbated in the event of a real victory where political negotiations would be needed.
5. Moreover, the TDF has been reluctant to declare an intent to march on Addis Ababa until recently. The Tigrayan leadership has often said that their goals are to end the blockade, return to the pre-war state borders, and hold a referendum for autonomy. In this context, to move on Addis Ababa would essentially mean to pursue control over Ethiopia once again, as it did in 1991. **FORECAST:** Even in an alliance with the OLA, the removal of the Abiy government from power would leave a vacuum that only the Tigrayans are capable of filling as the only party with the necessary governing experience and military capacity. This would repeat the past, except in a position with even greater ethnic hostility and distrust and thus greater potential for chaos. This may be a motivation for the TDF to avoid entering the capital altogether provided their other political goals

are met, but could be unavoidable or evolve to be the Tigrayans' new goal. In these circumstances, the country would remain highly unstable with the potential for new power struggles and conflicts in Oromia and Amhara regions in particular.

Resolution remains out of reach as government embraces total warfare, TDF seeks significant leverage for possible negotiations, as potential for palace coup increases

1. The international community has called for ceasefires and pushed for mediation over the past year, though largely did not implement any significant steps against PM Abiy or other leaders. This is likely due to the role Ethiopia plays in the region as the continent's second most populous nation and once an anchor of stability in the Horn of Africa. However, foreign observers may perceive that the conflict has engendered enough uncertainty that this stability can no longer be preserved regardless. Western countries have increased threats to use financial means to pressure the government, including a new sanctions regime and the US's recent suspension of Ethiopia from an agreement giving the country duty-free access to the US market. This will be an economic blow to the country, but the Abiy government is increasingly viewing the conflict in the context of regime survival and economic pressure may no longer be sufficient to bring Abiy to the table.
2. All parties on the ground have repeatedly obstructed the path to negotiations since the war began. If the TDF is not interested in reclaiming Addis Ababa, it is possible that its goals in this case are to secure a large enough military advantage that they come into negotiations with a significant amount of leverage. At the same time, Abiy's statements about committing to a total war and positioning the rest of the country to this end suggests that the federal government feels it cannot negotiate from what it perceives to be a position of weakness. More importantly, with the erosion of the federal military's capabilities and the reliance on ethnic militias to fight the war, it is not clear that Abiy remains in a position to negotiate a settlement. Even if the federal government were to agree to a ceasefire, it is possible that this would not halt hostilities particularly on the part of the Amhara militias, who view this as an existential conflict with the Tigrayans.
3. **FORECAST:** Much will depend on the ability of the federal government and its allies to withstand the TDF advance, as well as to project the image of this ability to the public to encourage them to participate in the defense. This is particularly the case in Amhara and Oromia regions outside of Addis Ababa, where the government needs the public to join the struggle and outlast the TDF. If the populace believes that the federal coalition has fully disintegrated, it may perceive that full-scale resistance to the Tigrayans is futile and not worth the sacrifices. Abiy's allies within the government must also be persuaded by this war effort, as the perception that he is entirely losing control could encourage a palace coup. This may be particularly likely if it is perpetrated by a multi-ethnic group that could prove capable of negotiating with the TDF and potentially stave off the Tigrayan entrance into Addis Ababa. In any case, the situation in central Ethiopia is likely to eventually destabilize in the absence of rapid and effective negotiations.

Recommendations

1. We advise to defer travel to Ethiopia at this time due to the risks of the escalation of the conflict. Those already in the country are advised to maintain contingency and evacuation plans.
2. Avoid all travel to Tigray Region as well as eastern Amhara Region and western Afar Region due to the ongoing armed conflict and changing frontlines.
3. For any further questions or consultation, please contact us at intel@max-security.com or +44 203 540 0434.

