



Photo: A destroyed armored vehicle in Hawzen, Ethiopia, June 6, 2021

# Is Ethiopia Collapsing? Implications for Israel and the Region from the Tigray War

Asher Lubotzky

Indiana University

Habtom Mehari

Hebrew University of Jerusalem

A bloody civil war has waged for the past year in the Tigray region of Ethiopia between the Ethiopian federal army and its allies and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). The significant operational achievements by the rebel forces in recent months have raised doubts regarding the federal government's ability to impose its authority over the country and rebuff other separatist threats, and may even threaten its political survival. Meanwhile, the instability and violence are spilling over beyond the local combat zone, involving additional states and threatening a volatile area. On the political level, the conflict has distanced Ethiopia from Washington, which aims to impose sanctions on Ethiopia, and brought it closer to Moscow, Beijing, Ankara, and perhaps even Tehran. Israel and the Gulf states are thus in a dilemma regarding how to relate to the events in Ethiopia, especially given their longstanding close relations with Addis Ababa. This article surveys the geopolitical implications of the developments in Ethiopia, analyzes the considerations of the various actors, and offers strategic recommendations for Israel.

*Keywords:* Ethiopia, Tigray, Egypt, United States, Red Sea

## Main Developments

A series of military confrontations in the Tigray region in November 2020 led to the outbreak of a [bloody](#) civil war between the Ethiopian federal army and its allies—mainly the Eritrean military and the Amhara militia—and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), the governing party in the Tigray region. This is a struggle between different elites for dominance in Ethiopia and to a large extent is also based on internal ethnic divisions. From the early 1990s until 2018, the TPLF was the dominant party in the political structure of federal Ethiopia, and constituted the country's ruling elite. The party represented the Tigray region, with only about 6 percent of Ethiopia's total population. For this reason, the TPLF was considered disproportionately powerful in the eyes of many Ethiopians, including its former allies—who represented other regions, sometimes much larger ones—in the governing coalition.

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In 2018 Abiy Ahmed was elected Prime Minister of Ethiopia and aimed to make far-reaching changes in the balance of power in Ethiopia. Abiy, himself of Oromo descent, aspired to strengthen the central government in Ethiopia and to weaken the Tigrayan centers of power in the federation. In practice, the rise of Abiy signaled the end of the TPLF's dominance within the Ethiopian federal government, for the first time in three decades. In Abiy's view, the TPLF leadership was the main and most powerful bastion of opposition to the comprehensive governmental reforms he hoped to pass in Ethiopia to strengthen the central regime. From the TPLF's perspective, Abiy's

rule signaled not only a reduction of the party's power within the Ethiopian system but also a possible threat to the country's ethnic-federalist structure, which provides the various ethnic groups with extensive autonomy, thus further decreasing the weight of the Tigrayan minority in the country.

One year ago these power struggles escalated to the point of a large-scale war, and ethnically-based militias, as well as the Eritrean army, joined the fighting alongside the Ethiopian army. The war dragged on and the rebel forces scored several [operational successes](#), including an invasion of the Amhara and Afar regions, located deep into the north-central part of the country and bordering Tigray, the conquest of the historic town of Lalibela last summer, and arrival at the outskirts of Addis Ababa in late October 2021; meantime, the humanitarian situation in the combat zones [deteriorated](#). Military tensions also developed between Ethiopia and Sudan in the Al Fushqa district, which is disputed between the countries.

It is [estimated](#) that tens of thousands have been killed so far in the hostilities in Tigray, thousands of women raped, and millions displaced from their homes. Rhetoric of demonization and even more or less implicit calls for genocide of the Tigrayans have been made by several Ethiopian leaders. The Jewish community in Tigray, which reportedly numbers a few thousand people, [is also in distress](#) due to the fighting. Despite Ethiopian government restrictions on access for journalists, stories of atrocities from the region [have started to reach](#) the international press at a greater rate in recent months. Meanwhile, Ethiopia has prevented the arrival of humanitarian aid, including American aid, to the battle zones, which in turn has prompted greater international pressure on Ethiopia. Ethiopia continues to enjoy Chinese and Russian backing, and the support of the majority of African countries. The TPLF is also [accused](#) of massacres and other crimes, some of them in response to Ethiopian violence.

As part of the “war of narratives” that has developed between the sides over the fighting, Abiy and his government label the TPLF a terrorist organization led by a tyrannical elite that refuses to accept the spirit of democratization of the new government in Addis Ababa, while the Tigrayans [claim](#) that they are resisting Abiy’s tyranny and megalomania and his intention to undermine the basic principles of the Ethiopian state that have existed over the past few decades.

Facing the various fronts and given the federal army’s limited capability, the Ethiopian government has increased its political and military reliance on members of the Amhara group (about 28 percent of the country’s population), including the use of the Amhara militias. The recent operational achievements of the rebel forces have raised serious doubts about Ethiopia’s ability to restore its governance over all of its territory, and have also [encouraged](#) other ethnic groups and separatist parties—led by the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA), which joined the rebels’ attack on the capital—to challenge the central government in Addis Ababa, and thus to place the future existence of the Ethiopian federation in tangible danger.

## The War in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa

Facing the increasing domestic challenge, the Prime Minister of Ethiopia is trying to enlist the assistance of foreign countries in handling the crisis. Eritrea, which until recently was considered a bitter adversary of Ethiopia, has become perhaps its central ally in the fighting against the Tigrayan rebels. Isaias Afwerki, President of Eritrea, signed a historic peace agreement with Abiy in 2019, and sees the Tigrayan rebels as a possible threat to his territory too: the majority of Eritrea’s population is Tigrayan, and the Tigrayan national movement [threatens](#) Afwerki’s dictatorship. During the days of the TPLF’s dominance in Ethiopia (before Abiy came to power), Ethiopia and Eritrea were in an

ongoing state of war, and Afwerki [is interested in](#) weakening the party.

Against this backdrop, Eritrea joined the fighting alongside the Ethiopian federal army in the first stages of the war and stationed combat troops in Tigray and even in Amhara, with its forces [participating](#) in some of the atrocities against the civilian population. As a result, the developments in Ethiopia [have raised the regional standing](#) of the Eritrean regime. This situation highlights the stability of the Eritrean regime and its military strength: Ethiopia, one of the biggest military powers in the region, needs help from little Eritrea (its population is equal to about 3 percent of Ethiopia’s population), which is one of the most internationally ostracized countries in the world. If his rule survives the war, Abiy will owe Afwerki a big debt.

The developments in Ethiopia also have an impact on Sudan, where at least tens of thousands of refugees have fled from the battle zones. Khartoum has even exploited the [opportunity](#) to tighten its hold on the fertile Al Fushqa region, which borders Tigray and which has been disputed for many years between the two countries. In December 2020 the Sudanese army took control of key areas in the region and attacked Amhara farmers, actions that led to military [clashes](#) in the area and caused the killing of dozens of people and the displacement of thousands. Ethiopia also accused Sudan of aiding the rebels in Tigray—an accusation that Khartoum [denied](#). For its part, Khartoum accused Ethiopia of efforts to agitate the internal arena in Sudan. In the background there is also a conflict between the countries over the construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, which Sudan sees as a strategic threat to the flow of the Nile into its territory, and Sudan’s convergence over the past two years with the more hawkish Egyptian position, which demands agreement and gradualness regarding the filling of the dam.

It seems that the Abiy government has broad support in Africa. The offices of the African Union are located in Addis Ababa and the organization



has expressed support in principle for Ethiopia, although recently has tried to initiate ceasefire [talks](#) between the sides. The rest of Ethiopia's African neighbors (except for Sudan)—some of which have very close relations with Israel, such as [Kenya](#)—also support the government in Addis Ababa, and many African leaders attended Abiy's second inauguration ceremony in October 2021.

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### **The War in Ethiopia and the Middle East**

The war also has links to and significance for Middle East alliances, particularly for strengthened Ethiopia-Turkey relations. Abiy visited Ankara in August and [declared](#) that “Ethiopia will never forget the aid that the Turkish people and the Turkish government extended to us at this critical time.” During the visit several agreements were signed (including a military agreement), and Turkey [expressed](#) support for the integrity of Ethiopia and offered to mediate the tension between Addis Ababa and Khartoum. A few months ago, unconfirmed reports claimed that Turkey also [supplied](#) about 10 UAVs to the Ethiopian army. The tightened relations come as part of the Turkish strategy of deepening its involvement in Africa (and particularly in the Horn of Africa), and also because Ankara has many investments in the country (it is the second largest investor in Ethiopia after China, and Ethiopia is Turkey's largest investment site in Africa), and therefore it has a significant [interest](#) in the stability of the government in Addis Ababa.

The growing alliance with Turkey also comes against the backdrop of the ongoing tension between Ethiopia and Egypt, one of Ankara's main adversaries in the region. Egypt is in an [ongoing dispute](#) with Addis Ababa regarding the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, and the

apparent strengthening of relations between Ethiopia and Turkey is an especially negative development for Egypt. In recent years claims have been made—[though denied](#) in Cairo—about an Egyptian interest in agitating rebels within Ethiopia in order to delay or prevent the dam project, such that it seems possible that from Cairo's perspective the current civil war in Tigray is [not necessarily](#) a negative development. This was illustrated in Ethiopia's [claims](#) that the TPLF tried to attack the dam construction site, and that the organization receives [the support of Egypt and Sudan](#) for these efforts. However, it appears that the internal crisis in Ethiopia has arrived [too late](#) for Egypt, as the Ethiopian dam is already nearly completed and the main dispute surrounds the rate it is filled. The Ethiopians have shown [determination](#) in their intention to bring the dam to full operation, and it appears that the worsening of the internal situation is actually pushing Abiy to complete the project as a seemingly impressive achievement of his regime, while willing to sustain increasing tension with hostile foreign powers such as Egypt or Sudan.

The Gulf states (and to a certain extent Israel as well) are in a more complicated position. On the one hand, Addis Ababa is a regional ally. On the other hand, they do not have a substantive ideological objection to the Tigrayan rebels, and in a scenario of a Tigrayan victory and the removal of Abiy, they do not want to be harmed by overly deep identification with the regime. Furthermore, they are also considering the American approach (even though they are not bound by it), which is critical of Ethiopia's conduct, and are looking with concern at the strengthening Ethiopian-Turkish and Ethiopian-Russian relations. It seems that in the meantime they are keeping a low profile regarding the crisis and trying to avoid direct involvement: they seek to maintain good relations with Addis Ababa (and it is possible that the United Arab Emirates has even [provided](#) Ethiopia with military equipment during the past two months), but on the other hand they have refrained from

political activism on the issue. Some of them, especially the United Arab Emirates, could aspire to serve as mediators between the sides, in order to reduce the Turkish/Iranian foothold in the region.

In contrast, the developments in Ethiopia pose opportunities for Iran. Iran's standing in the Horn of Africa [has suffered significantly](#) in recent years, especially since 2015 with the increasing detachment by its former close ally, Sudan, and with the growth of the Gulf influence in the region. The Horn of Africa region is important to Iran, if only because of its proximity to the combat arena in Yemen and its being Saudi Arabia's back yard. Soon after his inauguration, Iran's President Raisi placed greater emphasis on [Africa](#) in the foreign policy that his government intends to implement, and Tehran [has made clear](#) that from its perspective Ethiopia is of special importance. Currently, Ethiopia itself is the most open to Iran of the countries in the Horn of Africa, and Addis Ababa houses the only Iranian embassy in this region. According to certain assessments, it is possible that Iran is already involved in the fighting in Ethiopia: analysts [are concerned](#) that Ethiopia is using an Iranian-produced UAV (the Mohajer-6), perhaps even for offensive purposes, and there have been several [suspicious flights](#) between Tehran and Addis Ababa (including by airlines identified with the Iranian Revolutionary Guards).

## The War in Ethiopia and the Great Powers

The crisis in Ethiopia has placed the Biden administration in an uncomfortable position. On the one hand, Ethiopia is an important American ally in the region, and its army is considered one of the strongest in Africa and a partner in the war on terror in the Horn of Africa, especially in Somalia (where it is also deployed to cope with the threat of al-Shabaab). Ethiopia is the [largest](#) recipient of American aid in sub-Saharan Africa (about \$1 billion in 2020). On the other hand, due to the reports of Ethiopian war crimes, human rights organizations and other influential bodies

[are pushing](#) Washington to place pressure on Ethiopia to stop the fighting, including stopping the economic aid and imposing other [sanctions](#).

In the spring of 2021 the United States intensified its call for an end to hostilities in the area, and Secretary of State Blinken even demanded an investigation of allegations of ethnic cleansing in Tigray. In August the Biden administration sent Samantha Power (head of USAID, which provides economic aid to Ethiopia) to the region, in order to assess the humanitarian situation and to speak with the Ethiopian leadership. The visit ended in [embarrassment](#) after Prime Minister Abiy refused to meet her. Shortly afterward, Abiy (who at the same time met with Erdogan in Ankara) also [refrained](#) from meeting with the White House Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa, Jeffrey Feltman, during a visit to Ethiopia. Meanwhile, while the US administration expressed some support for maintaining Ethiopia's unity and denounced the rebels' invasion of the Amhara and Afar regions, it also [accused](#) the regime of preventing the transfer of humanitarian aid to Tigray and ascribed the main responsibility for the entire crisis to it. In September the Biden administration declared that it had given approval to impose a series of [personal sanctions](#) on individuals that the United States sees as responsible for the violence in the war, most of whom are officials in the governments of Ethiopia and Eritrea, and the Department of Defense [intends](#) to add Ethiopia and Eritrea to the list of countries where military exports are restricted.

In response, Abiy was quick to express his disappointment with Washington's policy and to frame the narrative of the war in Tigray within the American war on terror that began two decades ago. In [an open letter](#) to Biden, Abiy claimed that the TPLF is a terrorist organization that for several decades imposed terror on the residents of Ethiopia (including with American backing). He contended that the current Ethiopian government under his leadership is the one fighting for democracy in Ethiopia,

and not the reverse. He claimed that Ethiopia expects that just as it helps the Americans fight al-Shabaab in Somalia, Washington should back its war in Tigray.

Russia and China have identified the tension between Addis Ababa and Washington, and it seems that they are working to expand it and increase their influence in Ethiopia. Last July Russia and Ethiopia [signed](#) a military cooperation agreement, which joins [other steps](#) that Russia is taking on the continent to reduce the foothold of the Western countries on the continent. China for its part [denounced](#) the American intention to impose sanctions on Ethiopian figures connected to the fighting, and expressed confidence that both sides in Ethiopia will be able to resolve their internal disputes on their own. China itself has extensive investments in Ethiopia (which owes a significant debt to Beijing), and the Ethiopian army [relies on](#) Chinese weapons in its fight against the rebels. The disputes between the West and the non-Western powers have also emerged in UN Security Council discussions, where Ethiopia has met Western criticism for its responsibility for the situation in Tigray. In contrast, Russia and China (as well as India) [backed](#) the regime in Addis Ababa and denounced the rebels, which [satisfied](#) Ethiopia.

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### Conclusion and Implications

The war in Ethiopia is a tragic, complex, and ongoing conflict that reflects longstanding power struggles, combines conflicting national and ethnic loyalties, and is gradually expanding to additional circles. Thus, in the coming years as well, the war threatens to destabilize the Horn of Africa region, among the most [volatile and violent](#) areas in Africa.

Geopolitically, the war exposes the limited power of American influence on Addis Ababa (and perhaps in general in the Horn of Africa and the Middle East), both in Washington's inability to restrain the violence and in Ethiopia's strengthening relations with Russia and Turkey, which occurred in the wake of the conflict. The conflict has led to a distancing of Ethiopia from the West, and from the United States in particular, and to the strengthening of its relations with authoritarian countries that are antagonistic toward Washington. These are therefore negative developments for Washington that also harm the American standing in the region—a standing that recently has already suffered significantly with the events in Afghanistan.

For Israel the conflict raises a serious dilemma. On the one hand, Israel has good relations with the regime in Addis Ababa (Abiy visited Israel in 2019 and had a friendly [phone call](#) with Prime Minister Bennett last August). Israel is interested in a strong and united Ethiopia as a basis for regional stability and as a force fighting against (both Shiite and Sunni) extremism, and also as a potential civilian and military customer. The breakup or significant weakening of the Ethiopian state could lead to instability close to the Red Sea, which could in turn also impact [Israeli interests](#) and encourage the strengthening of forces hostile to Israel, such as Iran or global jihad groups.

On the other hand, the TPLF rebel party also maintained close relations with Israel when it was dominant in the Ethiopian political system (until 2018). Furthermore, Ethiopia's currently improving relations with Turkey and Russia (and possibly also Iran), along with the increasing tension between Addis Ababa and the United States and Egypt, close allies of Israel, are a negative development for Jerusalem. Above all, the war crimes attributed to the Ethiopian army pose a heavy moral dilemma with regard to cooperation—especially military—with Ethiopia, as well as a cause for concern for the fate of the Jewish community of Tigray.

Israel might need to take a stance on the conflict or intervene in it in one way or another. This could occur, inter alia, following a request from one of its allies: Ethiopia, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, or the United States, or as a result of additional escalation in the course of events. Thus, Israel may find itself compelled to make political decisions on the issue following a demand to express support for the Ethiopian government—whether declarative or through practical aid—or of an opposing demand (on the part of the US or Egypt) to refrain from such support. Alternatively, it is possible that Israeli involvement might be sought for initiatives to mediate the conflict, or, in contrast, an operational need for targeted activity to protect specific interests in the region, if the conflict escalates further.

In the face of these risks and the conflicting interests of the various forces in the region, Israel must adopt a cautious position concerning the civil war in Ethiopia. It should maintain proper relations with the regime in Addis Ababa but refrain from military support for the Ethiopian army, which could entangle Israel in relation to war crimes and in tension with Washington, Cairo, and even Khartoum (with Khartoum, Israel is currently seeking to advance the normalization between the countries, which is at a standstill).

At the same time, Ethiopia's apparent movement in the direction of actors that are negative or problematic for Israel (from Iran to Turkey and Russia) could be tempered by alternative regional action led by the Gulf states, which at the current time are only involved in a very limited manner in the issue. Israel could

therefore encourage the Gulf states, which have economic and diplomatic leverage over Addis Ababa, to create an alternative—not Turkish or Iranian—for ending the conflict in the country. In any case, Israel must strive for maximum coordination and cooperation on the issue with the United Arab Emirates, which is the country with the most similar interests to Israel in this context, especially when it comes to curbing Iran's influence in the region.

Furthermore, Israel must also be prepared for the scenario that the deteriorating regional humanitarian situation will have an effect on issues more closely related to Israeli interests, whether due to waves of refugees or a need to quickly intervene to ensure the security of the Jewish community still living in Ethiopia.

Asher Lubotzky is a doctoral candidate in history at Indiana University. He writes on Israel-Africa relations from historical and current perspectives. His Ph.D. dissertation focuses on Israel's involvement in the decolonization process in southern Africa. In addition, he publishes articles on Israel-Africa relations in current events periodicals such as *The Arena*, *Ifriqiya*, and *Strategic Assessment*. [aslubo@iu.edu](mailto:aslubo@iu.edu)

Habtom Mehari is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. He researches the promotion of human rights, justice, and democratization by Eritrean exiles in their homeland. In addition, he frequently publishes articles on current issues in Africa on various platforms such as the *Jerusalem Post* and the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs. [habtomehari@gmail.com](mailto:habtomehari@gmail.com)